

# The Importance of Empathy in the Selection of Frontline Staff in 4 and 5-Star Hotels in the City of Dubrovnik - Are We Human and Humane?

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## **RIT CROATIA**

The Importance of Empathy in the Selection of Frontline Staff in 4 and 5-Star  
Hotels in the City of Dubrovnik – Are We Human and Humane?

**SENIOR PROJECT**

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## EMPATHY AND THE SELECTION OF FRONTLINE STAFF

### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper was to investigate the importance that hospitality employers assign to empathy when selecting people for frontline positions. This research was focused on the 4 and 5-star hotels in the city of Dubrovnik. A survey that consisted of several open-ended questions was distributed in an attempt to investigate the practices and attitudes these hotels have towards empathy as a characteristic of a frontline employee. The research showed that hotels find empathy important both as a service quality dimension and a characteristic of a frontline employee. The paper also revealed that there is a lack of soft skill training provided to frontline employees.

**Keywords:** *hospitality, service quality, empathy, selection, frontline employees*

## EMPATHY AND THE SELECTION OF FRONTLINE STAFF

In the book *Delivering Quality Services; Balancing Customer Perceptions and Expectations* (Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Berry, 1990) empathy is proposed as one of the five dimensions when assessing service quality. The other four factors are Reliability, Assurance, Tangibles and Responsiveness. Although reliability seems to be the most important dimension across the services, the importance of empathy seems to vary in different situations (Marković & Raspor Janković, 2013), thus making it more interesting as a topic of further research.

Empathy can be defined as “a person’s ability to sense another’s thoughts, feelings, and experiences, to share another’s emotional experience, and to react to the observed experiences of another person” (Wieseke et al., 2012, p. 317). According to Marter (2013), it is not about changing and controlling other people’s feelings; instead, it is about helping people work through their feelings by listening to them and validating their emotional responses. Marter also suggests that people can increase their awareness and improve their relationships by consciously stepping outside of themselves and putting themselves in the experiences of others.

As Jodi Clarke (2020) explains in her article there are two types of empathy, cognitive and affective, which are both important, but different in the ways one person relates to the other. Cognitive empathy is related to the idea of stepping into someone else’s shoes or looking at the situation from another’s perspective. It is about understanding what could be the cause of someone feeling the way they feel. On the other hand, affective or emotional empathy involves shared emotional experience. This means that the person can feel the same emotions as the other person. Furthermore, Clarke states that, according to social psychology researchers Hodges and Myers, those who find affective empathy easy to exercise will be motivated to help the person in need.

Ability to practice empathy is influenced by genetics; however, this is not the only influence. Empathy is not a fixed personality trait – it is a skill that can be learned and

## EMPATHY AND THE SELECTION OF FRONTLINE STAFF

improved (Schumann et al., 2014). Psychologist Albert Bandura originated the social learning theory which proposes that people can improve their empathy skills through experiencing empathy from others.

Every company has a list of skills required for a certain position. This may include education, past working experience, personal characteristics, hard and soft skills, and more. According to Bryers (2018) one skill that every company should have on its list is empathy. He also discusses how those who possessed this skill were the most successful and resilient individuals, rather than those who were the most experienced or hard-working. His top team members have been those who could see from different points of view, as he explains, and deliver something that meets everyone's needs.

In hotels and similar service settings which include frontline service staff and customer interactions there is a high probability that such interactions will lead to customer satisfaction if the focus on the customer and empathy are shown. On the other hand, research shows that interactions which are lacking empathy and attentiveness lead to customer dissatisfaction (Wieseke et al., 2012). Hotels should focus on providing high quality and personalized service at a reasonable cost to have an initial competitive advantage (Buhalis & Law, 2008; Rust & Miu, 2006).

A study has been done on how empathy affects reviewing behavior. Pera, Viglia, Grazzini and Dalli (2019) investigated the relationship between empathy and tourists' intention to leave negative online reviews. Their findings show that empathy increases a more indulgent attitude towards the service provider which affects guests' reviewing behavior. Moreover, their results indicate that guests are more likely to leave a negative review because of the lack of personal interaction and empathy. Service providers may handle a situation in a professional way, but if they don't show empathy and take charge of the guest's problem, the customer dissatisfaction will turn into a negative review (Pera et al., 2019).

