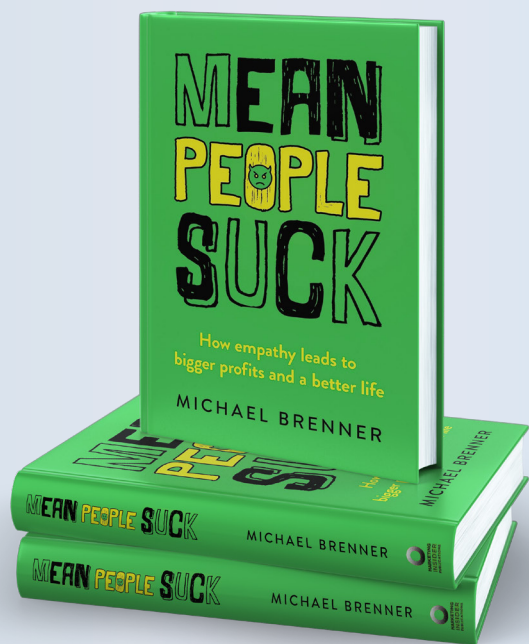


# BOOK SNAPS™

Zooming In On Your Next Read



## Mean People Suck

By Michael Brenner

Michael Brenner has been recognized as a Forbes top CMO influencer, a Top Business Keynote Speaker by the Huffington Post and a Top Motivational Speaker by Entrepreneur Magazine. He is CEO of Marketing Insider Group, where he has worked with more than 75 brands in building effective thought leadership, marketing, and employee activation programs. Michael has championed a customer-centric approach at organizations large and small. He led sales and marketing for software companies like Nielsen and FullTilt. Today, Michael is the CEO of Marketing Insider Group, founded on the belief that strong leaders who champion their teams are the key to unlocking massive growth.

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## How Empathy = Bigger Profits and a Better Life

Michael Brenner once took himself through the exercise of listing out and counting every job he could remember ever having. He knew there had been quite a few but he was pretty surprised to see that the total came to 53, all within the span of 25 years. His varied experience meant that he had the opportunity to encounter people of every sort. The customer service jobs he held taught him just “how much mean people suck.”

He says of the long list, “...inside corporate organizations and start-ups alike, I’ve witnessed unique management styles, workplace cultures, and bosses, all of which taught me a few lessons about business and how to manage it all. I’ve learned that sometimes your boss sucks. Sometimes you just want to get your job done without being challenged or questioned. But the real question is...How happy are we in our jobs?” Unfortunately, most people he queries about work are unhappy with their job itself, the culture in which they work, their boss, or the decisions over which they have zero power. They feel stuck. Brenner and his long list of jobs mean that he has experienced a bit of it all, with almost all of his positions having some aspects that are good and others that are bad. It got him wondering, “what separates the positive experiences from the negative?” “What makes us either love or hate the work we do?” “What makes us love or hate the lives we live?” Over thousands of conversations with people around the world, Brenner submits that the “overwhelming answer” he has heard again and again comes down to one simple thing. Mean people suck.

Mean people have a way of infecting those around them with meanness. Those on the receiving end of their ugly behavior suffer in silence until they finally fill up and lash out at those around them, shedding “some of that pain and frustration” that has sunk them so low. Despite regular and constant modeling and explicit teaching about being kind and taking care of one another and treating others as we’d want to be treated, there are still meanies out there that simply cannot put themselves in the shoes of another. “We know that we should be kind and have empathy, but why do so many of us, especially in the business world, not display empathy for others?” This is the central question that author Michael Brenner explores in *Mean People Suck*.



## The Shocking Decline of Empathy

Science has proven that empathy is a learned behavior that we develop throughout our lives. Research has also shown that it is in sharp and ceaseless decline. “The University of Michigan Institute for Social Research found that we are 40 percent less likely to describe ourselves as having empathy for others today than we were 40 years ago, with the steepest declines coming in the last 10 years.” This decline permeates our political system as well as our organizations.

