

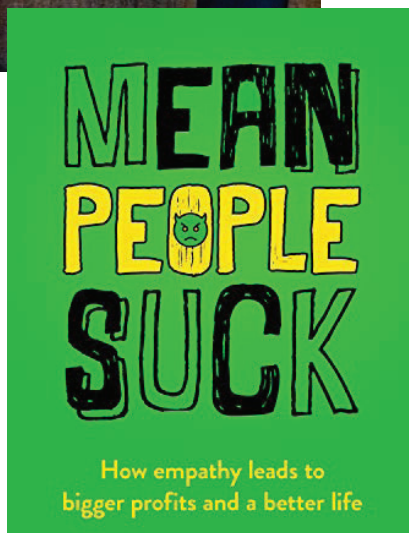
# Taking Empathy Beyond The Research:

Using emotional communication to increase profits & enhance lives



## *An interview with innovator, speaker, market research alum, and author of "Mean People Suck", Michael Brenner.*

Author and speaker Michael Brenner took some time with AMC Global to explore how the real-life experiences explored in his latest book, "Mean People Suck," can help market researchers—and beyond—use empathy to defeat "mean" in any situation. More emotional communication, from all sides of the workplace equation, increases profits and enhances lives.



Michael, who previously worked in the market research field and is now CEO of the Marketing Insider Group, works with brands to build effective content marketing and employee activation programs. He has been recognized as a *Forbes* Top CMO Influencer, a *Huffington Post* Top Business Keynote Speaker, and an *Entrepreneur Magazine* Top Motivational Speaker. Here, Michael shares some of his experiences and client stories to inspire impactful action. **Read on for quick insight into how you can apply his philosophies to your employee and client relationships.**

**Q >**

*In the market research industry, we seek to understand human behavior. That's our job. How can an increase in empathy, as described in your book "Mean People Suck", help us do this kind of work?*

**M. B. >**

We are all experts of ourselves—empathy is what helps us to see ourselves in others. So if you are looking to better understand human behavior as a market researcher, you will gain more insights using the reflections you already make about your own behavior.

**Q >**

*You have conducted bespoke research on the impact of empathy. Can you give us some highlights from your research that prove the power of empathy?*

**M. B. >**

With this research into empathy, I was trying to determine what level of correlation could be found in employee satisfaction, having empowering managers, and the self-reported belief that a company is "innovative." The mathematical correlation was dramatic. Employees were much more likely to be happy if their managers were empowering them. These conditions were also found to line up with the perception that a company was innovative. The inverse equation was even more striking: there were exactly zero happy employees in situations where a manager was not empowering, coupled with the view that the company was not innovative.



**Q >**

*Speaking of innovation, many industries like market research see tasks becoming more automated and efficient by machines and artificial intelligence. Some say this frees us up to be more human in our work. Does empathy play a role here?*

**M. B. >**

Yes! I call this the paradox of automation. As more and more of our tasks are being automated, we are expecting companies to act more human.

Here is an example: When my internet stops working, I am thrilled when I call my cable provider and their automated system knows who I am (from my phone number). Then the system can easily tell me there is an outage in my area that should be resolved in a certain amount of time. Or it can tell me my cable box needs to be reset—and then it can do it for me. I don't need a human for any of those tasks. But when I DO want a human, I expect to be able to bypass the automated system and get to live customer support quickly. When the system says: "It will be 22 minutes until someone is available, or you can order a call back," and they do call back, I expect a nice friendly human person to be on the line and ready to help me. For every industry, we should automate what makes sense, but make sure to improve the customer experience overall with actual people.

**Q >**

*Market research work can be intense and hectic, with demanding schedules and needs. How would you suggest empathy be implemented within fast-paced companies, where people are generally focused on "getting the job done" with a high standard of quality and efficiency?*

**M. B. >**

I hear this from professionals in every industry—and I feel it myself. We are all facing increases in stress and anxiety at work and it's easy to get caught up in it. I think empathy can help us to stop the vicious cycle. In my "Mean People Suck" book, I wrote how I liked to "interview" the stakeholders and colleagues of my manager to understand what she or he wanted, where they were coming from, and what pressures they may be facing. That allowed me to have more empathy for them and understand what they needed. But, I also had to re-frame the relationship. To illustrate this, I point to my "cake story." Once I told a manager that I wasn't getting along with that he could ask for a cake but he couldn't tell me how to bake it. We got along much better after that, and today we're even friends.

**Q >**

*In your book, you write specifically about the impact of “mean people at work” and a negative work culture. Can you explain, in a nutshell, how this impacts productivity and profits?*

**M. B. >**

As I mentioned, the research I conducted found that happy employees correlated directly with empowering managers and innovative companies. If you want productivity and profits, you need empowering leaders who allow their employees to decide how to create the most impact. Too often the opposite happens. Managers tell their employees what to do because they think they know better. Those employees aren’t allowed to think for themselves, apply their own experience, expertise or creativity. So they become less engaged. They don’t care about their work because they feel no ownership in it. So they “dial it in” and do just enough to say they got it done. This is not good for productivity or profits. It all starts with leaders who understand their role is not to tell people what to do, but to define the end goals and empower their teams to figure out the best way to get it done.



**Q >**

*Any real-world examples of how empathy has turned around a workplace or even an individual’s outlook?*

**M. B. >**

In the book, I talk about a number of personal experiences and also some outside documented ones. Microsoft is a great example of how a CEO placing value on empathy produced such a dramatic company turnaround that its stock price is one of the biggest winners of the last decade. But I also tell stories of individuals who are not the CEO, like Rena from Capgemini, who pushed back through multiple layers of management all the way up to the CEO—and produced a dramatic return on investment. The secret to the success in all the stories is a somewhat counter-intuitive and courageous use of empathy. Not just to create a better environment but also to produce better results.

**Q >**

*Suggestions of what to do if you have a mean manager? Mean clients? Mean co-workers?*

**M. B. >**

Ask them what they really need and explain how you want to help them—it's really as simple and as hard as that. This requires re-framing the conversation and, oftentimes, the whole relationship. But the results are dramatic. Taking that time and effort can produce huge results. I also believe that in most cases, we feel powerless. I wrote the book to empower people in these situations to take control. To learn how to push back, apply skills and talents, and get better results. But in the end, there are abusive people who gain their power from putting others down. In those situations, the only solution is to leave.

**Q >**

*If someone is looking to use empathy in the workplace to improve their situation, what are some of the key steps for them to follow in order to make change?*

**M. B. >**

I don't think there are any shortcuts to using empathy to improve a situation. You have to spend the time and energy getting to know your co-workers, colleagues and clients by using some of the things I talk about in the previous answers. And as you know in market research, just asking someone a question about how they feel, makes them feel differently (better). I love using the 36 questions to make anyone fall in love with you as a great example. Changing your situation at work requires taking the time to get to really know the people around you.

**Want to learn more about applying empathy and  
how it can benefit your next research project?**

**Reach out to us at:**

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