## EMPATHY AND THE SELECTION OF FRONTLINE STAFF

Frontline service employees are primarily responsible for these interactions with the guest because they are capable of building or damaging the brand (Huang, 2011). Researchers suggest that inability to understand the other's perspective harms any employee-customer interaction and leads to customer dissatisfaction (Abbasi and Alvi 2013; Agnihotri & Krush, 2015). Service interactions in which employees can recognize customers' needs and provide personalized service accordingly, lead to higher customer satisfaction (Wieseke et al., 2012). Moreover, such empathic employee behavior not only increases satisfaction but results in positive customer emotions toward the brand as well (Lee et al., 2011). The study done by Bahadur, Azizi and Zulfiqar (2018) affirmed that employees play a major role in customer satisfaction and loyalty. Therefore, as Iglesias & Saleem (2015) suggest, service brand strategy should support human resources principles and guidelines. Also, the strategy should align with service processes that focus on employee empathic behaviors (Bahadur et al., 2018).

Alternatively, Pizam (2015) argues against the idea that empathy is necessary for the delivery of a high-quality service. He believes that empathy is an important skill that should be practiced and developed, however, he explains that the quality of service is not dependent on empathy. Pizam (2015) explained his theory in the example of employee-guest interaction in a luxury hotel where some guests were treating the service providers as their slaves. These employees always responded with courtesy, as he explains, and tried their best to satisfy guests' unreasonable demands, but at the same time, they felt offended and deeply hurt by how these guests treated them. Therefore, these employees made a conscious decision not to show cognitive or affective empathy.

Marković and Raspor Janković (2013) discussed in their study the impact of perceived service quality dimensions on customer satisfaction in the hotel industry in Croatia. First, they identified the main perceived hotel service quality dimensions in the Croatian hotel:

## EMPATHY AND THE SELECTION OF FRONTLINE STAFF

reliability, empathy and competence of staff, accessibility, and tangibles. Their findings revealed that reliability and accessibility were strongly related to overall customer satisfaction. Empathy, on the other hand, did not have a statistically significant impact on overall customer satisfaction when three other dimensions were involved in the model.

According to Markey (2016), service jobs have been bringing changes and challenges that cause a lot of stress to employees. Pizam's story about employees in luxury hotels is an example of such a stressful environment (2015). Therefore, Markey (2016) suggests that employers should focus on hiring people with high levels of emotional intelligence and empathy because they will be the ones who can connect with customers in this sort of environment. He also states that employees with bad attitudes tend to affect not only customer satisfaction and brand but other employees as well. Additionally, hiring and training new "bad fit" employees not only affects the recruiting and training budget, but it consumes supervisors' time, too.

Employers should take their time and choose the people who are the right fit for such an environment, Markey explains. He states that it is much easier to train an empathic employee a technical skill than it is to train a person who is not empathic, but technically proficient employee to show genuine interest when interacting with other people.

In the previous part of the study, empathy was discussed as one of the dimensions of service quality. In the following part the research is focused on the importance that hotel HR managers assign to empathy when selecting people for the frontline positions.

## METHODOLOGY

### Participants

Participants for this research were 9 four and five-star hotels in the Dubrovnik area. Since the highest quality of service is expected from this type of hotels, the author focused on them to investigate whether hotel HR managers think empathy is an important element in

## EMPATHY AND THE SELECTION OF FRONTLINE STAFF

service delivery, how they define it and recognize it, and whether they provide training for their frontline employees regarding empathy. Due to the sensitivity of the requested data, confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed, and the participation was completely voluntary.

### **Materials**

Originally, the primary method that was planned to be used in this research was a semi-structured interview, however, due to the situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, data was, alternatively, collected from surveys. Taking this as a limitation, there has been an impact on the number of respondents and the quality of the collected data. Fifteen 4 and 5-star hotel HR managers in the Dubrovnik area received a survey via email, out of which 9 responded. The survey was created in Google Forms and consisted of 6 open-ended questions.

