

Principles of Empathic
Communication :

Habit 5

"Seek first to understand,
then to be understood"

The SEVEN HABITS of HIGHLY EFFECTIVE PEOPLE

*Restoring the
Character Ethic*

Stephen R. Covey
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PRINCIPLES OF EMPATHIC COMMUNICATION

The heart has its reasons which reason knows not of.

PASCAL

SUPPOSE YOU'VE BEEN HAVING TROUBLE WITH YOUR EYES and you decide to go to an optometrist for help. After briefly listening to your complaint, he takes off his glasses and hands them to you.

"Put these on," he says. "I've worn this pair of glasses for ten years now and they've really helped me. I have an extra pair at home; you can wear these."

So you put them on, but it only makes the problem worse.

"This is terrible!" you exclaim. "I can't see a thing!"

"Well, what's wrong?" he asks. "They work great for me. Try harder."

"I am trying," you insist. "Everything is a blur."

"Well, what's the matter with you? Think positively."

"Okay. I positively can't see a thing."

"Boy, are you ungrateful!" he chides. "And after all I've done to help you!"

What are the chances you'd go back to that optometrist the next time you needed help? Not very good, I would imagine. You don't have much confidence in someone who doesn't diagnose before he or she prescribes.

But how often do we diagnose before we prescribe in communication?

"Come on, honey, tell me how you feel. I know it's hard, but I'll try to understand."

"Oh, I don't know, Mom. You'd think it was stupid."

"Of course I wouldn't! You can tell me. Honey, no one cares for you as much as I do. I'm only interested in your welfare. What's making you so unhappy?"

"Oh, I don't know."

"Come on, honey. What is it?"

"Well, to tell you the truth, I just don't like school anymore."

"What?" you respond incredulously. "What do you mean you don't like school? And after all the sacrifices we've made for your education! Education is the foundation of your future. If you'd apply yourself like your older sister does, you'd do better and then you'd like school. Time and time again, we've told you to settle down. You've got the ability, but you just don't apply yourself. Try harder. Get a positive attitude about it."

Pause.

"Now go ahead. Tell me how you feel."

We have such a tendency to rush in, to fix things up with good advice. But we often fail to take the time to diagnose, to really, deeply understand the problem first.

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.

CHARACTER AND COMMUNICATION

Right now, you're reading a book I've written. Reading and writing are both forms of communication. So are speaking and listening. In fact, those are the four basic types of communication. And think of all the hours you spend doing at least one of those four things. The ability to do them well is absolutely critical to your effectiveness.

Communication is the most important skill in life. We spend most of our waking hours communicating. But consider this: You've spent years learning how to read and write, years learning

how to speak. But what about listening? What training or education have you had that enables you to listen so that you really, deeply understand another human being from that individual's own frame of reference?

Comparatively few people have had any training in listening at all. And, for the most part, their training has been in the Personality Ethic of technique, truncated from the character base and the relationship base absolutely vital to authentic understanding of another person.

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.

The real key to your influence with me is your example, your actual conduct. Your example flows naturally out of your character, or the kind of person you truly are—not what others say you are or what you may want me to think you are. It is evident in how I actually experience you.

Your character is constantly radiating, communicating. From it, in the long run, I come to instinctively trust or distrust you and your efforts with me.

If your life runs hot and cold, if you're both caustic and kind, and, above all, if your private performance doesn't square with your public performance, it's very hard for me to open up with you. Then, as much as I may want and even need to receive your love and influence, I don't feel safe enough to expose my opinions and experiences and my tender feelings. Who knows what will happen?

But unless I open up with you, unless you understand me and my unique situation and feelings, you won't know how to advise or counsel me. What you say is good and fine, but it doesn't quite pertain to me.

You may say you care about and appreciate me. I desperately want to believe that. But how can you appreciate me when you don't even understand me? All I have are your words, and I can't trust words.

I'm too angry and defensive—perhaps too guilty and afraid—to be influenced, even though inside I know I need what you could tell me.

Unless you're influenced by my uniqueness, I'm not going to be influenced by your advice. So if you want to be really effective in the habit of interpersonal communication, you cannot do it with technique alone. You have to build the skills of empathic listening on a base of character that inspires openness and trust. And you have to build the Emotional Bank Accounts that create a commerce between hearts.

EMPATHIC LISTENING

"Seek first to understand" involves a very deep shift in paradigm. We typically seek first to be understood. Most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply. They're either speaking or preparing to speak. They're filtering everything through their own paradigms, reading their autobiography into other people's lives.

"Oh, I know exactly how you feel!"

"I went through the very same thing. Let me tell you about my experience."

They're constantly projecting their own home movies onto other people's behavior. They prescribe their own glasses for everyone with whom they interact.

