

## HABIT FIVE: SEEK FIRST TO UNDERSTAND, THEN TO BE UNDERSTOOD

The single most important principle to be learned in the field of interpersonal relations is this: seek first to understand, then to be understood. Most people listen not with the intent to understand but with the intent to reply.

**W**here does understanding begin? Demanding to be understood is a way of saying, "You open up your mind for me." Wanting to understand the other person is a way of saying, "I'll open up my mind for you." The two are so different in tone and 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. The *em-* part of empathy means "in." The *-pathy* part comes from *pathos*, which means "feeling" or "suffering." We have empathy, then, when we place ourselves within other people, so to speak, in order to experience their feelings as they experience them. This does not mean that we agree, simply that we understand the other point of view.

Once we understand, we can proceed with the second step of the 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 Third Alternative.

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

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 be open, which is why we tend to enter a discussion with the immediate goal of defending our position, or being understood.

**and consider alternatives.**

When we are truly interested in other people's points of view, our openness creates a climate that allows them to look at ideas—both theirs and ours—without feeling threatened. When they don't feel threatened, they are more likely to loosen their grip on their position and consider a new one that favors us as well as them.

**Seeking first to understand lets us act from a position of knowledge.**

Seeking first to understand is a universal principle of effectiveness. Doctors do it when they diagnose; attorneys do it when they take depositions; sales people do it when they assess their customers' needs. We apply the same principle in our interpersonal relationships when we seek to understand before we seek to be understood. It lets us act from knowledge rather than from ignorance.

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In interdependent situations, ideas of "right" and "wrong," or "winners" and "losers," don't really apply. Interdependent situations have Third Alternatives and shared victories—completely new positions that people create together. That is what we're looking for when we open ourselves to be influenced.

**When we are open, we give people room to release their fixed positions**

**By seeking to understand, we gain influence in the relationship.**

When we take time to understand people, they are more likely to allow us to influence them. Being assaulted by someone else's fixed position is distressing, but being understood is pleasant. People tend to be flexible and willing to be influenced by those who they feel understand them, and resistant to those who don't.

Of course, if we then use our influence to impose our position, we will

probably lose it. This connection between understanding and influence is delicate and holds only as long as our intentions are unquestionable and are backed by a win-win or no deal commitment.

**Seeking first to understand leads people to discover the third alternative.**

When we seek to understand, we encourage the following process:

- People become less defensive about their position.
- They become more open to the question, "How can we both get what we want?"
- As they get their position out of the way, they begin to see their values more clearly so that they can use them as guidelines for creating and evaluating other options.
- By jointly considering other options, they develop a Third Alternative.

**Autobiographical responses keep us from understanding.**

When we listen to people, we tend to filter what we hear through our experience. Our background creates certain "autobiographical filters."

We translate others' words and feelings to fit our opinions and experiences. When we respond, we are really telling them what we would do if we were in their situation, and not necessarily what they should do. How often do we say: "If I were you . . .?"

The four main autobiographical responses are evaluating, probing, advising, and interpreting. They are all control mechanisms. We use them to control both what is shared and the meaning that it takes.

Evaluating is judging. It takes two forms: agreeing and disagreeing. We may state our evaluations directly, or we may express them through tone of voice, facial expressions, or body pos-

ture. Whatever the form, evaluations are ways of seeing the present moment, not for itself, but in terms of our past experience.

Probing is asking questions. Probing has the appearance of seeking to understand, but the questions that we ask come from our past experience, not from the present moment, and we use them to direct the conversation toward the things that our autobiography makes important.

Advising is telling others what they should do. When we give advice, we generally mean well. But when our advice comes from our biases, as it must, it blocks communication, because it is simply another position for us to defend

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**Autobiographical responses aren't necessarily "wrong" or "bad," per se...The tendency in most of us, however, is that we use these types of responses before we have sought to gain a complete understanding.**

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and for the other person to resist.

Interpreting is explaining why people behave the way that they do. When we interpret, we explain their behavior in terms of our motives. By interpreting, we may rob them of their sense that they are responsible for what they do, and we risk leaving them feeling manipulated, insulted, or psychoanalyzed.

Autobiographical responses aren't necessarily "wrong" or "bad," per se. They can be helpful if they are based upon an accurate understanding of the other person's situation. The tendency in most of us, however, is to use these types of responses before we have sought to gain a complete understanding.

**To truly understand, we must listen to more than words.**

Words are weak compared to the richness and complexity of the ideas that we need to express. They are particularly poor at expressing feelings, for example, and yet feelings are often the thing that people most want us to understand. So when we seek to understand, we must look beyond the surface issues that the words describe, to consider how people feel.

When people sense that we are trying to understand their feelings as well as their words, they tend to feel safe. Then, when they feel safe, we can discuss the issues. With the feelings out of the way, the words are clearer, they have lost their emotional overtones, and we can more easily use the words to explore options and possibilities.

**Empathy is listening with the eyes and the heart.**

As we mentioned, feelings rarely show up in words. They are revealed instead by subtle facial expressions, in the ways people carry their bodies, and in other nonverbal cues.

Unlike words, nonverbal cues are multidimensional and complex, so we can't always understand them logically and rationally.

We almost sense them more than understand them, with an extra dimension of complex understanding that poets call the heart. So empathic listening is listening with the eyes and heart, as well as with the ears. We notice nonverbal expressions and sense people's feelings.

Empathic listening is deep listening, followed by statements of what we understand the other person to be expressing.

Empathic listening is a skill. It is practiced through reflection, which means restating as clearly as possible what we are understanding. By restating our understanding, we put it out where both we and the other person

can examine it.

These statements of understanding don't always have to be verbal. The point is to convey our understanding to the other person, and just as the other person may express feelings more clearly through nonverbal cues than through words, so may we often reflect our understanding of them most clearly through nonverbal language.

Empathic listening is particularly important under three conditions:

- When the interaction has a strong emotional component.
- When we are not sure that we understand.
- When we are not sure the other person feels confident that we understand.