The topics of the questions were related to the importance that hotel HR managers assign to empathy in the selection of frontline employees. The questions were structured in a way so that it can be investigated whether employers value empathy as a skill of their future frontline employees. All of the survey questions can be seen in Table 1.

### **Procedures**

After all responses had been collected, each question was separately analyzed. From the first question regarding which key characteristic hotel HR managers consider in the selection of frontline employees, 9 different answers were provided. They were put in the following categories: Personal Characteristics, Soft Skills, Education, and Relevant Job Experience. The answers from the second question, which investigated the importance of empathy in relation to other dimensions of service quality, were put in the following categories: More Important, Equally Important, and Less Important. The methods for identifying the level of empathy in a person applying for the frontline position that hotel HR managers indicated in the third question were put in the following categories: Written or Oral



## EMPATHY AND THE SELECTION OF FRONTLINE STAFF

Exams, Candidate's Listening Skills, Candidate's Job Experience, Examiner's Intuition, Candidate's Body Language, and Candidate's Personal Characteristics.

The answers from the fourth question revealed whether hotel HR managers ask interview questions through which a person's emotional intelligence can be determined. Few examples of such questions were provided and were put in the appropriate categories. The answers to the fifth question showed how do hotel HR managers define empathy and whether they think empathy is an innate characteristic or a skill that can be learned. The training provided to the frontline employees that hotel HR managers indicated in the sixth question was put in the following categories: Technical Skills Development Training, Soft Skills Development Training, Quality Training, and Technology Training.

### **RESULTS**

The results revealed that 77.8% of managers consider personality traits and soft skills as the key characteristic in the selection of frontline employees, as can be seen in Table 2. 33.3% said that education is the most important, while 11.1% considered relevant job experience first.

The other important finding is that all 9 participants think that empathy is important in service delivery and that every frontline employee should possess this skill. As illustrated in Figure 1, 44.4% of them stated that empathy is the most important dimension out of five service dimensions when assessing service quality. 44.4% said that empathy is equally important as other service quality dimensions: reliability, assurance, tangibles, and responsiveness (Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Berry, 1990), while 11.1% consider it as less important.

The data also showed that 11.1% stated that the level of empathy cannot be recognized in the hiring process. Others suggested a few ways to recognize an empathic person. As can be seen from Table 3, 33.3% test candidates through written or oral exams. 22.2% stated

## EMPATHY AND THE SELECTION OF FRONTLINE STAFF

methods such as candidate's listening skills, candidate's job experience, and examiner's intuition. 11.1% said that the level of empathy in a person can be recognized through a candidate's body language and personal characteristics.

As visible in Figure 2, 55.6% of all participants ask interview questions through which they test emotional intelligence. 33.3% ask opinion questions, 22.2% behavioral questions, and 11.1% of the participants ask competency questions, as can be seen in Table 4.

Another interesting finding is that 55.6% of all participants think that empathy is both an innate characteristic and a skill that can be improved and taught too. 22.2% said it as a skill that can be learned and 11.1 defined it as an innate characteristic only. This can be seen in Figure 3.

Regarding the training, all 9 respondents stated that they do provide training to their frontline employees. From Table 5, it is visible that 55.6% provide technical skill development training, while 44.4% provide soft skills training, 22.2% provide quality training to their frontline employees, and 11.1% provide technology training.

### **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The goal of the primary research was to examine the importance that HR managers from hotels in the Dubrovnik area assign to empathy when selecting people for frontline positions. The following section of the paper addresses some important considerations with regard to the topic and the findings of this research.

The findings of this research revealed that 4 and 5-star hotel HR managers not only value empathy as a dimension of service quality, but also think it is a crucial skill of every frontline employee. The majority of them consider soft skills as one of the key characteristics in the selection of frontline employees. As Bryers (2018) mentioned in his article, empathy is one skill that every company should have on their list, considering that those who possessed

## EMPATHY AND THE SELECTION OF FRONTLINE STAFF

this skill were the most successful and resilient individuals, rather than those who were the most experienced or hard-working.

