

## Here's one good thing that happened in 2020 that makes me optimistic about 2021



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[I wrote a blog post](#) at the

beginning of the year that outlined the reasons why I was optimistic about 2020. Now it seems, everyone is asking each other if anything good happened to them this year. But I can think of one very good thing that happened in

2020 that has me optimistic about next year—the growing acceptance of empathy.

Before the Thanksgiving Day holiday in the States, I had a chance to meet (virtually) with a group of women studying business at the University of Colorado. The conversation pivoted to leadership and the value of emotional intelligence.

I noted that good leaders need to be empathic. We need to know how to build relationships with our employees and our customers by emotionally understanding where our employees and our customers “are coming from.” And we need to do it in a consistent way, so our behavior is steady and predictable.

In so many ways, 2020 has been the year of empathy, especially when you consider the biggest business and societal decisions made this past year:

- **Literally overnight, we shifted our business model not just for safety - but for**

**caring.** When global enterprises (including my company, Lumen Technologies) adopted a work from home model, they made a business decision driven primarily by the health and well-being of employees. We started having new discussions around the individual needs of our teammates, the challenges they were facing in this new work environment, and what could we do to address both physical and mental health needs. All of these actions required a significant degree of empathy.

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**"As leaders, we find ourselves driven to grow our businesses. The first step is to learn how to grow within ourselves by better understanding everyone else."**

**Laurinda Pang**  
President of Customer Success



- **We started new conversations, but more importantly, we took the time to listen.** In the summer, when the public dialogue in the United States shifted to intolerance and systemic racism, many companies again turned inward, asking each other difficult questions and forcing us to put ourselves in someone else's shoes. At Lumen, we have several Diversity and Inclusion programs to do that, such as Listening Circles involving managers and their teams as well as unconscious bias training.

In 2020, Lumen went one step further when it rebranded itself as a technology company built around furthering human progress. We deliver solutions that allow our clients to acquire, analyze, and act upon data faster than their competitors. **At the same, we challenge ourselves to develop evolving customer relationships that incorporate empathy into our day-to-day interactions.** This new approach leverages our ability to listen to enterprise clients, learn their goals and aspirations, and act in ways that achieve mutual success in the long run.

I believe empathy can be applied to any organization, because every organization is built around people and their needs. In that blog post I wrote at the start of the year, I quoted Colin Powell, because he called optimism "a force multiplier." Now another quote of his reinforces why empathy is so important—"Leadership is about people. It's not about organizations. It's not about plans. It's not about strategies. It is all about people-motivating people to get the job done."

Fortunately, 2020 gave business leaders plenty of practice to stretch their collective empathy “muscles.” It helped us better understand our colleagues and our customers, and those skills have prepared us for the challenges of a post-pandemic world.

As leaders, we find ourselves driven to grow our businesses. The first step is to learn how to grow within ourselves by better understanding everyone else.

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