

THE 7 HABITS OF HIGHLY EFFECTIVE PEOPLE

BOOK DIGEST

Habit 5 : SEEK FIRST TO UNDERSTAND, THEN TO BE UNDERSTOOD - Principles of empathic communication

“The heart has its reason which reason knows not of—Blaise Pascal”

The 5th habit gives us the key to **effective interpersonal communication** and the cure for a common syndrome we all share: we tend to prescribe our advice and conclusions before fully diagnosing the problem someone else is sharing with us. Indeed, we often feel an **urge to fix and problem solve** and that **prevents us from deeply listening** to what the other has to say.

Character and communication

The four basic types of communication are **reading, writing, speaking and listening**. **Communication is the most important skill in life**, since we spend hours communicating each day. And we all spend years learning how to write and speak, but **how many** of us have been **taught** how to truly **listen**? When have we learned how to listen from the other person's unique frame of reference, in order to deeply and fully understand THEM?

“If you want to interact effectively with me, to influence me—your spouse, your child, your neighbor, your boss, your coworker, your friend—you first need to understand me. And you can't do that with technique alone.

If I sense you're using some technique, I sense duplicity, manipulation.

I wonder why you're doing it, what your motives are. And I don't feel safe enough to open myself up to you.”

Our **character** radiates whether we're aware of it or not and will lead others to trust us or not regardless of what we say in a specific instant. If our behavior is very inconsistent, people will notice and have a hard time opening up to us. Even if someone truly wants to confide in us, something will stop them from being truly vulnerable, since the outcome is too unpredictable. And if someone doesn't deeply understand us they can't accurately counsel or advise us. Same for us if we don't truly understand the other. **Our words can only feel relevant to someone who feels known by us**. To trust our words, someone else needs to trust us first.

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"Unless you're influenced by my uniqueness, I'm not going to be influenced by your advice."

This is why we must learn the skill of **empathetic** listening and build a character that fosters trust and openness. We have to build strong emotional bank accounts (EBA) with others.

Empathic listening

"Most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply".

People tend to be either speaking or preparing to speak; that leaves little room to listen. It traps us into filtering what others say through our own autobiography that we then read into other people's lives.

So many people resume their communication problem with another person by "they just don't understand"

"We're filled with our own rightness, our own autobiography.

We want to be understood.

Our conversations become collective monologues.

and we never really understand what's going on inside another human being."

Here are the four levels our listening abilities tend to rely on:

- **Ignoring** (pretending to listen)
- **Pretending** (Uh-huh, sure...)
- **Selective** listening (filtering bits of the conversation)
- **Attentive** listening (focusing energy on the words of the other)

Empathetic level is the fifth level. This is different from the technique of active listening. It's not only about repeating some key words! That practice can actually be very detrimental for the relationship if followed as a skill only and make the other feel insulted. The intent is still to control, manipulate or reply. With empathetic listening, the goal is first and foremost to deeply understand and that's an entirely different paradigm. Our goal must be to put ourselves in the other person's frame of reference. To look through it. To see the world the way they see the world, to understand and how they feel. It's different from sympathy which is a form of agreement or judgment. Here the goal is not to agree or not, it's to understand the other person both emotionally and intellectually.

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In the author's words:

"In empathic listening, you listen with your ears, but also, and more important, listen with your eyes and with your heart. You listen for feeling, for meaning. You listen for behavior. You use your right brain as well as your left. You sense, you intuit, you feel."

*"Empathic listening is the key to making deposits in EBAs.
because nothing you do is a deposit until the other person perceives it as such."*

If someone perceives our efforts as manipulative, self-serving, condescending or intimidating, our deposit attempt ends up being a withdrawal. And this happens when we don't understand what is not important for them.

Being on the receiving end of empathic listening is deeply healing because it gives us "psychological air".

*"Next to physical survival, the greatest need of a human being is psychological survival—
to be understood, to be affirmed, to be validated, to be appreciated."*

Once we've understood we can see what would be truly helpful and influential for the other person. (Of note the author speaks of influencing others in the sense of having an impact, not through the lens of getting them to do what WE want them to do). We can then act with a focus on the human dynamic and not get stuck within the technical dimensions of the deal only.

It's hard to seek to understand first. It feels easier and faster to just get our point across. And yet, if we don't understand where other people are coming from, we can't achieve maximum interdependent production, we can't fill up our shared EBA. We only trust those who understand us.

And empathic listening is also hard, because it requires us to be vulnerable. It requires to be willing to be moved and perhaps changed by the other. We can only be influential on those we're willing to be influenced by.

This is why we needed to build habits 1,2 and 3 first! To be ready and equipped for habit 5 with a solid inner core and center.

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Four autobiographical responses

When we listen autobiographically, we fall into four traps: **evaluating** (agreeing or not), **probing** (asking questions after questions based on our own frame of reference), **advising** (counseling based on our own experience) or **interpreting** (trying to figure people out and how they function based on how we function). Those responses come naturally to us so we tend to be very scripted in them. We don't even realize we're doing that, it just feels normal. It keeps us stuck in the language of logic, which prevents access to the language of emotions. It does not make others feel seen, contrary to our beliefs; it makes them feel judged.