The result of the analysis showed that almost half of 4 and 5-star hotels in the Dubrovnik area provide some kind of soft skill training for their frontline employees which proves that empathy is a skill that can be learned and improved (Schumann et al., 2014). More than half of the hotel HR managers defined empathy as both an innate characteristic and a skill that can be learned. Most of the managers emphasize communication training. One explained that communication skills play an important role in being successful as a frontline employee and that it is a skill that consists of several components including empathy.

Some participants emphasized dealing with stressful situations as a key characteristic they're looking for in the selection of frontline employees. As Markey (2016) mentioned in his article, employers should focus on hiring people with high levels of emotional intelligence and empathy because they will be the ones who can connect with customers in stressful situations. Hiring individuals who might fail to connect with customers, especially in such a situation, increases the risk of having a dissatisfied customer who will leave a negative review (Pera et al., 2019).

The most mentioned method for identifying the level of empathy in a person applying for the frontline position was through written or oral exams. It is difficult to identify an empathic person on a job interview; however, employers can meet a person better by asking them specific job interview questions or by giving them a psychological test that will reveal their personality.

This research also showed that the common types of job interview questions are opinion, behavioral and competency questions. It is important for the examiner to know the candidate's background, education, and work experience, but also how they handled various

## EMPATHY AND THE SELECTION OF FRONTLINE STAFF

work situations in the past. By asking this type of questions, the examiner can roughly identify the candidate's level of empathy.

An interesting observation was that some answers of particular participants were inconsistent and this is where the problem is. For instance, one manager mentioned that empathy is highly important as a characteristic of frontline employees so that they can best understand the guests and their needs, and added that empathy can be taught. The same hotel HR manager, however, in the following answers stated that they do not provide any soft skill training to their frontline employees.

Regarding the limitations of this paper, the author was unable to conduct the research through the primary method due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Originally, the primary method that was planned to be used in this research was a semi-structured interview. Alternatively, the data was collected from surveys. Taking this as a limitation, there has been an impact on the number of respondents and the quality of the collected data. Another limitation is the respondents' subjective assessments. The author's interpretation of the answers is also one of the limitations of this research.

Further research suggestion is to investigate the complete hiring process of different hotels. For this to be done, hotels will have to provide their protocol and transparent data. Another research suggestion is to examine the way soft skills training is conducted in different hotels, including the types of training and third parties that are conducting the training.

The conclusion is that hotels are aware of the importance of empathy as a characteristic of frontline employees and that it is a skill that can be learned and improved. However, as the research shows, only half of the participants provide soft skill training to their frontline employees. It would be suggested that more 4 and 5-star hotels incorporate this type of training and that they perform actions consistent with their claims.

## EMPATHY AND THE SELECTION OF FRONTLINE STAFF

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## EMPATHY AND THE SELECTION OF FRONTLINE STAFF

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# EMPATHY AND THE SELECTION OF FRONTLINE STAFF

## APPENDIX

<p>1. Each hotel has a list of skills required for a particular position. This may include education, previous work experience, personal characteristics, soft skills, and more. In your opinion, what are the most important characteristics of a frontline employee? Please explain.</p>
<p>2. Marković and Raspor Janković (2013) discussed in their study the impact of perceived service quality dimensions on customer satisfaction in the hotel industry in Croatia. First, they identified the main perceived hotel service quality dimensions in the Croatian hotel: reliability, empathy and competence of staff, accessibility, and tangibles. Their findings revealed that reliability and accessibility were strongly related to overall customer satisfaction. Empathy, on the other hand, did not have a statistically significant impact on overall customer satisfaction when three other dimensions were involved in the model. Other research shows that, in addition to having a positive impact on a customer's experience, empathetic employee behavior also results in a positive attitude toward the brand that the employee represents. What is your opinion on the importance of empathy and the impact of this quality on guest satisfaction? Do you consider empathy to be an essential characteristic of a frontline employee in relation to other characteristics that affect a positive guest experience? Please explain.</p>
<p>3. Can you provide some methods for identifying the level of empathy in a person applying for a frontline position?</p>
<p>4. Do you ask specific questions during a job interview that can tell you whether a person is emotionally intelligent? If yes, can you give an example of such a question?</p>
<p>5. Do you think empathy is an inherent characteristic or do you interpret it as a skill that can be learned? Please explain.</p>
<p>6. Do you provide certain training to your frontline employees? If yes, please list and explain.</p>