If they have a problem with someone—a son, a daughter, a spouse, an employee—their attitude is, "That person just doesn't understand."

A father once told me, "I can't understand my kid. He just won't listen to me at all."

"Let me restate what you just said," I replied. "You don't understand your son because he won't listen to you?"

"That's right," he replied.

"Let me try again," I said. "You don't understand your son because *he* won't listen to *you*?"

"That's what I said," he impatiently replied.

"I thought that to understand another person, *you* needed to listen to *him*," I suggested.

"Oh!" he said. There was a long pause. "Oh!" he said again, as the light began to dawn. "Oh, yeah! But I do understand him. I know what he's going through. I went through the same thing myself. I guess what I don't understand is why he won't listen to me."

This man didn't have the vaguest idea of what was really going

on inside his boy's head. He looked into his own head and thought he saw the world, including his boy.

That's the case with so many of us. 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.

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, *empathic listening*.

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

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

Empathy is not sympathy. Sympathy is a form of agreement, a form of judgment. And it is sometimes the more appropriate emotion and response. But people often feed on sympathy. It makes them dependent. The essence of empathic listening is not that you agree with someone; it's that you fully, deeply, understand that person, emotionally as well as intellectually.

Empathic listening involves much more than registering, reflecting, or even understanding the words that are said. Communica-

tions experts estimate, in fact, that only 10 percent of our communication is represented by the words we say. Another 30 percent is represented by our sounds, and 60 percent by our body language. In empathic listening, you listen with your ears, but you also, and more importantly, 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 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 the deep communication of another human soul.

In addition, empathic listening is the key to making deposits in Emotional Bank Accounts, because nothing you do is a deposit unless the other person perceives it as such. You can work your fingers to the bone to make a deposit, only to have it turn into a withdrawal when a person regards your efforts as manipulative, self-serving, intimidating, or condescending because you don't understand what really matters to him.

Empathic listening is, in and of itself, a tremendous deposit in the Emotional Bank Account. It's deeply therapeutic and healing because it gives a person "psychological air."

If all the air were suddenly sucked out of the room you're in right now, what would happen to your interest in this book? You wouldn't care about the book; you wouldn't care about anything except getting air. Survival would be your only motivation.

But now that you have air, it doesn't motivate you. This is one of the greatest insights in the field of human motivation: *Satisfied needs do not motivate*. It's only the unsatisfied need that motivates. 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.

When you listen with empathy to another person, you give that person psychological air. And after that vital need is met, you can then focus on influencing or problem solving.

This need for psychological air impacts communication in every area of life.

* * *

I taught this concept at a seminar in Chicago one time, and I instructed the participants to practice empathic listening during the evening. The next morning, a man came up to me almost bursting with news.

"Let me tell you what happened last night," he said. "I was trying to close a big commercial real estate deal while I was here in Chicago. I met with the principals, their attorneys, and another real estate agent who had just been brought in with an alternative proposal.

"It looked as if I were going to lose the deal. I had been working on this deal for over six months and, in a very real sense, all my eggs were in this one basket. All of them. I panicked. I did everything I could—I pulled out all the stops—I used every sales technique I could. The final stop was to say, 'Could we delay this decision just a little longer?' But the momentum was so strong and they were so disgusted by having this thing go on so long, it was obvious they were going to close.

"So I said to myself, 'Well, why not try it? Why not practice what I learned today and seek first to understand, then to be understood? I've got nothing to lose.'

"I just said to the man, 'Let me see if I really understand what your position is and what your concerns about my recommendations really are. When you feel I understand them, then we'll see whether my proposal has any relevance or not.'

"I really tried to put myself in his shoes. I tried to verbalize his needs and concerns, and he began to open up.

"The more I sensed and expressed the things he was worried about, the results he anticipated, the more he opened up.

"Finally, in the middle of our conversation, he stood up, walked over to the phone, and dialed his wife. Putting his hand over the mouthpiece, he said, 'You've got the deal.'

"I was totally dumbfounded," he told me. "I still am this morning."

He had made a huge deposit in the Emotional Bank Account by giving the man psychological air. When it comes right down to it, other things being relatively equal, the human dynamic is more important than the technical dimensions of the deal.

Seeking first to understand, diagnosing before you prescribe, is hard. It's so much easier in the short run to hand someone a pair of glasses that have fit you so well these many years.

But in the long run, it severely depletes both P and PC. You can't achieve maximum interdependent production from an inaccurate understanding of where other people are coming from. And you can't have interpersonal PC—high Emotional Bank Accounts—if the people you relate with don't really feel understood.

Empathic listening is also risky. It takes a great deal of security to go into a deep listening experience because you open yourself up to be influenced. You become vulnerable. It's a paradox, in a sense, because in order to have influence, you have to be influenced. That means you have to really understand.