At times, empathic responses are unnecessary and could be counterproductive. Good judgement is essential in any communication

***Empathic responses can guide both people to understanding.***

Sometimes the people we are listening to may not be totally clear about their feelings and their point of view on the issues. Their interaction with us may therefore clarify things for them as well as for us. Often that clarity comes when they hear us reflect what we're understanding. They may say, "Yes, that is what I mean," almost with surprise at hearing their thoughts expressed so clearly.

In fact, our goal in reflecting should be to express the other person's point of view better than they can. Many times others can be so close to the issue that they are unable to clearly see its different aspects. Because we are listening from the outside, we may pick up things that they have missed—assumptions that they had not clarified, for example, or

relationships that they had overlooked. That is the sort of thing that we cannot do when we are defensive or when we are listening through the filters of our own experience.

***Empathic listening allows the other person to explore his feelings at his own pace and direction.***

The important thing about empathic listening is that it gives psychological air. It lets them express and explore their feelings without being threatened, without feeling a need to defend themselves and fight for survival.

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***The most important part of the skill of empathic listening is the win-win attitude that backs it up. The attitude simplifies learning the skill because we can have the attitude immediately. The attitude will give us success, even when we aren't polished at the skill.***

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The reason we reflect as they explore, rather than probe and advise, is that we are not in a position to do the exploring. We aren't where the treasure is, so to speak. That inner terrain is complex, and we must leave its exploration to the person who lives there.

That is why autobiographical responses are so damaging. They imply that we know the terrain when we don't. Or they place the other person on our terrain, where we can manipulate and dictate.

Empathic responses don't push. We reflect aspects of the terrain, but no more than the owner has given us. And yet, our reflection may cast light on

aspects of the terrain that the owner wasn't seeing. We are part of the process—an amplifier of signals—but we are not in charge of it. This sensitivity of empathic listening lets the exploration proceed.

Empathic listening combines several skills, including capturing feelings from nonverbal cues and phrasing empathic responses clearly and supportively. These empathic listening skills take practice.

People typically learn the skills of empathic listening in five stages:

#### Stage 1

**Mimic the content of the communication.** In this stage we simply repeat what is said—words only, not feelings.

#### Stage 2

**Rephrase content.** Now we put their meaning into our own words. This takes more thought than stage one, but it also creates more awareness.

#### Stage 3

**Reflect feelings.** Here we look more deeply and begin to capture feelings.

#### Stage 4

**Rephrase content and reflect feelings.** We express both the words and the feelings and wants behind them—stages 2 and 3 combined.

#### Stage 5

**Learn when not to reflect.** The last stage of learning to reflect is discerning when it isn't necessary and may even get in the way.

The most important part of the skill of empathic listening is the win-win attitude that backs it up. The attitude simplifies learning the skill because we can have the attitude immediately. The attitude will give us success, even when we aren't polished at the skill. And when we learn the

skill, we will simply be that much better.

***Empathic responses will backfire if the attitude behind them is wrong.***

The danger of empathic listening is that we may use it because we believe that it "works." We may see it as a tool for getting what we want, or for "shaping people up." If we hold such expectations, we corrupt the skill and turn it into a weapon. Empathic listening creates positive results only when we embrace it as a useful principle and use it solely with the intent to understand.

***We can support the skill by letting the other person know what we are trying to do.***

We can help people accept our empathic listening by saying something like this: "I'm taking a course that has encouraged me to be more understanding. I'm learning a skill called empathic listening, and what I'll try to do is say back to you exactly

what I'm understanding. That way, you'll know whether I understand or not, and if I don't, you can help me. So if I act differently, that's what I'm doing. Will you help me learn to do this?"

A statement like this gives the other person a chance to support us. It makes our win-win intentions clear, which can keep us from using the technique to manipulate. By being willing to make such a statement, we set a supportive tone that, by itself, can transform the relationship.

***The second half of the skill of creating understanding is seeking to be understood.***

Once we understand, we then proceed to be understood. That is related to the earlier comment that win-win is a balance between courage and consideration. Understanding the other person shows consideration. Being understood takes courage. Both are necessary conditions for win-win agreements.

If, in the course of being under-

stood, we sense resistance, we have another opportunity to choose again either to be defensive or to seek to understand. So we may find ourselves moving back and forth between seeking to understand and seeking to be understood. The process is complete when both parties feel understood and when their interaction has given them a foundation for discovering the third alternative.

These supporting ideas will enhance your understanding of the principle of seeking first to understand.

***Seeking first to understand saves time.***

When we listen empathically, we simply tell the other person what we are understanding. From a reactive perspective, that can seem a long and hard way of doing things. If we are trying to understand, it seems much more direct, and much quicker, just to ask questions.

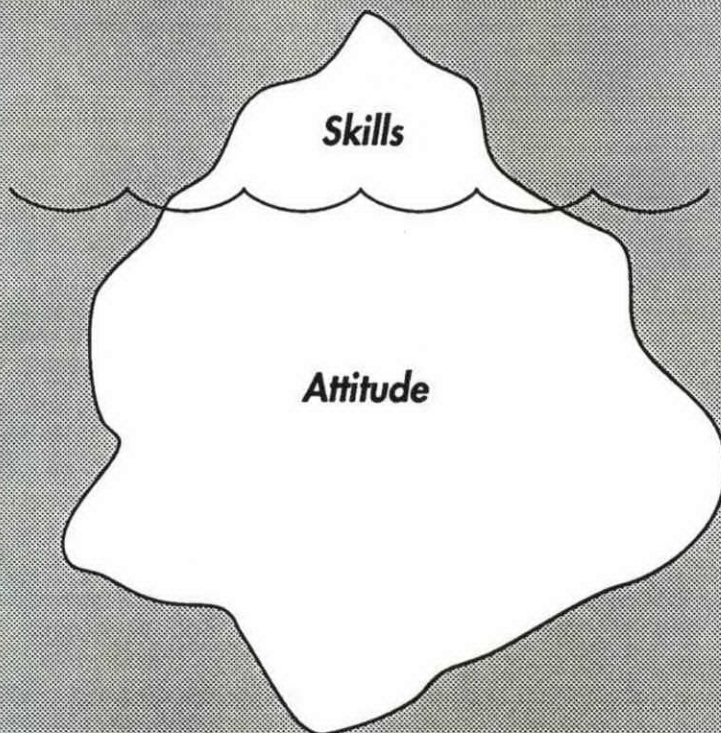
Actually, probing questions take extra time. They seem directed toward understanding, but they come from our biases and serve mainly to protect them. We can never reach the sort of mutual understanding that empathic listening produces by asking questions that force the other person to talk about what we think is important.