We are born with “the capacity for empathy” but somewhere along the way, we lose it. Empathy and age tend to have an inverse correlation, which Brenner calls “the paradox of confidence.” Brenner credits this downward slide of empathy on social change and disruptions. Our daily communications are less connected as they occur through text or social media. We find it much easier to be mean to people through the veil of technology. Unlike a mere couple of decades ago, “today, we can anonymously spew so much hate without any real fear of repercussion.” The digital environment is almost entirely lacking in empathy and that has moved into our workplaces, with terrible consequences.

## Your Company Sucks, Your Manager Sucks, and Your Customers Know It

Organizational charts have existed for over a hundred years, providing a visual reminder of who is above, who is below, and who is in line with our own position. They are meant to help us out by showing us who is in charge, who we should go to for approvals, and who will make decisions about particular aspects of our job. There are, as you may imagine, loads of problems with traditional org charts.

Org charts are rigid, while the world demands flexibility. They only encourage “upward communication” when companies desperately need peer collaboration. We focus on what is best for us and how we can move up and up the hierarchy, rather than focusing on what is best for the organization as a whole.

In reality, companies are not organized into clean lines and tidy boxes. Human beings and their relationships “are complicated, constantly in flux, and can change so quickly.” To account for this human element, companies have to rethink the org chart in a way that busts up the “silos throughout our organizations” and ensure that “all departments focus their efforts on the customer.” But it’s not just the company’s method of organization that sucks. Mean managers suck, too.

Managers sometimes fall into an insistence trap, in which they come up with an idea that feels like a winner, but you know better. You can see that this idea will not work and is destined to not only fail, but to waste precious time and money in the process. But you say nothing. This is so often the case. We feel powerless to push back against those in a superior position to us and we go along with their idea, even when we know with certainty it is a terrible idea. Why do we do this?

Brenner says that it may feel like the buck stops with the boss, but in reality, you are part of the problem. In order to avoid the trap of implementing a doomed strategy, we have to step up and do some difficult insisting ourselves. We have to push back, explaining with crystal clarity that “all our wasted effort is in no one’s best interest.” If we can establish common ground with our managers, we can find a way for everyone to walk forward with freedom and purpose. Leaders have to get on the sidelines and start cheering for their people. Managers who champion their employee’s ideas get better results for every stakeholder involved. When managers suck, customers can tell and they choose not to spend money with managers or companies that suck.

Modern consumers are savvy to say the least. Advertisements are completely ignored at best and seen as an annoyance that deters buying at worst. Brands must come to terms with the fact that consumers simply are not interested in being “reminded relentlessly of how great a product is.” Consumers know that some companies suck and they are, increasingly, intolerable of this.

Customers need and desire connection with the brands they use. Companies that are successful at making this connection do so because they have a meaningful core mission that is consistently executed. Meaningful brands make a difference in the lives of others. They “stand for something and promote the values that their customers connect with” and people are moved by them on an emotional level. Brands that cannot, will not, or do not do this will have a very difficult time thriving in turbulent times.

## Empathy for the Win

Customers need to be engaged, employees need their ideas championed, customers have to be at the center of all decisions, and pain points of customers need to be addressed to drive growth. Knowing that these are the things a leader must do is just the beginning. How you do these things “will ultimately determine your effectiveness.” This is where empathy comes into play.

Families, communities, businesses, and indeed, the world at large needs empathy. The dictionary defines empathy as “the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another...without having the feelings, thoughts, and experience fully communicated in an objectively explicit manner.” It is putting yourself in someone else’s shoes, even if just for a moment. In business terms, Brenner asserts that “Empathy is the counterintuitive secret to getting more of what we want.”

Today we fail to realize that “infusing empathy into our workplace cultures also makes for a more profitable and stable business model.” Communication runs more smoothly when we lend an empathetic ear. It makes us more strongly bonded to those around us. It is “essential in grabbing, and keeping, the attention of others, specifically our customers.” It also drives “actual business results” by promoting a positive culture, decreasing turnover, increasing productivity, and improving the customer experience. “It can transform a business’s profitability and internal cost level.” In short, empathy wins. And it wins big.