That's why Habits 1, 2, and 3 are so foundational. They give you the changeless inner core, the principle center, from which you can handle the more outward vulnerability with peace and strength.

DIAGNOSE BEFORE YOU PRESCRIBE

Although it's risky and hard, seek first to understand, or diagnose before you prescribe, is a correct principle manifest in many areas of life. It's the mark of all true professionals. It's critical for the optometrist, it's critical for the physician. You wouldn't have any confidence in a doctor's prescription unless you had confidence in the diagnosis.

When our daughter Jenny was only two months old, she was sick one Saturday, the day of a football game in our community that dominated the consciousness of almost everyone. It was an important game—some 60,000 people were there. Sandra and I would like to have gone, but we didn't want to leave little Jenny. Her vomiting and diarrhea had us concerned.

The doctor was at that game. He wasn't our personal physician, but he was the one on call. When Jenny's situation got worse, we decided we needed some medical advice.

Sandra dialed the stadium and had him paged. It was right at a critical time in the game, and she could sense an officious tone in his voice. "Yes?" he said briskly. "What is it?"

"This is Mrs. Covey, Doctor, and we're concerned about our daughter, Jenny."

"What's the situation?" he asked.

Sandra described the symptoms, and he said, "Okay. I'll call in a prescription. Which is your pharmacy?"

When she hung up, Sandra felt that in her rush she hadn't really

given him full data, but that what she had told him was adequate.

"Do you think he realizes that Jenny is just a newborn?" I asked her.

"I'm sure he does," Sandra replied.

"But he's not our doctor. He's never even treated her."

"Well, I'm pretty sure he knows."

"Are you willing to give her the medicine unless you're absolutely sure he knows?"

Sandra was silent. "What are we going to do?" she finally said.

"Call him back," I said.

"You call him back," Sandra replied.

So I did. He was paged out of the game once again. "Doctor," I said, "when you called in that prescription, did you realize that Jenny is just two months old?"

"No!" he exclaimed. "I didn't realize that. It's good you called me back. I'll change the prescription immediately."

If you don't have confidence in the diagnosis, you won't have confidence in the prescription.

This principle is also true in sales. An effective sales person first seeks to understand the needs, the concerns, the situation of the customer. The amateur salesman sells products; the professional sells solutions to needs and problems. It's a totally different approach. The professional learns how to diagnose, how to understand. He also learns how to relate people's needs to his products and services. And, he has to have the integrity to say, "My product or service will not meet that need" if it will not.

Diagnosing before you prescribe is also fundamental to law. The professional lawyer first gathers the facts to understand the situation, to understand the laws and precedents, before preparing a case. A good lawyer almost writes the opposing attorney's case before he writes his own.

It's also true in product design. Can you imagine someone in a company saying, "This consumer research stuff is for the birds. Let's design products." In other words, forget understanding the consumer's buying habits and motives—just design products. It would never work.

A good engineer will understand the forces, the stresses at work, before designing the bridge. A good teacher will assess the class before teaching. A good student will understand before he applies. A good parent will understand before evaluating or judging. The

key to good judgment is understanding. By judging first, a person will never fully understand.

Seek first to understand is a correct principle evident in all areas of life. It's a generic, common denominator principle, but it has its greatest power in the area of interpersonal relations.

FOUR AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL RESPONSES

Because we listen autobiographically, we tend to respond in one of four ways. We *evaluate*—we either agree or disagree; we *probe*—we ask questions from our own frame of reference; we *advise*—we give counsel based on our own experience; or we *interpret*—we try to figure people out, to explain their motives, their behavior, based on our own motives and behavior.

These responses come naturally to us. We are deeply scripted in them; we live around models of them all the time. But how do they affect our ability to really understand?

If I'm trying to communicate with my son, can he feel free to open himself up to me when I evaluate everything he says before he really explains it? Am I giving him psychological air?

And how does he feel when I probe? Probing is playing twenty questions. It's autobiographical, it controls, and it invades. It's also logical, and the language of logic is different from the language of sentiment and emotion. You can play twenty questions all day and not find out what's important to someone. Constant probing is one of the main reasons parents do not get close to their children.

"How's it going, son?"

"Fine."

"Well, what's been happening lately?"

"Nothing."

"So what's exciting in school?"

"Not much."

"And what are your plans for the weekend?"

"I don't know."

You can't get him off the phone talking with his friends, but all he gives you is one- and two-word answers. Your house is a motel where he eats and sleeps, but he never shares, never opens up.

And when you think about it, honestly, why should he, if every time he does open up his soft underbelly, you elephant stomp it with autobiographical advice and "I told you so's."