In fact, only empathic listening can lead to true understanding. And once we've established a foundation of trust, future communication can be easy and effective. People who understand each other can communicate a world of meaning in just a few words.

***Empathic listening is not a panacea.***

Empathic listening is not good for everything. There are times when nothing works but silence and patience. There are times when the autobiographical responses work because they follow understanding and the other person is prepared for them. Sometimes nothing works. Empathic listening is just one tool to help us in our efforts to understand.

***Understanding is not the same as agreeing.***



***Two Parts of Empathy***

Agreeing, or holding the same opinion as the other person, is called sympathy. Sympathy is not empathy, however. The idea behind empathy is not to agree with people but to understand them, to give them psychological air, to allow them to feel safe so that we can communicate openly. When people agree with one another, there is no need to communicate and no need to find a third alternative. In that sense, sympathy can trap us in a lose-win relationship and actually get in the way of the third alternative by

making it unnecessary. Empathy nurtures the third alternative.

***Empathic listening is the highest of five levels of listening.***

These are the five levels of listening:

- **Ignoring.** We pay no attention to the other person or what he is saying.
- **Pretended listening.** We acknowledge the other person and act like we are listening, but our attention is

really elsewhere.

- **Selective listening.** We hear some things, ignore others.
- **Attentive listening.** We listen fully but with the ears only, never looking at deeper issues.
- **Empathic listening.** We listen with ears, eyes, and heart to move below surface meaning to the feelings and issues that really matter. ▲

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The key to influence is to first be influenced.

<b>Capture</b> (purposes, main points, validations, applications, value)	<b>Expand</b> (evaluation, insights, illustrations)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discussions go more smoothly when one of the partners is willing to be the first to understand.</li> </ul>	

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Capture</b> (purposes, main points, validations, applications, value)</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Expand</b> (evaluation, insights, illustrations)</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• By seeking to understand, we gain influence in a relationship.</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seeking First to Understand leads people to discover the third alternative.</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Autobiographical responses keep us from understanding. Four autobiographical responses are evaluating, probing, advising, and interpreting.</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To truly understand, we must listen to more than words.</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Empathy is listening with the eyes and the "heart."</li> </ul>	
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***Empathic: An Unappreciated  
Way of Being***

Carl R. Rogers, PhD

It is my thesis in this paper that we should re-examine and re-evaluate that very special way of being with another person which has been called "empathic." I believe we tend to give too little consideration to an element that is extremely important both for the understanding of personality dynamics and for effecting changes in personality and behavior. It is one of the most delicate and powerful ways we have of using ourselves. In spite of all that has been said and written on this topic, it is a way of being that is rarely seen in full bloom in a relationship. I start with my own somewhat faltering history in relation to this topic.

PERSONAL VACILLATIONS

Very early in my work as a therapist, I discovered that simply listening to my client, very attentively, was an important way of being helpful. So when I was in doubt as to what I should do in some active way, I listened. It seemed surprising to me that such a passive kind of interaction could be so useful.

A little later a social worker, who had a background of Rankian training, helped me to learn that the most

effective approach was to listen for the feelings, the emotions, whose patterns could be discerned through the client's words. I believe she was the one who suggested that the best response was to "reflect" these feelings back to the client—"reflect" becoming in time a word that made me cringe. But at that time, it improved my work as therapist, and I was grateful.

Then came my transition to a full-time position at Ohio State University, where, with the help of students, I was at last able to scrounge equipment for recording my and my students' interviews. I cannot exaggerate the excitement of our learnings as we clustered about the machine that enabled us to listen to ourselves, playing over and over some puzzling point at which the interview clearly went wrong, or those moments in which the client moved significantly forward. (I still regard this as the one best way of learning to improve oneself as a therapist.) Among many lessons from these recordings, we came to realize that listening to feelings and "reflecting" them was a vastly complex process. We discovered that we could pinpoint which response of the therapist caused a fruitful flow of significant expression to become superficial and unprofitable. Likewise, we were able to spot the remark that turned a client's dull and desultory talk into a focused self-exploration.

In such a context of learning, it became quite natural to lay more stress upon the content of the therapist's response than upon the empathic quality of the listening. To this extent, we became heavily conscious of the techniques that the counselor or therapist was using. We became expert in analyzing, in very minute detail, the ebb and flow of the process in each interview, and we gained a great deal from that microscopic study.

But this tendency to focus on the therapist's

## PRINCIPLES OF EMPATHY

1. Seek first to understand, then to be understood.

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

2. The deepest need of the human soul is to be understood.

- By seeking to understand, we gain influence in the relationship.

3. The ticket to judgment is understanding.

- Empathic responses can guide both people to understanding.

4. Let the feeling live – it dies birthing; deny the feeling life – it struggles for life.

- When we are open, we give people room to release their fixed positions and consider alternatives.

5. Describe the other's alternative better than they can!

- Empathy is listening also with the eyes and the "heart."

The Chinese characters that make up the verb "to listen" tell us something significant about this skill.



