

EMPATHETIC LISTENING

Steven Covey

Note: Habit 5 in Steven Covey's *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* is
"Seek first to understand, then to be understood."

If I were to summarize in one sentence the single most important principle I have learned in the field of interpersonal relations, it would be this: *Seek first to understand, then to be understood*. This principle is the key to effective interpersonal communication...

When another person speaks, we're usually "listening" at one of four levels. We may be *ignoring* another person, not really listening at all. We may practice *pretending*. "Yeah, Uh-huh. Right." We may practice *selective listening*, hearing only certain parts of the conversation. We often do this when we're listening to the constant chatter of a preschool child. Or we may even practice *attentive listening*, paying attention and focusing energy on the words that are being said. But very few of us ever practice the fifth level, the highest form of listening, *empathetic listening*.

When I say empathetic listening, I am not referring to the techniques of "active" listening or "reflective" listening, which basically involve mimicking what another person says. That kind of listening is skill-based, truncated from character and relationships, and often insults those "listened" to in such a way. It is also essentially autobiographical. If you practice those techniques, you may not project your autobiography in the actual interaction, but your motive in listening is autobiographical. You listen with reflective skills, but you listen with intent to reply, to control, to manipulate.

When I say empathetic listening, I mean listening with the intent to *understand*. I mean *seeking first* to understand, to really understand. It's an entirely different paradigm.

Empathetic (from *empathy*) listening gets inside another person's frame of reference. You look through it, you see the world as they see the world, you understand their paradigm, you understand how they feel.

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Empathetic listening is so powerful because it gives you accurate data to work with. Instead of projecting your own autobiography and assuming thoughts, feelings, motives and interpretation, you're dealing with the reality inside another person's head and heart. You're listening to understand. You're focused on receiving deep communication from another human soul.