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Are You Listening To Understand, Or To Rebut?

Rodger Dean Duncan Contributor ⓘ*I cover leadership issues that make or break your workplace experience*[Follow](#)

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Some people "listen" only so they can sharpen their own point of view. They miss opportunities to ... [+] PEXELS

Have you noticed? Much of the programming on cable TV is little more than various “experts” trying to out shout each other. The scene is no

better among our elected “leaders.”

It’s as though people have no sense of curiosity. Or manners.

There are many excellent resources that can help us with our listening skills. One of the best is Stephen R. Covey’s classic book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*.

You might think that such a classic could not be improved. That was my assumption. Then I carefully explored the 30th anniversary edition that includes bonus insights by the author’s son Sean Covey, today himself a noted thought leader.

Here are some of his insights into the all-important issues of communication and empathy.

Rodger Dean Duncan: Our current political culture suffers from a serious deficit in reasonable dialogue. What’s your elevator speech in advocating adoption and practice of Habit 5 (seek first to understand, then to be understood)?

Sean Covey: We are taught how to speak, how to write, and how to think. But we aren’t taught how to listen, which is the most important communication skill of all. If you watch the political dialogue or TV show conversation, there is only monologue. No one is listening to the other person. Instead, they are preparing their response to what the other person is saying. As a result, we get contention and we miss out on so much of what could have been.

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Just think what could be accomplished if people were to practice this habit and seek first to understand before expressing their viewpoints.

Most of us have poor listening skills. We probe, we advise, we interpret, and we give autobiographical responses, from our own heads. “Yeah, I know how you feel. I remember when I had a similar circumstance and this is what I did ... blah, blah, blah.” We don’t hear what they are saying because they never took the time to understand us.

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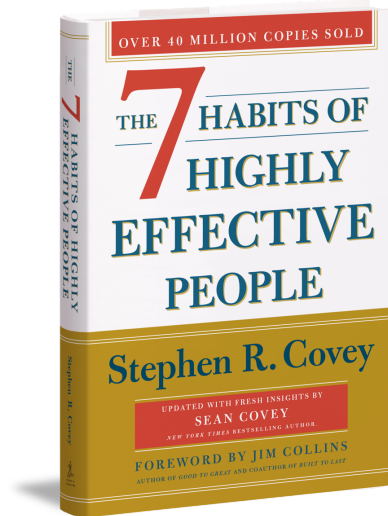
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Empathic listening is where you truly seek to understand where the other person is coming from. You figuratively stand in their shoes, with no agenda other than wanting to understand. The best way to do that is to repeat back in your own words what the other person is saying and feeling. “So, if I understand you correctly, Susan, you feel really upset about how John is always taking credit for the work you’ve done. It makes you feel betrayed. And it’s causing you to want to get off the team. Is that it?”

Habit 5 is the habit most people think they do well—but actually do the worst. “Yeah, I think I’m a pretty good listener,” they say. But in reality, they’re listening from their own frame of reference and not from the frame

of reference of the other person. They listen with an agenda and with the intent to respond, not to understand. They never get into the other person's head. And they miss out on so much, including not uncovering core issues and never fully engaging people's hearts as they could.



Duncan: How does this apply to leaders?

Covey: Listening empathically gets even harder when you're in a leadership position because people tend to defer to authority. That's why so many senior leaders are poor listeners and do most of the talking anytime they're in the room.

University of California professor Dacher Keltner coined the term “the power paradox” to describe how leaders gain influence through empathy and other practices that serve others, but lose those skills as they gain influence and power. In fact, the farther you go up the ladder, the less empathy leaders tend to have.

If you're in a leadership role, do a gut check. The next time you're in a team meeting, ask yourself, “What percentage of the words spoken in this meeting today came from my own mouth?” If there were six people in the room, and 80% of the words came from you, that is a problem.

Duncan: Empathy is a critical component of genuine connection between people. What effect have email and texting had on that, and how can people balance the need to be effective in their relationships while being efficient with their time?

Covey: Email and texting are fine and efficient when it comes to communicating on quick and easy things, but they don't work well when

emotions are high.

I've seen this happen on my team. Someone gets upset and sends a pointed email. The other person writes back a novel. It gets contentious. Then they start copying people ... and more people. And I'm like, "For crying out loud, just get on the phone and talk it through."

The use of technology strips out the tone of voice and facial expressions that help us empathize. So, any time you're dealing with an important, emotional issue, do not email or text. At some point, meet face-to-face or at least talk it out over the phone. An emoji just isn't going to cut it.

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Rodger Dean Duncan

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