EAR

EYES

UNDIVIDED  
ATTENTION

HEART

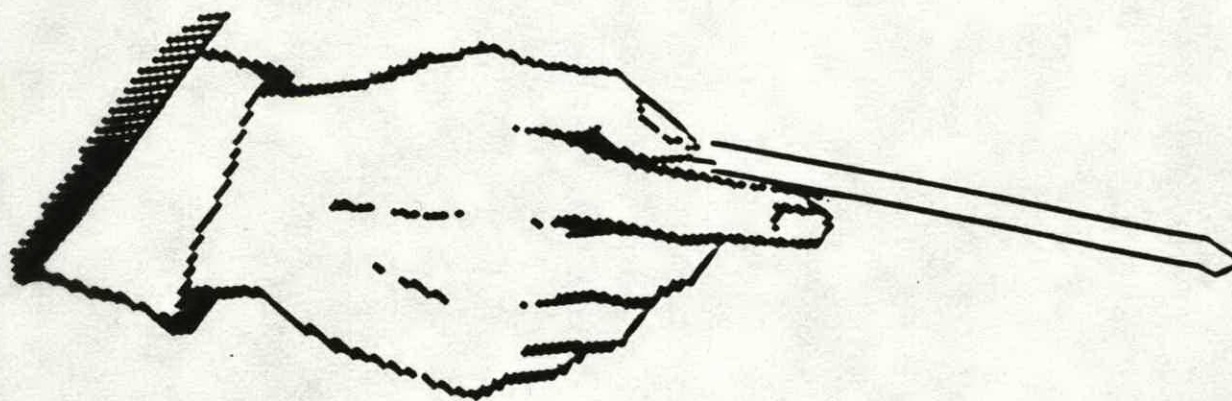
one

The characters  
Together

king.

"We do not really listen to each other, at least not all the time. Instead of true dialogue, we carry on two parallel monologues. I talk. My companion talks. But what we are really concentrating on is how to sound good, how to make our points strongly, how to outshine the person with whom we are talking."

The Christophers  
Prayer to Be A Better Listener



**Probe**: a blunt  
instrument used  
to explore a  
wound.

Websters New Collegiate Dictionary

# Leadership and the New Science

What gives power its charge, positive or negative, is the quality of relationships. Those who relate through coercion or from disregard for the other person create negative energy. Those who are open to others and who see others in their fulness create positive energy. Love in organizations, then, is the most potent source of power we have available. We will need to become more savvy about how to build relationships, and how to nurture growing, evolving things. All of us will need better skills in listening, communicating, and facilitating groups because these are the talents that build strong relationships.

—Margaret J. Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science*  
Berrett-Koehler Publishers, San Francisco, 1992



“To be with another in this way means that for the time being, you lay aside your own views and values in order to enter another’s world without prejudice. In some sense it means that you lay aside your self; this can only be done by persons who are secure enough in themselves that they know they will not get lost in the world of the other.”

– Carl Rogers

*Empathic: An Unappreciated Way of Being*

# ● ● ● Autobiographical Responses



Evaluating

Probing

Advising

Interpreting

# Five Stages of Empathy

1. Mimic the content of the communication.
2. Rephrase content.
3. Reflect feelings.
4. Rephrase content and reflect feelings.
5. Learn when not to reflect.

## PART 3: The Attitude and Skill of Empathy

### KEY IDEA SUMMARIES

#### 1. Developing the skill of empathic listening progresses through five stages.

Empathic listening combines several skills, including capturing feelings from non-verbal cues and phrasing empathic responses clearly and supportively. These empathic listening skills take practice.

People typically learn the skills of empathic listening in five stages:

**Stage 1:** Mimic the content of the communication. In this stage we simply repeat what is said--words only, not feelings.

*listen w/ears*

**Stage 2:** Rephrase content. Now we put their meaning into our own words. This takes more thought than stage one, but it also creates more awareness.

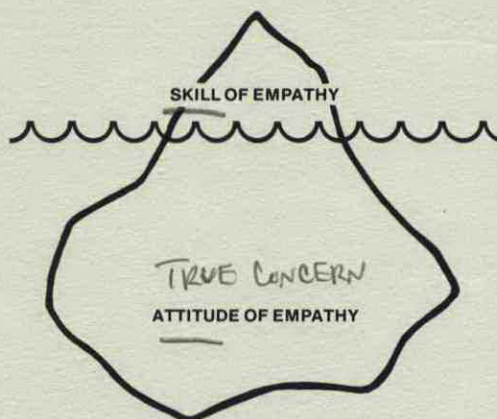
**Stage 3:** Reflect feelings. Here we look more deeply and begin to capture feelings.

