UNDERSTAND TO BE UNDERSTOOD: THE ART OF COMMUNICATION
Karen M. Macalinao

“Seek First to Understand, then to be Understood” – Stephen Covey

Demanding to be understood is a way of saying, “You open my mind for me.” Wanting to understand the other person is a way of saying, “I’ll open my mind for you.” The two are so different in tone and in meaning that it’s hard to do both at the same time. So we generally focus on one or the other. Most people want only to be understood. We can be different, with tremendous benefit to the relationship, by seeking first to understand. When we seek to understand, we are applying the principle of empathy. Empathy is a Greek word, “em” means “in” while “pathy” comes from “pathos” means “feeling or suffering.” We have empathy, then, when we place ourselves within the other person, so to speak, in order to experience his or her feelings as that person experiences them. This does not mean we agree, simply that we understand the other point of view.

In a book written by Stephen Covey, “Seven Habits of Highly Effective People,” he even mentioned in Habit 5: Seek First to Understand, then to be Understood.” If you're like most people, you probably seek first to be understood; you want to get your point across. And in doing so, you may ignore the other person completely, pretend that you're listening, selectively hear only certain parts of the conversation or attentively focus on only the words being said, but miss the meaning entirely. So why does this happen? Because most people listen with the intent to reply, not to understand. You listen to yourself as you prepare in your mind what you are going to say, the questions you are going to ask, etc. You filter everything you hear through your life experiences, your frame of reference. You check what you hear against your autobiography and see how it
measures up. And consequently, you decide prematurely what the other person means before he/she finishes communicating.

Once we understand, we can now proceed with the second step of interaction: seeking to be understood. Now it is much more likely that we will actually be understood, because the other person’s drive to be understood has been satisfied. Then, when both parties fully understand both points of view, they can work from there to discover the next alternative and that is the key to communication.

To understand another person, we must be willing to be influenced.

According to Principles of Quality Living, when we seek to understand, we show a willingness to be influenced by the other person’s point of view. On the surface, being open to another person’s ideas can seem like admitting that we might be wrong. Since few people like to be wrong, few people are willing to open, which is why we tend to enter to a discussion with the immediate goal of defending our position, or being understood.

Seeking first to understand is a universal principle of effectiveness. Doctors do it when they diagnose; attorney’s do it when they take dispositions; sales people do it when they assess their customer’s needs. Teachers do it when they mentor their pupils. We apply the same principle in our interpersonal relationships when we seek to be understood. It lets us act from knowledge rather than from ignorance.

REFERENCES:

Covey, Stephen, “Seven Habits of Highly Effective People,” [https://www.stephencovey.com/](https://www.stephencovey.com/)

Principles of Quality Living, Aboitiz & Co. Inc.