## Acts of kindness and empathetic interactions spark others to behave the same way.”

### 5 Tips to Deeper Empathy

No matter if you are a leader, manager, employee, spouse, parent, or friend, you will find that people will like you more when you “take interest in them and their concerns.” Being empathetic will improve your life, at work or at home. Follow these five guidelines to avoid being the mean person who sucks, that everyone around you complains about.

1. **Learn to listen.** It is critical to first learn to ask questions, rather than talk ceaselessly about yourself. Once you learn to ask first, you have to learn how to genuinely listen to the answers. “This is easier said than done.” Distraction is a major part of the problem. Our phones are constantly buzzing and dinging, providing endless opportunities “to look away when someone is talking.” Put your own agenda, and your phone, aside when you are engaged in conversation with others. Make an intentional effort to try to see where the other person is coming from and be open to any feedback you may receive.
2. **Try being kind.** Stanford psychologist Jamil Zaki says, “Kindness is contagious.” When we behave kindly towards others within a group, such as a team or entire staff at work, that kindness contributes to Zaki’s theory called “positive conformity.” Acts of kindness and empathetic interactions spark others to behave the same way. It is an idea as old as time itself. You attract more bees with honey than vinegar. Treat others as you would like to be treated. It works at work, too. “It’s easier to get what you want from others when you’re nice.”
3. **Don’t take it personally.** We’ve all been there. You are having a terrible day with one annoying set back after another. By the end of the day, you are feeling pretty impatient and crabby. The next person that happens along your way becomes the target of your sour mood and you lash out at them, unjustly. Guess what? You are not the only person who experiences this. Every human has bad days. Every human experiences circumstances beyond their control that occasionally become misplaced or projected onto someone else. When this happens, don’t take it personally because it isn’t about you. Instead of ruminating over it or looking for ways to pay that person back for their bad behavior, let it go. Don’t carry it forward. Leave it in the past and maintain your overall happiness.
4. **Remember the good times.** It is sometimes hard to see the good in a bad situation. Of all the 50+ jobs that Brenner has held, none of them were all bad all the time. He still

enjoyed moments of laughter and bonding with coworkers. He still learned valuable insights and lessons that he applies in his life and work today. He credits mean people with teaching some of the most valuable lessons of the lot! “Shifting your focus from dwelling on the negative to appreciating the positive changes your mindset.” You become more open to positive experiences and you feel better. That’s a win for everyone.

5. **Find meaning in what we do.** Brenner sums up this guideline with three simple phrases. “Be kind. Be cool. Be you.” Go out into the world and into your workplace being authentic, empathetic, and nice and you will find meaning in all that you do. Brenner asserts that there is always meaning to be found, even in a job that you absolutely loathe. “If you can’t find that larger purpose in the work itself, you might find it in working together with your teammates or colleagues.” To do this, start by asking yourself four questions. “What do I know? What does the world need? What do I love? What are people willing to pay me to do?” Your answers will intersect to reveal the path to personal and professional happiness.

Brenner’s book boils down to a simple, but profound idea. “Empathy for others is the key to getting the lives and careers we want.” Every single one of us wants the same thing. We want to be happy, fulfilled, and make a difference through the work we do. We want our time on this planet to matter. Yet most of us fall short of that. We are not happy. We are unfulfilled. We do not put ourselves in the shoes of others. Some of us are downright mean. In *Mean People Suck*, Brenner makes a case for exactly what we can do about that.

All we really need to do is “make a choice.” “Make a choice to not be unhappy, unfulfilled, disengaged and focus on others. Apply empathy where it matters the most. Make a choice for empathy—in business, in life.” Empathy is the key to making meaningful connections, enjoying your work, creating meaningful solutions for your customers, and making a real difference in this world. Do not fall into the dismal trap of believing that the only way to get what you want is to take it. “Showing others that you care is the best way to get what you want and to live a better life in the process.” You only have to ask yourself one question to make the change. “What choice will you make?”