We are so deeply scripted in these responses that we don't even

realize when we use them. I have taught this concept to thousands of people in seminars across the country, and it never fails to shock them deeply as we role-play empathic listening situations and they finally begin to listen to their own typical responses. But as they begin to see how they normally respond and learn how to listen with empathy, they can see the dramatic results in communication. To many, *seek first to understand* becomes the most exciting, the most immediately applicable, of all the Seven Habits.

Let's take a look at what well might be a typical communication between a father and his teenage son. Look at the father's words in terms of the four different responses we have just described.

"Boy, Dad, I've had it! School is for the birds!"

"What's the matter, Son?" (probing).

"It's totally impractical. I don't get a thing out of it."

"Well, you just can't see the benefits yet, Son. I felt the same way when I was your age. I remember thinking what a waste some of the classes were. But those classes turned out to be the most helpful to me later on. Just hang in there. Give it some time" (advising).

"I've given it ten years of my life! Can you tell me what good 'x plus y' is going to be to me as an auto mechanic?"

"An auto mechanic? You've got to be kidding" (evaluating).

"No, I'm not. Look at Joe. He's quit school. He's working on cars. And he's making lots of money. Now that's practical."

"It may look that way now. But several years down the road, Joe's going to wish he'd stayed in school. You don't want to be an auto mechanic. You need an education to prepare you for something better than that" (advising).

"I don't know. Joe's got a pretty good set up."

"Look, Son, have you really tried?" (probing, evaluating).

"I've been in high school two years now. Sure I've tried. It's just a waste."

"That's a highly respected school, Son. Give them a little credit" (advising, evaluating).

"Well, the other guys feel the same way I do."

"Do you realize how many sacrifices your mother and I have made to get you where you are? You can't quit when you've come this far" (evaluating).

"I know you've sacrificed, Dad. But it's just not worth it."

"Look, maybe if you spent more time doing your homework and less time in front of TV . . ." (advising, evaluating).

"Look, Dad. It's just no good. Oh . . . never mind! I don't want to talk about this anyway."

Obviously, his father was well intended. Obviously, he wanted to help. But did he even begin to really understand?

Let's look more carefully at the son—not just his words, but his thoughts and feelings (expressed parenthetically below) and the possible effect of some of his dad's autobiographical responses.

"Boy, Dad, I've had it! School is for the birds!" (*I want to talk with you, to get your attention.*)

"What's the matter, Son?" (*You're interested! Good!*)

"It's totally impractical. I don't get a thing out of it." (*I've got a problem with school, and I feel just terrible.*)

"Well, you just can't see the benefits yet, Son. I felt the same way when I was your age." (*Oh, no! Here comes Chapter three of Dad's autobiography. This isn't what I want to talk about. I don't really care how many miles he had to trudge through the snow to school without any boots. I want to get to the problem.*) "I remember thinking what a waste some of the classes were. But those classes turned out to be the most helpful to me later on. Just hang in there. Give it some time." (*Time won't solve my problem. I wish I could tell you. I wish I could just spit it out.*)

"I've given it ten years of my life! Can you tell me what good 'x plus y' is going to do me as an auto mechanic?"

"An auto mechanic? You've got to be kidding." (*He wouldn't like me if I were an auto mechanic. He wouldn't like me if I didn't finish school. I have to justify what I said.*)

"No, I'm not. Look at Joe. He's quit school. He's working on cars. And he's making lots of money. Now that's practical."

"It may look that way now. But several years down the road, Joe's going to wish he'd stayed in school." (*Oh, boy! Here comes lecture number sixteen on the value of an education.*) "You don't want to be an auto mechanic." (*How do you know that, Dad? Do you really have any idea what I want?*) "You need an education to prepare you for something better than that."

"I don't know. Joe's got a pretty good set up." (*He's not a failure. He didn't finish school and he's not a failure.*)

"Look, Son, have you really tried?" (*We're beating around the bush,*

Dad. If you'd just listen, I really need to talk to you about something important.)

"I've been in high school two years now. Sure I've tried. It's just a waste."

"That's a highly respected school, Son. Give them a little credit." (Oh, great. Now we're talking credibility. I wish I could talk about what I want to talk about.)

"Well, the other guys feel the same way I do." (I have some credibility, too. I'm not a moron.)

"Do you realize how many sacrifices your mother and I have made to get you where you are?" (Uh-oh, here comes the guilt trip. Maybe I am a moron. The school's great, Mom and Dad are great, and I'm a moron.) "You can't quit when you've come this far."

"I know you've sacrificed, Dad. But it's just not worth it." (You just don't understand.)

"Look, maybe if you spent more time doing your homework and less time in front of TV. . . ." (That's not the problem, Dad! That's not it at all! I'll never be able to tell you. I was dumb to try.)

"Look, Dad. It's just no good. Oh . . . never mind! I don't want to talk about this anyway."