Table 1. Survey Questions

## EMPATHY AND THE SELECTION OF FRONTLINE STAFF

Categories	No. of Hotel HR Managers	% of Hotel HR Managers
Personality Characteristics	7	77.8
Soft Skills	7	77.8
Education	3	33.3
Relevant Job Experience	1	11.1

Table 2. Key Characteristics Considered in the Selection of Frontline Employees

Categories	No. of Hotel HR Managers	% of Hotel HR Managers
Written or Oral Exams	3	33.3
Candidate's Listening Skills	2	22.2
Candidate's Job Experience	2	22.2
Examiner's Intuition	2	22.2
Candidate's Body Language	1	11.1
Candidate's Personal Characteristics	1	11.1

Table 3. Methods for Identifying the Level of Empathy in a Person Applying for the Frontline Position

Categories	No. of Hotel HR Managers	% of Hotel HR Managers
Opinion Questions	3	33.3
Behavioral Questions	2	22.2
Competency Questions	1	11.1

Table 4. Type of Interview Questions Asked on the Job Interview



## EMPATHY AND THE SELECTION OF FRONTLINE STAFF

Categories	No. of Hotel HR Managers	% of Hotel HR Managers
Technical Skills Development Training	5	55.6
Soft Skills Development Training	4	44.4
Quality Training	2	22.2
Technology Training	1	11.1

