

Empathy Mapping Employee Experiences

OVERVIEW

Recently, I viewed an episode of *Undercover Boss*. While watching the show, I completed two empathy maps based on the Chief Executive Officer and a frontline associate of the company. In his *Career Foundry* article, Camren Browne explains that “empathy maps are an efficient tool used by designers to not only understand user behavior but also visually communicate those findings to colleagues, uniting the team under one shared understanding of the user.” In this case, I witnessed and evaluated how two employees experience the same company from differing roles and perspectives within the company’s hierarchy.

◆ *Undercover Boss*, Season 8, Episode 1: Build-A-Bear



“Based in St. Louis, Missouri, Build-A-Bear Workshop is a global retail chain where customers can design and create their own stuffed toys. With almost 400 locations, more than 3,000 employees, and 400 million dollars in revenue, this family favorite has been bringing joy to kids since 1997.” (*Undercover Boss*)

In season 8, episode 1 of *Undercover Boss*, Sharon John, the President and Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Build-A-Bear, goes undercover in her own business. Sharon transforms into Jessie, an associate of the company, to join her employees and immerse their everyday work environments. Gaining insight into the personal experiences of employees helps Sharon understand the impact of her decisions on employees and customers. It also helps her determine what considerations and decisions to make moving forward.

EMPATHY MAP INDIVIDUALS



Sharon Price John
President & CEO

(BOSS)



Leney
Bear Builder

(EMPLOYEE)

Sharon Price John

President & Chief Executive Officer

EMPATHY MAP



In June 2013, Sharon Price John became the President and CEO of Build-A-Bear Workshop. Prior to Sharon joining the company, Build-A-Bear experienced a financial decline from 2008 to 2012. This resulted in 22% of the company's North American locations being declared unprofitable. Sharon previously served as Stride Rite Children's Group's President and has detailed experience working in big toy and children-focused companies. Some of the companies she has successfully supported include Hasbro, Mattel, Wolverine World Wide, and DDB Needham Worldwide. She has experience in advertising, marketing, product development, and change management.

In her field, she has been recognized for fixing businesses and restoring declining brands. She is well-versed in reinventing historic brands and making them appeal to the modern customer. As a first-time CEO, Sharon joined Build-A-Bear with the hope of reinventing the brand and refreshing it for the new consumer and millennial. Sharon worked with her team to introduce a new store model, incorporating new colors and a new look and feel to make the store more relevant and appealing.

In this episode of *Undercover Boss*, Sharon is excited about reshaping Build-A-Bear Workshop's future. She looks forward to seeing how her employees and customers are taking to her new store model and other recent changes. She wants to observe Build-A-Bear operations to find out what is working well and what may need improvements. Under her alias, "Jessie," she walks through a day of work alongside four different employees.

THINK & FEEL

- Feels eager to succeed because she has a reputation for restoring failing business
- Excited to see improvements in Build-A-Bear because she is a first-time CEO
- Anxious to see how some stores are taking to her new processes
- Unsure about what she may experience first-hand
- Feels nervous about operating stuffer machine and register
- Concerned about inconsistencies between stores
- Feels touched by each of the employees' personal stories
- Appreciates each employee's enthusiasm and passion at work
- Understands where the company is lacking and where to shift her focus moving forward

SEE

- Notices each employee's enthusiasm, dedication, and loyalty to the company
- Positive employee interactions with customers
- The entire process of building a bear
- The need for store experiences that make building a bear more memorable for guests
- The need for a quick and easy training manual
- Notices and appreciates Solomon's concern with safety
- The process of cherry-picking and stacking palettes in the bearhouse
- Notices the inefficient processes of box stacking in the bearhouse

PAIN

- Feels the burdens and hardship of each employee
- Realizes her new store model may need to be revised
- Realizes she may need to revisit some processes in the old store so guests have better experiences
- Inconsistencies between store operations concerning the training manual, answering questions, how many stitches a stuffed animal needs, etc.
- Inefficient processes (training manual, box stacking, etc)

HEAR

- Each employee's personal story, family dynamic, and future dreams
- Solomon says, "Build-A-Bear is a family, it's not a job, that's why I love it here." The other employees identify with this as well
- Leney's experiences with and thoughts about the old store model vs. the new store model. The new Smile-with-Me station does not help guests bond with their stuffed animals as well as the old Fluff Me station.
- Sounds kids can choose to put in their stuffed animals
- Nick's nostalgia. He misses the bears they used to have
- Solomon's concerns about the way they stack boxes on palettes in the bearhouse. It's inefficient
- Kendall's reasoning for developing her own training manual instead of using the new one

SAY & DO

- Explains that she is eager to see how employees and customers are experiencing her new store model
- Asks a lot of questions to gain insight on employee experiences and challenges
- Operates the stuffer machine and struggles with it. Stuffing ends up all over and she says, "I knew this would happen."
- Has difficulty learning the register
- Participates in bear-making, working the register, cherry-picking, greeting customers
- Expresses that she loves the cherry picker machine
- Makes it her priority to meet the needs and concerns that have come to her attention through this experience

GAIN

- Insight into issues with efficiency
- Ideas about developing a quickstart manual
- Experiences with employees cause her to be more sensitive and empathetic, which aligns with Build-A-Bear's mission
- Gains peace of mind as she realizes that the employees generally love their jobs and the company

Leney

Bear Builder, Northridge, CA

EMPATHY MAP



Leney has been a loyal guest at Build-A-Bear since she was about five years old. Now, at age 17, Leney works as a dedicated Bear Builder in Build-A-Bear's store located in Northridge, California. This store has recently implemented the Discovery store model, a new store model developed by Sharon and her team.