Can you see how limited we are when we try to understand another person on the basis of words alone, especially when we're looking at that person through our own glasses? Can you see how limiting our autobiographical responses are to a person who is genuinely trying to get us to understand his autobiography?

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 Emotional Bank Account, as well as the empathic listening skills to do it.

The skills, the tip of the iceberg of empathic listening, involve four developmental stages.

The first and least effective is to *mimic content*. This is the skill taught in "active" or "reflective" listening. Without the character and relationship base, it is often insulting to people and causes them to close up. It is, however, a first stage skill because it at least causes you to listen to what's being said.

Mimicking content is easy. You just listen to the words that come out of someone's mouth and you repeat them. You're hardly even using your brain at all.

"Boy, Dad, I've had it! School is for the birds!"

"You've had it. You think school is for the birds."

You have essentially repeated back the content of what was being said. You haven't evaluated or probed or advised or interpreted. You've at least showed you're paying attention to his words. But to understand, you want to do more.

The second stage of emphatic listening is to *rephrase the content*. It's a little more effective, but it's still limited to the verbal communication.

"Boy, Dad, I've had it! School is for the birds!"

"You don't want to go to school anymore."

This time, you've put his meaning into your own words. Now you're thinking about what he said, mostly with the left side, the reasoning, logical side of the brain.

The third stage brings your right brain into operation. You *reflect feeling*.

"Boy, Dad, I've had it! School is for the birds!"

"You're feeling really frustrated."

Now you're not paying as much attention to what he's saying as you are to the way he feels about what he's saying. The fourth stage includes both the second and the third. You *rephrase the content and reflect the feeling*.

"Boy, Dad, I've had it! School is for the birds!"

"You're really frustrated about school."

Frustration is the feeling; school is the content. You're using both sides of your brain to understand both sides of his communication.

Now, what happens when you use fourth stage empathic listening skills is really incredible. As you authentically seek to understand, as you rephrase content and reflect feeling, you give him psychological air. You also help him work through his own thoughts and feelings. As he grows in his confidence of your sincere desire to really listen and understand, the barrier between what's going on inside him and what's actually being communicated to you disappears. It opens a soul to soul flow. He's not thinking and feeling one thing and communicating another. He begins to trust you with his innermost tender feelings and thoughts.

"Boy, Dad, I've had it! School is for the birds!" (I want to talk with you, to get your attention.)

"You're really frustrated about school." (*That's right! That's how I feel.*)

"I sure am. It's totally impractical. I'm not getting a thing out of it."

"You feel like school's not doing you any good." (*Let me think—is that what I mean?*)

"Well, yeah. I'm just not learning anything that's going to help me. I mean, look at Joe. He's dropped out of school and he's working on cars. He's making money. Now that's practical."

"You feel that Joe really has the right idea." (*Well. . .*)

"Well, I guess he does in a way. He's really making money now. But in a few years, I bet he'll probably be ticked off at himself."

"You think Joe's going to feel he made the wrong decision."

"He's got to. Just look at what he's giving up. I mean, if you don't have an education, you just can't make it in this world."

"Education is really important."

"Oh, yeah! I mean, if you don't have a diploma, if you can't get jobs or go to college, what are you going to do? You've just got to get an education."

"It's important to your future."

"It is. And . . . you know what? I'm really worried. Listen, you won't tell Mom, will you?"

"You don't want your mother to find out."

"Well, not really. Oh, I guess you can tell her. She'll probably find out anyway. Look, I took this test today, this reading test. And, Dad, they said I'm reading on a fourth-grade level. Fourth grade! And I'm a junior in high school!"

What a difference real understanding can make! All the well-meaning advice in the world won't amount to a hill of beans if we're not even addressing the real problem. And we'll never get to the problem if we're so caught up in our own autobiography, our own paradigms, that we don't take off our glasses long enough to see the world from another point of view.

"I'm going to flunk, Dad. I guess I figure if I'm going to flunk, I might as well quit. But I don't want to quit."

"You feel torn. You're in the middle of a dilemma."

"What do you think I should do, Dad?"

* * *

By seeking first to understand, this father has just turned a transactional opportunity into a transformational opportunity. Instead of interacting on a surface, get-the-job-done level of communication, he has created a situation in which he can now have transforming impact, not only on his son but also on the relationship. By setting aside his own autobiography and really seeking to understand, he has made a tremendous deposit in the Emotional Bank Account and has empowered his son to open, layer upon layer, and to get to the real issue.

Now father and son are on the same side of the table looking at the problem, instead of on opposite sides looking across at each other. The son is opening his father's autobiography and asking for advice.

Even as the father begins to counsel, however, he needs to be sensitive to his son's communication. As long as the response is *logical*, the father can effectively ask questions and give counsel. But the moment the response becomes *emotional*, he needs to go back to empathic listening.

"Well, I can see some things you might want to consider."