*ignore content*

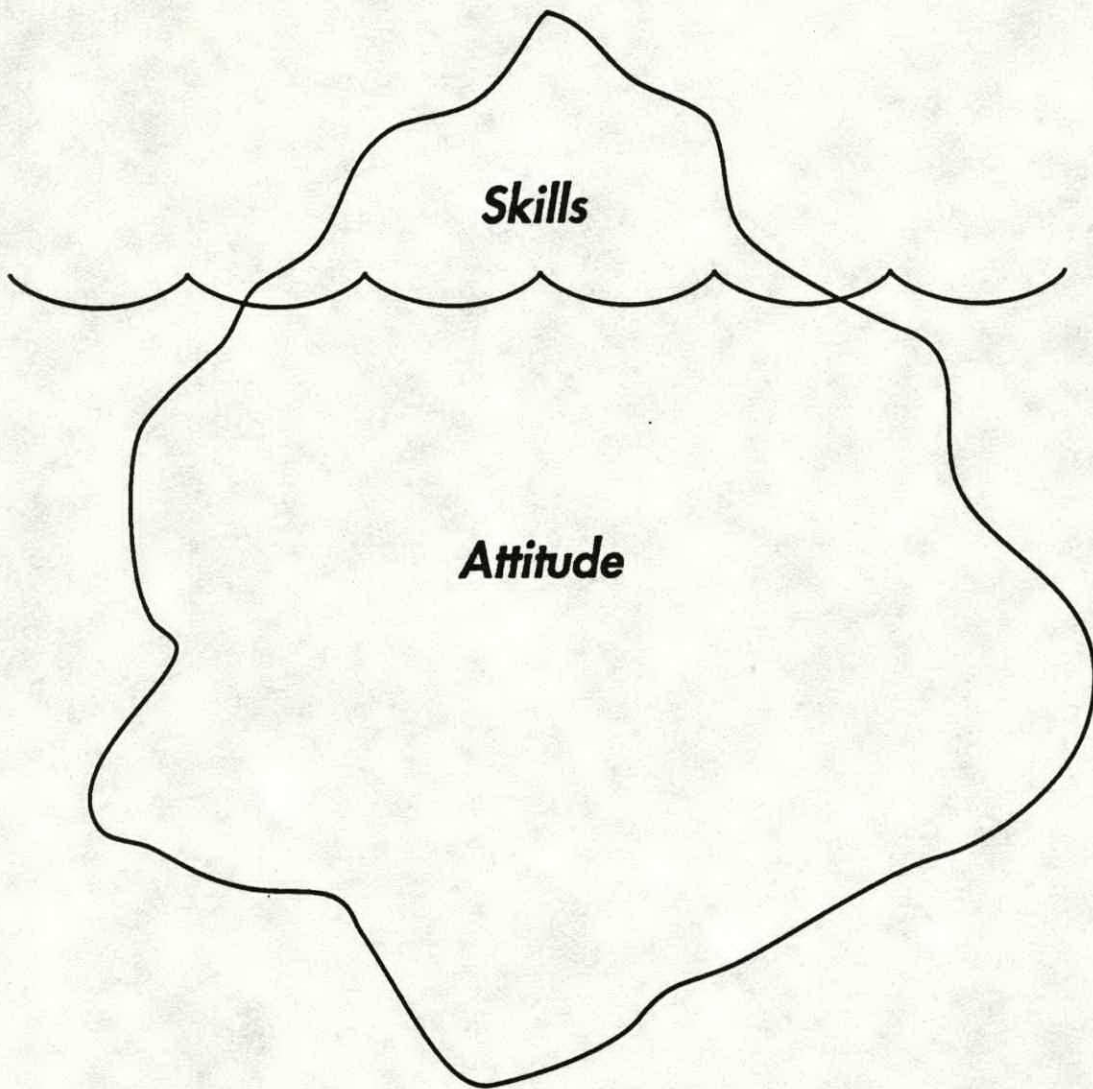
**Stage 4:** Rephrase content and reflect feeling. We express both the words and the feelings and wants behind them--stages 2 and 3 combined.

**Stage 5:** Learn when not to reflect. The last stage of learning to reflect is discerning when it isn't necessary and may even get in the way.

#### THE TWO PARTS OF EMPATHY



# TWO PARTS OF EMPATHY



## Objections to Empathy

"I'll give up control."

"It takes too much time."

"It's risky."

The root of active listening is  
empathic thinking.

**Most people listen not with the  
intent to understand, but with the  
intent to reply.**



I used to take notes early in the conversation so that I would not forget my point of view, or forget to raise an issue. I was still not listening, even though I was nodding along. Now I have learned that I don't want to remember "my" point of view. If it is worth anything, it will survive my listening to the other person.

—Past Participant

“We do not really listen to each other, at least not all the time. Instead of true dialogue, we carry on two parallel monologues. I talk. My companion talks. But what we are really concentrating on is how to sound good, how to make our points strongly, how to outshine the person with whom we are talking.”

—*The Christophers,*  
*Prayer to Be a Better Listener*

## **AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL RESPONSES**

- Evaluating
- Probing
- Advising
- Interpreting

## 5 Stages of Empathy

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## EMPATHIC RESPONSE LEADS

Kind of feeling . . .  
Sort of saying . . .  
As I get it, you felt that . . .  
I'm picking up that you . . .  
Sort of a feeling that . . .  
If I'm hearing you correctly . . .  
To me it's almost like you are saying, "I . . ."  
Sort of hear you saying that maybe you . . .  
Kind of made (makes) you feel . . .  
The thing you feel most right now is sort of like . . .  
So, you feel . . .  
What I hear you saying is . . .  
So, as you see it . . .  
As I get it, you're saying . . .  
What I guess I'm hearing is . . .  
I'm not sure I'm with you, but . . .  
I somehow sense that maybe you feel . . .  
You feel . . .  
I really hear you saying that . . .  
I wonder if you're expressing a concern that . . .  
It sounds as if you're indicating you . . .  
I wonder if you're saying . . .  
You place a high value on . . .  
It seems to you . . .  
Like right now . . .  
It appears to you . . .  
As I hear it, you . . .  
So, from where you sit . . .  
Your feeling now is that . . .  
I read you as . . .  
Sometimes you . . .  
You must have felt . . .  
I sense that you're feeling . . .  
Very much feeling . . .  
Your message seems to be, "I . . ."  
You appear . . .  
Listening to you it seems as if . . .  
I gather . . .  
So your world is a place where you . . .  
You communicate (convey) a sense of . . .

# Habit 5

- Video:** Teen Wolf
- Purpose:** "Violation of Empathic Listening"
- Actors:** Bobby Finstock, Michael J. Fox
- Time:** 5 minutes
- Set Up:** APIE/Autobiographical Responses

The most important part of the skill is the Win/Win attitude that backs it up. The attitude simplifies learning the skill because we can have the attitude immediately. The attitude will give us success, even when we aren't polished at the skill. And when we learn the skill, we will simply be that much better.

**2. Empathic responses will backfire if the attitude behind them is wrong.**

The danger of empathic listening is that we may use it because we believe that it "works." We may see it as a tool for getting what we want, or for "shaping people up." If we hold such expectations, we corrupt the skill and turn it into a weapon. Empathic listening creates positive results only when we embrace it as a useful principle, and use it solely with the intent to understand.