When we base our answers on our own narratives, it feels incredibly limiting to the person who's genuinely trying to get their point across. As Stephen Covey puts it:

"You will never be able to truly step inside another person, to see the world as he sees it, until you develop the pure desire, the strength of personal character, and the positive EBA, as well as the empathic listening skills to do it."

Once again only mimicking what the other say in a misguided attempt at active listening can be even more damaging than not listening. It's better to start by rephrasing the content, demonstrating that we're trying to put what they mean into our own words. It's even more potent if we mirror what the other person is feeling. Logically, the next step of improvement will be to learn how to do both at the same time (rephrasing and reflecting). That's what empathic listening is about. That's **how we offer the other psychological air**. It helps the other person to work through their own thoughts and emotions. And that's when we earn the right to be trusted with their innermost tender feelings and stories.

If we don't take the time to understand first, we assume we understand what feels challenging for the other person in a specific situation, but we risk being wrong. And if we misunderstand the problem, none of our help will help. We need to always remember that the goal is not transactional but transformational.

"There are times when transformation requires no outside counsel.

**Often when people are really given the chance to open up,
they unravel their own problems and the solutions become clear to them in the process."**

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A **sincere** desire to understand must drive all our attempts to communicate with someone else if we want to be able to help. And deeply listening can be more helpful than words often.

Also, as the author points out, empathic listening takes time but not nearly as much as correcting misunderstandings with someone who does not trust us.

Here's what SC want us to realize:

"A discerning empathic listener can read what's happening down deep fast, and can show such acceptance, such understanding that other people feel safe to open up layer after layer until they get to that soft inner core where the problem really lies."

"People want to be understood".

Understanding and perception

Listening deeply to other people leads us to discover tremendous differences in perception. For instance someone can come from an abundance mentality, and the other filters the world through scarcity. Some people rely only on their left brained rational skills and others on their creative right brain abilities. We've all been living in our own paradigms for years interpreting what we perceive as universal truths and confusing our perceptions as undeniable facts. And the other person is just as convinced as us, that character and mental competence are proven by our ability to understand the world the way we do. Habit 5 allows us to **transcend the limits of our individual perceptions** to create deep communication and efficient collaboration.

Then seek to be understood

Maturity has been defined here as the balance between consideration and courage. **Seeking to understand** requires **consideration**, but that's only half of the process. We must then have the **courage** to make sure **we're understood** too. The author takes us back to the origins of our civilization, where the Greeks would use the words ETHOS, PATHOS and LOGOS to describe our personal **credibility** (ethos), our **empathic** side (pathos) and our **logic** (logos). Egos translates the trust we inspire (our EBA!), pathos translates in how we align with the other person's emotional thrust and logos is the reasoning part of our presentation. Stephen Covey does not only want to give us a lesson in ancient greek, but also to emphasize the sequence. Ethos (our character) **first**. Pathos (our relationships) **second**. Logos **last**. However most people base their presentations only on the logic of the point they're making. They want others to understand their logic before giving any thoughts to ethos or pathos. And that doesn't work.

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When a sell does not happen, the potential buyer is not sent back to school, the salesman is. We must remember that **effectiveness is not measured in the means but the results**. Did we create the change we wanted, and did we build a relationship in the process? That's all that mattered to evaluate our communication skills. We expect others to change just because they think we should but we're often not willing to try and change the way we encourage them to. We forget that **the way we present things is our circle of influence**, not what the other chooses to do afterwards.

In order to open someone's mind to an alternative solution, we must first understand even better than they do why they think that their solution is the best. Doing this is the necessary condition for us to be able to justify the logic beneath our request for a different way.

"When you can present your own ideas clearly, specifically, visually, and most important, contextually—in the context of a deep understanding of other people's paradigms and concerns—you significantly increase the credibility of your ideas."

Habit 5 allows us to reach greater accuracy and greater integrity in our interactions.

One on one

The power of habit 5 lies in the fact that it is **completely within our circle of influence**. We can ALWAYS decide to seek first to understand. And that allows us to base all our decisions on accurate information, reaching the heart of the matter quicker, building our EBA, and giving people the psychological air we all crave. It's the **INSIDE OUT** approach.

Interestingly, the more we understand others, the more we appreciate them and the more reverence we feel towards them.

Of note, people don't have to open up immediately just because we emphasized. It's also very important to remain patient. But empathic listening is also a productive choice as it creates opportunities to do preventive work, to make deposits in the EBA, to allow people to witness that they can indeed trust us.

Seeking to understand first is the **stepping stone** to our next habit: **synergy**.

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"Seek first to understand.

Before the problems come up, before you try to evaluate and prescribe,
before you try to present your own ideas—seek to understand.

It's a powerful habit of effective interdependence."

Here are our homeworks:

- To select a relationship with an empty EBA and try to write about how we believe the other person is seeing the situation. This is to be reviewed after truly listening to them to understand the next time we meet. How on point were we?
- To try and witness people communicating while covering our ears and relying only on our eyes.
- Choosing to apologize the next time we find ourselves into one of the four autobiographical responses.
- To base our next presentation on empathy! By describing the other's point of view even better than they would and then presenting things in a way that will allow them to understand what we mean through THEIR frame of reference (not ours).

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BOOK CLUB DISCUSSIONS

SAVE THE DATE

You're invited

Tuesday, October 24th

from 7pm-8pm

Virtual Zoom Meeting

OR

Friday, October 27th

from 12pm-1pm

Virtual Zoom Meeting