"Like what, Dad?"

"Like getting some special help with your reading. Maybe they have some kind of tutoring program over at the tech school."

"I've already checked into that. It takes two nights and all day Saturday. That would take so much time!"

Sensing *emotion* in that reply, the father moves back to *empathy*.

"That's too much of a price to pay."

"Besides, Dad, I told the sixth graders I'd be their coach."

"You don't want to let them down."

"But I'll tell you this, Dad. If I really thought that tutoring course would help, I'd be down there every night. I'd get someone else to coach those kids."

"You really want the help, but you doubt if the course will make a difference."

"Do you think it would, Dad?"

The son is once more open and *logical*. He's opening his father's autobiography again. Now the father has another opportunity to influence and transform.

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.

At other times, they really need additional perspective and help. The key is to genuinely seek the welfare of the individual, to listen with empathy, to let the person get to the problem and the solution at his own pace and time. Layer upon layer—it's like peeling an onion until you get to the soft inner core.

When people are really hurting and you really listen with a pure desire to understand, you'll be amazed how fast they will open up. They want to open up. Children desperately want to open up, even more to their parents than to their peers. And they will, if they feel their parents will love them unconditionally and will be faithful to them afterwards and not judge or ridicule them.

If you really seek to understand, without hypocrisy and without guile, there will be times when you will be literally stunned with the pure knowledge and understanding that will flow to you from another human being. It isn't even always necessary to talk in order to empathize. In fact, sometimes words may just get in your way. That's one very important reason why technique alone will not work. That kind of understanding transcends technique. Isolated technique only gets in the way.

I have gone through the skills of empathic listening because skill is an important part of any habit. We need to have the skills. But let me reiterate that the skills will not be effective unless they come from a *sincere desire* to understand. People resent any attempt to manipulate them. In fact, if you're dealing with people you're close to, it's helpful to tell them what you're doing.

"I read this book about listening and empathy and I thought about my relationship with you. I realized I haven't listened to you like I should. But I want to. It's hard for me. I may blow it at times, but I'm going to work at it. I really care about you and I want to understand. I hope you'll help me." Affirming your motive is a huge deposit.

But if you're not sincere, I wouldn't even try it. It may create an openness and a vulnerability that will later turn to your harm when a person discovers that you really didn't care, you really didn't want to listen, and he's left open, exposed, and hurt. The technique, the tip of the iceberg, has to come out of the massive base of character underneath.

Now there are people who protest that empathic listening takes too much time. It may take a little more time initially but it saves so

much time downstream. The most efficient thing you can do if you're a doctor and want to prescribe a wise treatment is to make an accurate diagnosis. You can't say, "I'm in too much of a hurry. I don't have time to make a diagnosis. Just take this treatment."

I remember writing one time in a room on the north shore of Oahu, Hawaii. There was a soft breeze blowing, and so I had opened two windows—one at the front and one at the side—to keep the room cool. I had a number of papers laid out, chapter by chapter, on a large table.

Suddenly, the breeze started picking up and blowing my papers about. I remember the frantic sense of loss I felt because things were no longer in order, including unnumbered pages, and I began rushing around the room trying desperately to put them back. Finally, I realized it would be better to take ten seconds and close one of the windows.

Empathic listening takes time, but it doesn't take anywhere near as much time as it takes to back up and correct misunderstandings when you're already miles down the road, to redo, to live with unexpressed and unsolved problems, to deal with the results of not giving people psychological air.

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. And whatever investment of time it takes to do that will bring much greater returns of time as you work from an accurate understanding of the problems and issues and from the high Emotional Bank Account that results when a person feels deeply understood.

UNDERSTANDING AND PERCEPTION

As you learn to listen deeply to other people, you will discover tremendous differences in perception. You will also begin to appreciate the impact that these differences can have as people try to work together in interdependent situations.

You see the young woman; I see the old lady. And both of us can be right.

You may look at the world through spouse-centered glasses; I see it through the money-centered lens of economic concern.

You may be scripted in the abundance mentality; I may be scripted in the scarcity mentality.

You may approach problems from a highly visual, intuitive, holistic right brain paradigm; I may be very left brain, very sequential, analytical, and verbal in my approach.

Our perceptions can be vastly different. And yet we both have lived with our paradigms for years, thinking they are "facts," and questioning the character or the mental competence of anyone who can't "see the facts."

Now, with all our differences, we're trying to work together—in a marriage, in a job, in a community service project—to manage resources and accomplish results. So how do we do it? How do we transcend the limits of our individual perceptions so that we can deeply communicate, so that we can cooperatively deal with the issues and come up with Win/Win solutions?

The answer is Habit 5. It's the first step in the process of Win/Win. Even if (and especially when) the other person is not coming from that paradigm, seek first to understand.