**3. We can support the skill by letting the other person know what we are trying to do.**

We can help people accept our empathic listening by saying something like this: "I'm taking a course that has encouraged me to be more understanding. I'm learning a skill called empathic listening, and what I'll try to do is say back to you exactly what I'm understanding. That way, you'll know whether I understand or not, and if I don't, you can help me. So if I act differently, that's what I'm doing. Will you help me learn to do this?"

A statement like this gives the other person a chance to support us. It makes our Win/Win intentions clear, which can keep us from using the technique to manipulate. And by being willing to make such a statement, we set a supportive tone that, by itself, can transform the relationship.

**4. The second half of the skill of creating understanding is seeking to be understood.**

Once we understand, we then proceed to be understood. This is related to the earlier comment that Win/Win is a balance between courage and consideration. Understanding the other person shows consideration. Being understood takes courage. Both are necessary conditions for Win/Win agreements.

If, in the course of being understood, we sense resistance, we have another opportunity to choose again either to be defensive, or to seek to understand. So we may find ourselves moving back and forth between seeking to understand and seeking to be understood. The process is complete when both parties feel understood, and when their interaction has given them a foundation for discovering the Third Alternative.

### SMALL GROUP EXERCISE

This exercise requires 3 people. Person A begins by choosing a topic that he or she feels strongly about. It might be a political issue, or a needed improvement at work. Person A will talk about the topic with Person B, while Person C observes. Person B is to listen empathically, applying the skill of empathic listening. He or she should not attempt to solve the problem. Person C is to give Person B feedback. When Person A has finished, you will shift roles so that each of you has a chance to present, listen, and observe. Person A has five minutes to discuss his or her topic with Person B. Person C should then lead a short feedback discussion.

### APPLICATION EXERCISE

1. Identify a situation where you could immediately apply the skill and attitude of empathy.

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2. What benefit could result from your use of empathy in this situation?

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3. What is likely to happen if you don't use empathy?

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4. Would it be useful to inform the other person of your intention to try to be a better listener and to ask for his or her support as you try out some new approaches?

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## APPLICATION CHECKLIST

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This Application Checklist is an individual application tool. You can use it to check yourself on three questions:

- Do I know what Seeking First to Understand is?
- Have I created the conditions that support Seeking First to Understand?
- Do I do the actions that establish the habit of Seeking First to Understand?

Review the Checklist whenever you need to reaffirm your commitment to the principle of Seeking First to Understand.

### CHECKPOINT 1: Do I know what Seeking First to Understand is?

Seeking First to Understand is . . .

\_\_\_\_\_ **The intention to discover as clearly and accurately as possible the other person's feelings and wants.**

When we seek to understand the other person, we allow the other person to feel safe.

\_\_\_\_\_ **The application of the reflecting skills and empathic listening.**

Reflective listening gives feedback that guides both us and the other person through the discovery process.

### CHECKPOINT 2: Have I created the conditions that support Seeking First to Understand?

\_\_\_\_\_ **Do I have a Win/Win attitude?**

The attitude gives power to the skill.

\_\_\_\_\_ **Have I released my attachment to my attitudes and positions?**

We can't understand while we are defending ourselves.

\_\_\_\_\_ **Have I become open to the possibility that other perspectives exist?**

As we truly seek to understand, we open ourselves to be influenced.

**CHECKPOINT 3: Do I perform the actions that establish the habit of Seeking First to Understand?**

\_\_\_\_\_ **Do I avoid autobiographical responses?**

Evaluating, probing, advising, and interpreting impose our experience on the other person.

\_\_\_\_\_ **Do I faithfully reflect my understanding of the other person?**

Reflecting guides the discovery process.

\_\_\_\_\_ **Do I focus on feelings as well as words?**

Words can't express the full complexity of an issue, particularly one with emotional overtones.

\_\_\_\_\_ **Do I watch non-verbal cues to discern feelings?**

Feelings are revealed through subtle expressions of face and body.

**SUPPORTING IDEAS**

These supporting ideas will enhance your understanding of the principle of Seeking First to Understand.

**1. Seeking First to Understand saves time.**

When we listen empathically, we simply tell the other person what we are understanding. From a reactive perspective, that can seem a long and hard way of doing things. If we are trying to understand, it seems much more direct, and much quicker, just to ask questions.

But probing questions actually take extra time. They seem directed toward understanding, but they come from our biases and serve mainly to protect them. We can never reach the sort of mutual understanding that empathic listening produces by asking questions that force the other person to talk about what we think is important.

In fact, only empathic listening can lead to true understanding. And once we've established a foundation of trust, future communication can be easy and effective. People who understand each other can communicate a world of meaning in just a few words.

**2. Empathic listening is not a panacea.**

Empathic listening is not good for everything. There are times when nothing works but silence and patience. There are times when the autobiographical responses work because they follow understanding and the other person is prepared for them. Sometimes nothing works. Empathic listening is just one tool to help us in our efforts to understand.

### 3. **Understanding is not the same as agreeing.**

Agreeing, or holding the same opinion as the other person, is called "sympathy." This is not empathy, however. The idea behind empathy is not to agree with people, but to understand them, to give them psychological air, to allow them to feel safe so that we can communicate openly. When people agree with one another, there is no need to communicate, and no need to find a Third Alternative. In that sense, sympathy can trap us in a Lose/Win relationship and actually get in the way of the Third Alternative by making it unnecessary. Empathy nurtures the Third Alternative.

### 4. **Empathic listening is the highest of five levels of listening.**

These are the five levels of listening:

- First, ignoring. We pay no attention to the other person or what he is saying.
- Second, pretended listening. We acknowledge the other person and act like we are listening, but our attention is really elsewhere.
- Third, selective listening. We hear some things, ignore others.
- Fourth, attentive listening. We listen fully, but with the ears only, never looking at deeper issues.
- Fifth, empathic listening. We listen with ears, eyes, and heart to move below surface meaning to the feelings and issues that really matter.



















## **Select an Issue That:**

1. People tend to have strong opinions about.
2. The resolution of which will directly affect people's lives.
3. Has two basic positions.
4. Is not so hot that it generates hostility and anger.
5. People in the group have different opinions about.