During her childhood, Leney and her younger sister made memories and bonded together in Build-A-Bear Workshops. Due to her childhood experiences with the store, Leney identifies most with Build-A-Bear's old store model, the Heritage model. She especially loved the Fluff Me station, where kids could give their stuffed animals an air bath. This step in the bear-making process was more memorable and special for guests than the new Smile-with-Me station.

Leney lives at home with her younger sister, father, and paternal grandmother. She does not talk to her mother or any family members on her mother's side. Leney's mother left when she was about 13 years old. Additionally, she was never truly present, so Leney's grandmother raised her. Currently, Leney is trying to get the most out of living at home with her grandmother because her grandmother has lupus, which is taking a toll on her health. Her father is disabled, so she works three jobs to try and support her family. Despite her many responsibilities and the challenges in her personal life, Leney keeps a smile on her face and works enthusiastically. She is a model employee, as she makes the Build-A-Bear experience exciting and enjoyable for her customers.

THINK & FEEL

- Prepared to walk Sharon through each step of the bear-making process
- Feels connected to Build-A-Bear because of her childhood experiences with the store
- Emotional about the new store model because the old store helped her relive her childhood
- Concerned that aspects of the new store model are misleading and less memorable
- Nervous about her grandmother's health because she has lupus
- Excited and enthusiastic despite her personal challenge of juggling three jobs to support her family

HEAR

- Sharon expresses her nervousness while they prepare to work together
- Sharon questions how Leney feels about the new store model
- Sharon recognizes Leney's joy and spirit while working
- Sharon empathizes with her and encourages her when she shares about her family

SEE

- Supervises Sharon while hosting the birthday party
- Notices Sharon struggling with the stuffer machine
- Witnesses the kids' excitement because of her high energy and enthusiasm

SAY & DO

- Takes Sharon through the entire bear-making process
- Encourages Sharon when she says she's nervous. "Oh don't be. You're gonna do perfect."
- Hosts a bear-making party with excitement and enthusiasm
- Shows Sharon how to operate the stuffer machine and stitch the stuffed animals
- Shares how Build-A-Bear has impacted her and her little sister personally
- Explains her family dynamic and the challenges they have encountered throughout her life
- Tells Sharon she preferred the old store model. "The old store... was my childhood."
- Expresses her disdain for the Smile-with-Me station in comparison to the Fluff Me station

PAIN

- Father is disabled, grandmother has lupus, Mother is absent
- Works three jobs to support her family at the age of 17. She has a lot of responsibility
- Misses old store model because of its connection to her childhood

GAIN

- Loves her job at Build-A-Bear
- Seeks to make the experience as enjoyable and memorable for the guests as it was for her and her sister growing up
- Remains joyful and optimistic despite personal challenges and working long hours
- Customers enjoy the Build-A-Bear experience because of Leney
- Sharon commends Leney. "I think Leney is doing a great job managing the organized chaos of the party. When the party was over, the kids were so joyful. Leney definitely exemplifies the heart of Build-A-Bear."

User Experience Summary



Leney, Bear Builder, California

- Desires to support her family and give them a bright future
- Empathizes with guests and wants them to have a memorable experience in the store
- Understands the importance of joy and enthusiasm in her role
- Works hard and stays in good spirits in spite of juggling three jobs and family hardship



Sharon John, President & CEO

- Desires to see Build-A-Bear thrive
- Wants to make the company more relevant to today's consumers
- Desires to maintain the heart of the brand
- Realizes she has had to conceal her sensitivity and emotional side in her past professional experiences
- Recognizes unveiling her emotions would benefit her new role as CEO



Conclusion

Unlike other episodes of *Undercover Boss*, this episode ended on a great note. Sharon was able to tap into who she truly is emotionally and gain insight into why Build-A-Bear's guest experiences are positive and meaningful.

Sharon stated, "I feel terrific about the future of Build-A-Bear. We have wonderful employees that are dedicated to this company and dedicated to the mission. I think what I've learned about myself is that to get to CEO there's been a part of myself that I've tried to hold back, an exuberant, joyful part. But this company needs me to be like my real self."

Additionally, Sharon recognized a few setbacks in the company's operational procedures and her new store model. She learned of areas she can focus on improving for the future of her guests, employees, and Build-A-Bear as a company.

Finally, this experience helped Sharon practice empathy toward her employees. Learning about Leney's life experiences as a 17-year-old impacted Sharon directly because she has a 17-year-old daughter. In conversation with Leney, Sharon stated, "I can't imagine her having some of the responsibilities and burdens you have on you at this age."

Sharon gifted Leney \$10,000 for her own personal use, \$15,000 to cover medical bills for grandmother and father, and a college fund for Leney's younger sister. Leney broke into tears and thanked Sharon numerous times for her consideration and generosity.