This principle worked powerfully for one executive who shared with me the following experience:

"I was working with a small company that was in the process of negotiating a contract with a large national banking institution. This institution flew in their lawyers from San Francisco, their negotiator from Ohio, and presidents of two of their large banks to create an eight-person negotiating team. The company I worked with had decided to go for Win/Win or No Deal. They wanted to significantly increase the level of service and the cost, but they had been almost overwhelmed with the demands of this large financial institution.

"The president of our company sat across the negotiating table and told them, 'We would like for you to write the contract the way you want it so that we can make sure we understand your needs and your concerns. We will respond to those needs and concerns. Then we can talk about pricing.'

"The members of the negotiating team were overwhelmed. They were astounded that they were going to have the opportunity to write the contract. They took three days to come up with the deal.

"When they presented it, the president said, 'Now let's make sure we understand what you want.' And he went down the contract, rephrasing the content, reflecting the feeling, until he

was sure and they were sure he understood what was important to them. 'Yes. That's right. No, that's not exactly what we meant here . . . yes, you've got it now.'

"When he thoroughly understood their perspective, he proceeded to explain some concerns from his perspective . . . and they listened. They were ready to listen. They weren't fighting for air. What had started out as a very formal, low-trust, almost hostile atmosphere had turned into a fertile environment for synergy.

"At the conclusion of the discussions, the members of the negotiating team basically said, 'We want to work with you. We want to do this deal. Just let us know what the price is and we'll sign.'"

THEN SEEK TO BE UNDERSTOOD

Seek first to understand . . . *then to be understood*. Knowing how to be understood is the other half of Habit 5, and is equally critical in reaching Win/Win solutions.

Earlier we defined maturity as the balance between courage and consideration. Seeking to understand requires consideration; seeking to be understood takes courage. Win/Win requires a high degree of both. So it becomes important in interdependent situations for us to be understood.

The early Greeks had a magnificent philosophy which is embodied in three sequentially arranged words: *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*. I suggest these three words contain the essence of seeking first to understand and making effective presentations.

Ethos is your personal credibility, the faith people have in your integrity and competency. It's the trust that you inspire, your Emotional Bank Account. *Pathos* is the empathic side—it's the feeling. It means that you are in alignment with the emotional thrust of another person's communication. *Logos* is the logic, the reasoning part of the presentation.

Notice the sequence: *ethos*, *pathos*, *logos*—your character, and your relationships, and then the logic of your presentation. This represents another major paradigm shift. Most people, in making presentations, go straight to the *logos*, the left brain logic, of their ideas. They try to convince other people of the validity of that logic without first taking *ethos* and *pathos* into consideration.

I had an acquaintance who was very frustrated because his boss was locked into what he felt was an unproductive leadership style.

"Why doesn't he do anything?" he asked me. "I've talked to him about it, he's aware of it, but he does nothing."

"Well, why don't you make an effective presentation?" I asked.

"I did," was the reply.

"How do you define 'effective'? Who do they send back to school when the salesman doesn't sell—the buyer? Effective means it works; it means P/PC. Did you create the change you wanted? Did you build the relationship in the process? What were the results of your presentation?"

"I told you, he didn't do anything. He wouldn't listen."

"Then make an *effective* presentation. You've got to empathize with his head. You've got to get into his frame of mind. You've got to make your point simply and visually and describe the alternative he is in favor of better than he can himself. That will take some homework. Are you willing to do that?"

"Why do I have to go through all that?" he asked.

"In other words, you want him to change his whole leadership style and you're not willing to change your method of presentation?"

"I guess so," he replied.

"Well, then," I said, "just smile about it and learn to live with it."

"I can't live with it," he said. "It compromises my integrity."

"Okay, then get to work on an effective presentation. That's in your Circle of Influence."

In the end, he wouldn't do it. The investment seemed too great.

Another acquaintance, a university professor, was willing to pay the price. He approached me one day and said, "Stephen, I can't get to first base in getting the funding I need for my research because my research is really not in the mainstream of this department's interests."

After discussing his situation at some length, I suggested that he develop an effective presentation using ethos, pathos, and logos. "I know you're sincere and the research you want to do would bring great benefits. Describe the alternative they are in favor of better than they can themselves. Show that you understand them in depth. Then carefully explain the logic behind your request."

"Well, I'll try," he said.

"Do you want to practice with me?" I asked. He was willing, and so we dress rehearsed his approach.

When he went in to make his presentation, he started by saying, "Now let me see if I first understand what your objectives are, and what your concerns are about this presentation and my recommendation."

He took the time to do it slowly, gradually. In the middle of his presentation, demonstrating his depth of understanding and respect for their point of view, a senior professor turned to another professor, nodded, turned back to him, and said, "You've got your money."

