

The Habits of Communication

Stephen Covey's fifth and sixth habits help you to continue developing interpersonal relationships by teaching you how to better understand and communicate your customers' needs.

Have you ever felt misunderstood or have misunderstood what someone was trying to communicate to you? Communication is a vital part of any successful organization and effective relationships. Imagine how much more successful your organization could be if everyone communicated effectively. The fifth and sixth habits in Stephen R. Covey's *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* teach you how to communicate better with your team and customers.

Listening to Understand

The key to improving communication is to seek to understand and then to be understood—Covey's fifth habit. At its core is listening to understand. Don't confuse this with reflective listening, which is a technique that focuses on being able to repeat what another individual has said. Being able to repeat the words doesn't mean you understand them. Listening to understand goes beyond reflective listening to engage as many senses as possible so you fully understand what's being

communicated. If you're successful, you understand the other person's context, motive, intent, and desired goal.

Developing the right listening skills will help you become an excellent communicator. In college, you may have taken a speech communications class and a writing class, but I doubt you had to take a listening class. It's interesting how much focus we put on the other areas' communication processes.

Sometimes it might seem as though listening doesn't take skill because it's involuntary that you hear voices and conversations, so you might assume everyone understands how to listen. Yet involuntary hearing isn't listening. Listening with the intent to understand the message and purpose of the dialogue or discussion is a skill that Covey covers in the importance of listening.

Types of Listening

Covey describes several levels of listening. The first level is *ignoring* someone, when you don't really listen at all. The next level is *pretend listening*, when you may mumble "yeah" or "uh-huh" but don't have any idea what the person said. At the next level, *selective listening*, you pick up bits and

pieces of the conversation. This would be like trying to participate in a conversation while watching TV. Next you may even practice *attentive listening*, when you make an effort to pay attention and focus on the words you hear.

As I mentioned, training seminars that were popular in the past have employed techniques such as mimicking and paraphrasing that teach you how to practice attentive listening. But in those types of listening you view what is being said from your own frame of reference.

Covey emphasizes not just listening but empathic listening, which requires you to use your self-awareness. He says that we frequently project our intentions onto others' behavior. Essentially, we think people take actions for the same reasons we would because we don't know anything about that person. While this assumption *could* be correct, it's only an assumption. Our reaction to others based on our assumption of their intentions frequently invokes a response based on our reaction and not the true reality of the situation. This results in a self-fulfilling prophecy. *Empathic listening* allows you to get inside the other person's frame of reference and empathize with him or her. You see the world



the way he or she sees it. You understand his or her paradigm. You understand the way he or she feels.

Seeking to understand is accomplished through empathic listening—when you diagnose before you prescribe. A doctor will diagnose before prescribing medication, and a good salesperson will try to understand the customer's needs before offering a product. Likewise, a good communicator will seek to understand another's point of view before seeking to be understood.

Why is this difficult? People want to be understood. Yet most people listen with the intent to reply. They are either speaking or preparing to speak, filtering everything that's being said through their own paradigm and their own autobiography that's made up of past experiences: "I know exactly how you feel." "Let me tell you what happened to me." As a result, the other person will feel misunderstood and won't be very open to what's being said.

Seek to Be Understood

To ensure an effective conversation, continue the communication. Make sure you are willing to share your thoughts and intentions and have the patience to listen to the whole conversation. Share all the facts, your intent, and your purpose. We all have different perceptions, see the world differently, and have different approaches to problems. For example, people can be results oriented vs. customer oriented, analytical vs. expressive, and/or optimistic vs. pessimistic. Successful teams and organizations value these differences, and following Covey's advice can help you

make the most of their value. The most successful teams are made up of individuals who see things differently but can draw on the strengths of one another. When you really, deeply understand someone, you open the door to creative solutions and better alternatives. You are open to new ideas, new perspectives, and shared solutions. Our differences are no longer stumbling blocks to communication and progress but are stepping stones to synergy.

Habit 6: Synergize

Synergy in its basic form means that human beings are cooperating with each other to produce an outcome greater than if they worked separately. The habit of synergy is the culmination of the preceding five. Covey writes that "the highest forms of synergy focus the four unique human endowments, the motive of Win/Win and the skills of empathic communication on the toughest challenges we face in life...We create new alternatives—

something that wasn't there before." Synergy is the tool that can produce significant benefits, but it takes a serious commitment to accomplish it.

To synergize effectively requires us to be personally secure. This inner security can only come from the "personal victory" achieved by acquiring the first three habits. If you haven't chosen to be responsible or determined what the most important things are and put them first, you can't truly be inwardly secure. You gain confidence when you know your purpose and know you're putting the right things first in order to accomplish it. When you have this security, you can seek win-win situations and seek first to understand, then to be understood. Synergy requires that you both listen and share openly what you believe. For these reasons, you can't have effective synergy until you have used the other five habits.

Like the previous habits, synergy isn't achieved easily. Reaching true synergy requires a commitment to achieve it. First, synergy requires you to build relationships. It's difficult to synergize with others when an emotional bank account is low or overdrawn. Second, sometimes you may believe you already know the answer, but synergy demands your time and patience if it's going to work. It won't work if you seek a quick fix.

Some people may believe or say that their department, organization, or coworkers can't achieve synergy. But someone has to initiate synergy, and it will be the one who can make it happen. If you think it can't happen, it won't, but if you believe it can and model the

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desired behavior, others will follow your example in time. As a result, you and everyone around you will reap the rewards. Only individuals who are interested in benefiting the team can achieve synergy. Synergy is the magic of creative cooperation and the fruit of healthy relationships.

Putting It Together

By now you may be wondering, “Why should I try synergy? What’s in it for me?” Having synergy allows you to achieve greater successes than you could have ever accomplished by yourself. It’s believing that 2 + 2 can equal 10. Synergy values differences, allowing the team to consider new ideas and mold them into great ideas that no one could have accomplished by themselves. True synergy can create a fun, exciting, and bonding workplace.

Synergy is something that each of us needs to be involved in, yet each of us will have different obstacles to overcome in order to be successful. Some of us may find that we have a scarcity mentality or that our emotional bank accounts are overdrawn. Some of us may find that we haven’t yet achieved personal victory. Whatever our challenge, we can overcome it if we want to. If each of us puts the habit of synergy to work, we’ll be able to serve both our internal and external customers better. You and your team can use synergy to help accomplish the team’s goals. This synergy will help you reach new levels of achievement, which will provide both sat-

isfaction in your work and assurance for a brighter future.

In his book, Covey quotes Albert Einstein: “The significant problems we face cannot be solved at the same level of thinking that created them.” In business, we have many challenges and obstacles. Great companies seek to understand their customers, their competition, and their environment so that they can be successful. When you engage these habits in your organization, you will find new ways to be successful and effectively address the problems you face.

All parts of an organization must work together to create great products. The sales force has to understand the customers’ needs and desires and then communicate those effectively to the product development team. The marketing team has to understand how to communicate the key product features and benefits to the customer most effectively. The customer service and support departments have to understand what the customer values and provide that value to the customer. When everyone is focused on meeting the customers’ needs and is open to feedback from others, the organization can effectively meet its goal of providing excellent products and services to its customers. When we combine effective communication, good understanding, and synergy, we create the optimum value for our own company and our customers. **SF**

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