

LEAD Microsoft's CEO Says This Single Interview Question Changed His Life (and Taught Him a Major Lesson in Empathy)

Spoiler alert: He got it wrong. But the lesson he learned proved invaluable.



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In the five years since he took over as [CEO of Microsoft, Satya Nadella](#) has led a stunning turnaround. Not only has [Microsoft rebuilt its reputation as an innovator](#), it's once again battling for first place as the most valuable company in the world.

[Nadella recently stopped by the Stanford Graduate School of Business](#) to share some major lessons he's learned through the years. As a student of [emotional intelligence](#), one story really caught my attention.

It had to do with Nadella's initial series of interviews with Microsoft almost 30 years ago:

"I remember the last interview when I was interviewing at Microsoft was also a life changing moment for me. I went through this interview; it was all code on screen at that time. And so, this guy says: 'Hey, here's a question for you. You're at the crossroads, a baby falls, and is crying, what will you do?'"

"And I say, wow, this is some search algorithm I didn't learn...And I really thought about it for a few minutes. And then I said, 'I'll go to the phone booth and call 911.'"

"And so, he gets up. He escorts me out, and he says: 'You know what? You need to develop some empathy. Because when a baby falls, you pick them up and hug them first before you call.'"

"And I thought that's it, I'm definitely not going to get this job."

Nadella says that although he did actually get the job, the lesson he learned from that interview question is core to doing good business--and he's absolutely right.

Empathy makes you and those around you better.

Why emotional intelligence and empathy are invaluable

Remember that one of Nadella's main tasks when he took over as Microsoft's CEO was to get his key people on the same page. After all, a company full of A-players won't succeed if those individuals don't have the ability to work well together.

[Empathy](#), a core element of emotional intelligence, would prove essential to making that happen. It's a lesson Nadella says they're all still learning.

"Even recently at Microsoft, we realized that it's important for us to even understand: 'What are the necessary conditions to even develop empathy,'" said Nadella. "So, one of the words we have put into our parlance is 'respect.' For example, if you don't start from a place [of] having some respect for the other person's views, where they come from, their complete history, it's really hard to develop empathy."

Nadella's words are spot on. In my book, [EQ Applied: The Real-World Guide to Emotional Intelligence](#), I cite tons of research proves that teams thrive when their team members feel psychologically safe, that is, that they can take risks, be themselves, and even make mistakes without their colleagues embarrassing or punishing them.

To illustrate, imagine that you walk into work one day to find a colleague complaining about a problem. You may think to yourself, "Why are they always complaining?" Or, "I've had that problem before. What's the big deal?"

Even if you don't voice those thoughts, just thinking them will make you prone to get annoyed or frustrated when dealing with your colleague. This, of course, only makes the situation worse for them--and completely undermines your relationship.

In contrast, what if you offered your colleague a listening ear? Further, what if you really tried to understand their frustration, and even to relate to their feelings? What if you offered a helping hand?

When you do this, you're learning to see the world through the eyes of others. Your colleagues will see you as someone who is quick to encourage and build up rather than dishearten and tear down. Because they feel understood, they'll put forth more effort--and will be inspired to try and understand you the next time you need the same treatment.

By winning their trust, you inspire them to be the best version of themselves.

And it'll help you become the best version of yourself, too.