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

You're not wrapped up in your "own thing," delivering grandiose rhetoric from a soapbox. You really understand. What you're presenting may even be different from what you had originally thought because in your effort to understand, you learned.

Habit 5 lifts you to greater accuracy, greater integrity, in your presentations. And people know that. They know you're presenting the ideas which you genuinely believe, taking all known facts and perceptions into consideration, that will benefit everyone.

ONE ON ONE

Habit 5 is powerful because it is right in the middle of your Circle of Influence. Many factors in interdependent situations are in your Circle of Concern—problems, disagreements, circumstances, other people's behavior. And if you focus your energies out there, you deplete them with little positive results.

But you can always seek first to understand. That's something that's within your control. And as you do that, as you focus on your Circle of Influence, you really, deeply understand other people. You have accurate information to work with, you get to the heart of matters quickly, you build Emotional Bank Accounts, and you give people the psychological air they need so you can work together effectively.

It's the inside-out approach. And as you do it, watch what happens to your Circle of Influence. Because you really listen, you become influenceable. And being influenceable is the key to influencing others. Your circle begins to expand. You increase your

ability to influence many of the things in your Circle of Concern.

And watch what happens to you. The more deeply you understand other people, the more you will appreciate them, the more reverent you will feel about them. To touch the soul of another human being is to walk on holy ground.

Habit 5 is something you can practice right now. The next time you communicate with anyone, you can put aside your own autobiography and genuinely seek to understand. Even when people don't want to open up about their problems, you can be empathic. You can sense their hearts, you can sense the hurt, and you can respond, "You seem down today." They may say nothing. That's all right. You've shown understanding and respect.

Don't push; be patient; be respectful. People don't have to open up verbally before you can empathize. You can empathize all the time with their behavior. You can be discerning, sensitive, and aware and you can live outside your autobiography when that is needed.

And if you're highly proactive, you can create opportunities to do preventive work. You don't have to wait until your son or daughter has a problem with school or you have your next business negotiation to seek first to understand.

Spend time with your children now, one on one. Listen to them; understand them. Look at your home, at school life, at the challenges and the problems they're facing, through their eyes. Build the Emotional Bank Account. Give them air.

Go out with your spouse on a regular basis. Have dinner or do something together you both enjoy. Listen to each other; seek to understand. See life through each other's eyes.

My daily time with Sandra is something I wouldn't trade for anything. As well as seeking to understand each other, we often take time to actually practice empathic listening skills to help us in communicating with our children.

We often share our different perceptions of the situation, and we role-play more effective approaches to difficult interpersonal family problems.

I may act as if I am a son or daughter requesting a special privilege even though I haven't fulfilled a basic family responsibility, and Sandra plays herself.

We interact back and forth and try to visualize the situation in a very real way so that we can train ourselves to be consistent in modeling and teaching correct principles to our children. Some of

our most helpful role-plays come from redoing a past difficult or stressful scene in which one of us "blew it."

The time you invest to deeply understand the people you love brings tremendous dividends in open communication. Many of the problems that plague families and marriages simply don't have time to fester and develop. The communication becomes so open that potential problems can be nipped in the bud. And there are great reserves of trust in the Emotional Bank Account to handle the problems that do arise.

In business, you can set up one-on-one time with your employees. Listen to them, understand them. Set up human resource accounting or stakeholder information systems in your business to get honest, accurate feedback at every level: from customers, suppliers, and employees. Make the human element as important as the financial or the technical element. You save tremendous amounts of time, energy, and money when you tap into the human resources of a business at every level. When you listen, you learn. And you also give the people who work for you and with you psychological air. You inspire loyalty that goes well beyond the eight-to-five physical demands of the job.

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.

When we really, deeply understand each other, we open the door to creative solutions and third alternatives. Our differences are no longer stumbling blocks to communication and progress. Instead, they become the stepping stones to synergy.

APPLICATION SUGGESTIONS:

1. Select a relationship in which you sense the Emotional Bank Account is in the red. Try to understand and write down the situation from the other person's point of view. In your next interaction, listen for understanding, comparing what you are hearing with what you wrote down. How valid were your assumptions? Did you really understand that individual's perspective?
2. Share the concept of empathy with someone close to you. Tell him or her you want to work on really listening to others and ask for feedback in a week. How did you do? How did it make that person feel?

3. The next time you have an opportunity to watch people communicate, cover your ears for a few minutes and just watch. What emotions are being communicated that may not come across in words alone?
4. Next time you catch yourself inappropriately using one of the autobiographical responses—probing, evaluating, advising, or interpreting—try to turn the situation into a deposit by acknowledgment and apology. (*"I'm sorry, I just realized I'm not really trying to understand. Could we start again?"*)
5. Base your next presentation on empathy. Describe the other point of view as well as or better than its proponents; then seek to have your point understood from their frame of reference.