*Table 5.* Training Hotels Provide to Their Frontline Employees

EMPATHY AND THE SELECTION OF FRONTLINE STAFF

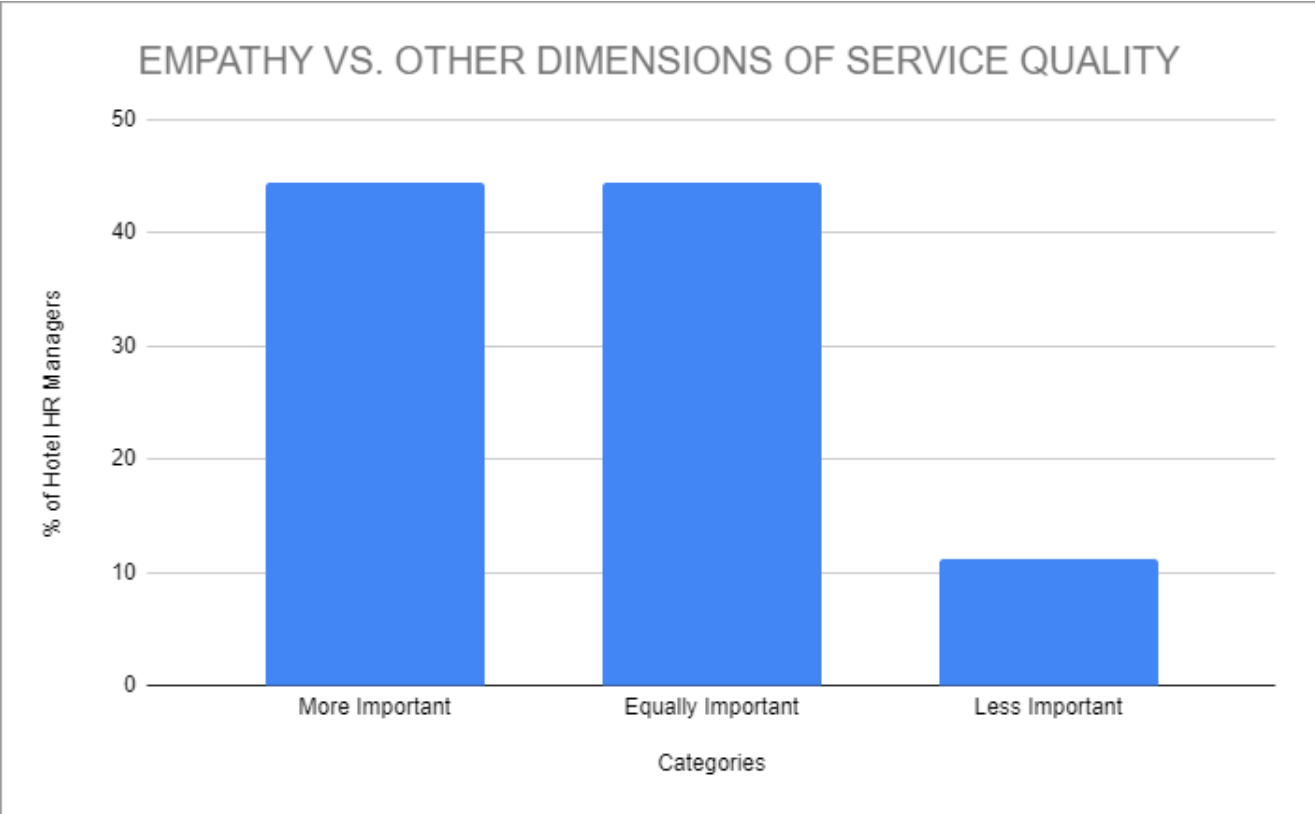


Figure 1. The Importance of Empathy in Relation to Other Dimensions of Service Quality

EMPATHY AND THE SELECTION OF FRONTLINE STAFF

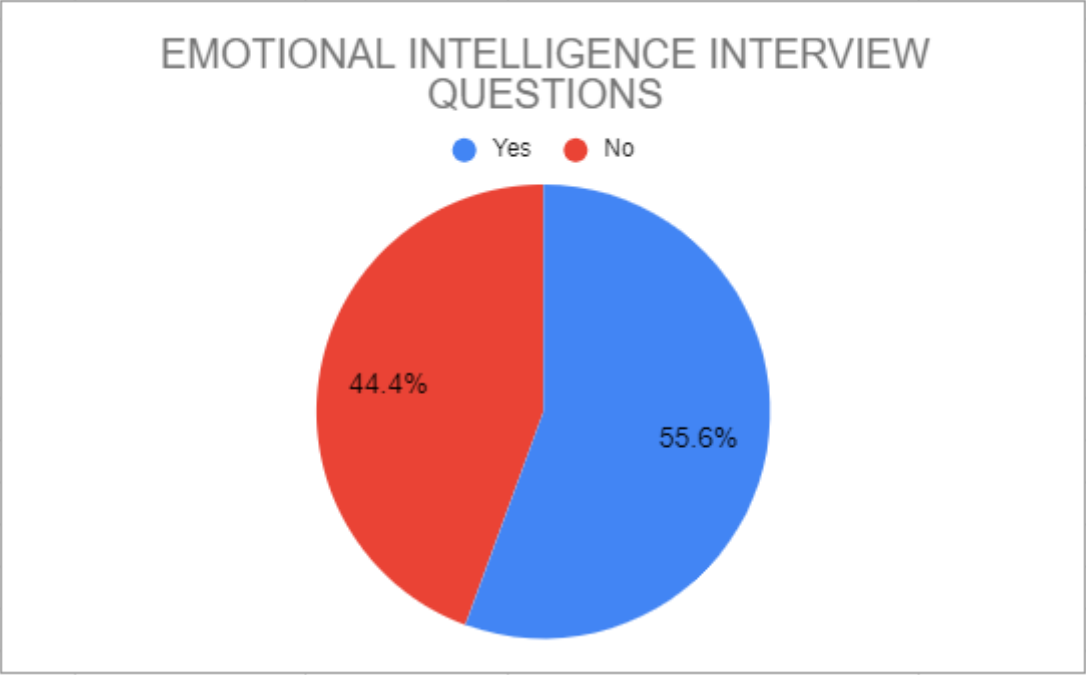


Figure 2. Do Hotel HR Managers Ask Interview Questions Through Which a Person's Emotional Intelligence Can Be Determined?