# HABIT FIVE: SEEK FIRST TO UNDERSTAND, THEN TO BE UNDERSTOOD

## Instructions

Please consider the following questions.

1. Identify a situation where you could immediately apply the skill and attitude of empathy.

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2. What benefit could result from your use of empathy in this situation?

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3. What is likely to happen if you don't use empathy?

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4. Would it be useful to inform the other person of your intention to try to be a better listener and to ask for his or her support as you try out some new approaches?

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## AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL RESPONSES

### Instructions

The following statements are hypothetical responses in a discussion between two co-workers. Each is preceded by a blank. Place a number in the blank that identifies the statement as one of four autobiographical responses:

- 1) = probing
- 2) = evaluating
- 3) = advising
- 4) = interpreting

A single statement may combine elements of more than one autobiographical response.

- \_\_\_\_\_ I can see why you believe that, but you are ignoring some important facts in the situation.
- \_\_\_\_\_ What do you hope to accomplish by such an approach?
- \_\_\_\_\_ Do you know of other cases where people have done this successfully?
- \_\_\_\_\_ It seems to me a strategy based more on fear than on confidence.
- \_\_\_\_\_ If I were you, I would strike more of a balance.
- \_\_\_\_\_ You know, when I worked for another company, we faced a similar problem. We tried a solution like the one you are suggesting, but it did not work out.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Whatever we do has to be aggressive.
- \_\_\_\_\_ I think you are too close to the issue.
- \_\_\_\_\_ I think it is natural from your experience that you would choose a direct approach, but isn't it possible that there are times in a larger organization like ours when we have to exercise more restraint than you have been used to?
- \_\_\_\_\_ Didn't that Richards thing last year teach you that sometimes you tend to jump into things without covering all the bases?
- \_\_\_\_\_ What do you expect to gain by rushing ahead?
- \_\_\_\_\_ Are there other people with similar experiences that you might consult?
- \_\_\_\_\_ How far do you expect you can push it?
- \_\_\_\_\_ It seems to me that perhaps you just lack confidence in your ability to come up with a more sensitive approach.

## EMPATHIC LISTENING

### OBSERVER'S ROLE

**Your Assignment:**

Read both situations to get a clear picture of what is going on.

Observe the listener's approach.

- Look for:
- Probing
  - Evaluating
  - Advising
  - Interpreting

What impact do any of these behaviors have on the other person?

If you feel at any time the discussion is deteriorating fast, call "time out" and coach the listener in areas you feel are helpful. As you observe, take notes in the following areas:

1. What went well
2. What needs improvement
3. Suggestions

After the role play, lead the discussion with the two people involved on how it went, what we learned, etc.

Note when these are being used.

## Small Group Discussion Questions

Discuss the following questions within your small group:

1. Recall the 5 levels of listening (ignoring, pretending, selecting, attending, empathic). Discuss how the characters in the video used these.
2. Within your small group, discuss the four conversations (Otto and Mae, Boss and employee in performance review, manager with two account managers, young woman with her daughter and parents) keeping in mind these questions:
  - What autobiographical responses are being used in this scenario? Don't just say "all of them." Be specific.
  - What results are occurring from these autobiographical responses?
  - What other observations do you have?
3. What are Otto's motives in his conversations with Mae? Discuss how our motives influence our effectiveness as listeners (remember the iceberg: 90% of listening is our **attitude**, only about 10% of our effectiveness is determined by listening **skills**).
4. What intergenerational tendencies are being transmitted?
5. Discuss the role of hard work in listening. Why do we have a tendency to avoid hard work in favor of laziness when it comes to seeking to understand others?
6. What feelings do you think were generated on the part of the employee receiving the performance review? How did these feelings affect his ability to listen?

## Individual Application Exercise

1. How can you tell when someone isn't listening to you? What attitudes and behaviors (including non-verbal behaviors) do you observe?



2. How do you think others would evaluate **your** abilities as a listener?
  
3. Which of the autobiographical responses do you most often use?
  
4. What can **you** do to make yourself more aware of your use of these behaviors and attitudes?
  
5. What underlying paradigms must you change in order to be a better listener?

## *The Pontiac and the Ice Cream*

One of the reasons problems don't get solved is that too often we misunderstand the true "nature" of the problem. Take the following story—a favorite at General Motors—about a complaint received by Pontiac. The customer's letter to the President of the Pontiac Division is as follows:

*"This is the second time I have written you, and I don't blame you for not answering me, because what I have to say sounds kind of crazy.*

*But it is a fact that we have a tradition in our family of ice cream for dessert after dinner each night. But the kind of ice cream varies. So every night, after we've eaten, the whole family votes on which kind of ice cream we should have and I drive down to the store to get it.*

*It's also a fact that I recently purchased a new Pontiac, and since then, my trips to the store have created a problem. You see, every time I buy vanilla ice cream, when I start back from the store my car won't start. If I get any other kind of ice cream, the car starts fine.*

*I want you to know I'm serious about this question, no matter how silly it sounds: 'What is there about a Pontiac that makes it not start when I get vanilla ice cream, and easy to start whenever I get any other kind?'"*

The Pontiac president was understandably skeptical about the letter, but sent an engineer to check it anyway. The latter was surprised to be greeted by a successful, obviously well-educated man in a fine neighborhood. He had arranged to meet the man just after dinner time, so the two hopped into the car and drove to the ice cream store. It was vanilla ice cream that night and sure enough, after they came back to the car it wouldn't start.

The engineer returned for three more nights. The first night the man got chocolate. The car started. The second night he got strawberry. The car started. The third night he ordered vanilla. Again the car failed to start.

Now the engineer, being a logical man, refused to believe that this man's car was allergic to vanilla ice cream. He arranged, therefore, to continue his visits for as long as it took to solve the problem. And toward this end he began to take notes. He jotted down all sorts of data, time of day, type of gas used, time to drive back and forth, etc.

In a short time he had a clue: the man took more *time* to buy any other flavor than vanilla. Why? The answer was in the layout of the store. Vanilla, being the most popular flavor, was in a separate case at the front of the store for quick pickup. All the other flavors were kept in the back of the store at a different counter where it took considerably longer to find the flavor and get checked out.

Now the question for the engineer was why the car wouldn't start when it took less time. Once *time* became the problem—not the vanilla ice cream—the engineer quickly came up with the answer: *vapor lock*. It was happening every night, but the extra time taken to get the other flavors allowed the engine to cool down sufficiently to start. When the man got vanilla the engine was still too hot for the vapor lock to dissipate.

## EXERCISE

**DEVELOPING SKILLS IN LISTENING****Instructions**

Follow the instructions that will be given to you.

**Statements:****I. Person—Age 35**

"I'm determined to get ahead. I am not afraid of hard work. I am not afraid to take a few hard knocks if I can see my goal out there in front. And I'm not averse to climbing over a few people—who get in my way—because this means a lot to me. I can't be satisfied with just a mediocre job. No, I want to be somebody."

**II. Person—Age 30**

"I've lived in this town for ten years now—and in the same apartment for seven years—but I don't know anybody. At the office I just can't seem to make friends. I just freeze up. I try to be nice to the other workers, but I feel all stiff and uncomfortable inside. And then I tell myself that I don't care. People aren't dependable. Everyone is out for themselves. I don't want any friends—and sometimes I think I really mean that."

**III. Person—Age 35**

"I expect, that if I took this job—with the understanding that I'd be given the opportunity to prove my value to the firm—and had a chance for promotions; yes, I believe that's the soundest way to go about it. It's not as spectacular as I would like to have it. No, I don't really want a spectacular job anymore—just a good solid job with a future. Yes, I'll take this job and discuss my plans with the boss quite frankly and honestly. Then my family and I can get some feeling of permanence and we can buy a home and really think about the future here in this city. The kids need an anchor. They haven't had that—but from now on we are all going to have our feet down on solid earth."

**Responses:**

**Response I:**

1. You see yourself as a deeply ambitious person, is that it?
2. You feel that you just have to be out on top no matter what you may do to others?
3. What do you suppose is behind this strong determination of yours to get ahead?
4. Would you be interested in taking some tests to determine in what area you might expect to be most successful? It might be of help to you, although it is possible with your drive that you could be successful in a number of fields.
5. Strong ambition can be a real asset to anyone. Are you really sure, thoroughly, that you mean it when you say you're not averse to climbing over those who get in your way? Couldn't that turn out to do you more harm than good?

**Response II:**

1. Well, I'll tell you what I can do. I can arrange for you to join a small social group at the "Y". I send quite a few people there who have difficulty making friends. Most want to start out by taking classes, leather tooling or some other handicraft. This gives them something to do as a basis and permits them to make friends slowly and at their own pace. How does that sound to you?
2. Possibly if you could tell me a little more about how you go about trying to make friends, we could get a clearer idea of what is involved.
3. It's gone on so long it almost has you convinced—is that what you mean?
4. Maybe your not wanting friends is just to protect you from something else.
5. That's a pretty unhappy situation, to be without

friends, and one that I would really work on. There are a number of things that you might do to learn how to make friends and the sooner you start, the better.

**Response III:**

1. That's fine. The long way around can be the short way home; I think you've really got your feet on the ground now for sure. The kind of thinking you're doing is certainly the most constructive.
2. That sounds good to me. And if you run across any difficulty in thinking through how you're going to present your problem to the boss, or if you want any help in planning how to make yourself more promotable—just remember that I'm always here to help you.
3. I'm wondering if you've investigated the promotional policy of the company to see if the path you want to follow is the one most likely to lead to promotion.
4. Of course! The spectacular may be appealing but the more mature way pays off.
5. It may not be spectacular, but I gather the soundness of it is what really appeals to you.

**Response IV:**

1. You feel that you'd be a lot happier if you could just escape your work and start out in a field where you are more adequate, is that it?
2. Whether this is the field in which you'll end up no one can say, but it seems to me quite sound that you are counting more on yourself.
3. Have you thought of the possibility of working out a combination line? It seems a shame to just toss out all you've lined up so far.
4. You've decided that you'd do better to change.
5. How much study have you given this new field?

**Response V:**

1. If you'd think it wise, I could give you the name of an investment counselor who'd be glad to go over the proposition with you and possibly give you some good leads on how to seek financial support.
2. That's fine! One must feel sure of himself if he expects to make a go of something. To go into something hesitantly can really make it get all mixed up. You're on the right track and I wish you success.
3. If you could get the cash to start, you feel sure you could make a go of it.
4. You feel sure you could be successful because you now see what is involved in making things go. When you see things clearly, assurance follows.
5. Have you figured out what the risks are as yet?

**Response VI:**

1. You feel that you must be out in front. That is really important to you, to be the better person.
2. It's a fine thing to try to get ahead, but do you think that by starting out with such an attitude toward this person you're going at it right?
3. And that will probably take a lot of careful planning and thinking. You'll want to go carefully.
4. This person really makes you want to beat them out.
5. Let's wait a minute there. Why is it so important?



## Experiencing Communication Role Plays

The purpose of this exercise is to experience the impact of different types of communication from others in the group.

In small groups discuss the assignment below and figure out a role play situation that follows the criteria given then select one person to act out/present the role play as realistically as possible to the entire group. Upon completion, there will be a brief discussion about the impact of the communication on others.

### 2. PERSONAL (Person "A"):

You feel that you have too much to do at work. And what is worse, you feel that almost half of what you do has no real purpose or value. It's just busy work that never gets used. You have some good ideas on how to restructure your job so that you can use your time in a much more productive way. So you decide to explain your frustrations and your new ideas to your boss. You've worked at how to explain the whole situation—problems, possible solutions, etc.—for some time. You are quite excited about the possibilities and express yourself with high emotion.