EMPATHY AND THE SELECTION OF FRONTLINE STAFF

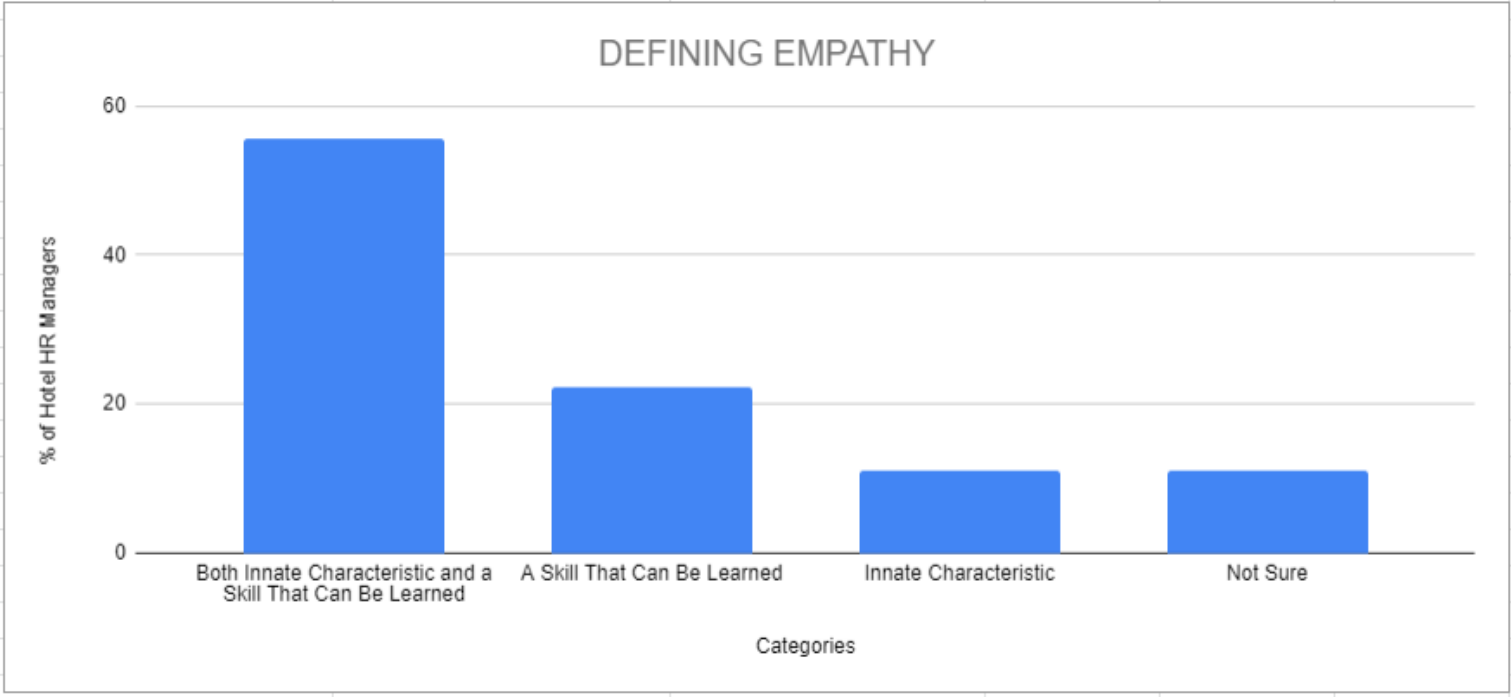


Figure 3. Do Hotel HR Managers Think Empathy Is an Innate Characteristic or Do They Interpret It as a Skill That Can Be Learned?