

CHAPTER 18:

UNDERSTANDING

*“Seek first to understand, then to be understood.” –
Steven Covey*

A few years ago, I was in the market for a new car. My local showroom had an ex-demo of the very model I thought I wanted by remarkable good fortune, so I paid them a visit.

The salesperson took me out for a test drive before taking me through the purchasing options. After that, I decided to have lunch while I thought the purchase over, so I went into town and paid McDonald's a visit. I hadn't eaten there for several years and was surprised and confused by the variety on the menu.

The server asked me for my order, and I said I wasn't sure. She asked me what I used to like at McDonald's, how important healthy choices²⁴ were and whether I wanted a full meal or just a lunch snack (and of course the obligatory 'do you want fries with that?').

As I sat eating my Quarter Pounder with Cheese, it occurred to me that she had just asked me more questions concerning a £5.00 purchase than the car salesman had asked me for a car with a value of nearly £30,000.

I returned to the dealership, and, after some price haggling, I ended up buying the ex-demo. The salesperson looked pleased, and no doubt his manager was too.

But it was sloppy and lazy.

He took the path of least resistance, which was to process the order for whatever I said I wanted. He showed no interest in me or what I was looking for in a car.

Within months I began to wish I'd bought something different. With just a few questions and a genuine interest in me, the salesman could have sold me something more suited to my needs; AND established a relationship with

24 The irony of this statement was not lost on me either.

me for future car purchases and perhaps some personal recommendations.



If we want other people to invest their time, energy, and/or resources with us, we must align our mutual outcomes (creating a win/win situation) and then influence and inspire them.

The fastest way to do this is to understand how they see the world, themselves, and their own dreams and fears.

We do this by asking questions, listening intently and allowing the other person space to think and respond.

We engage our curiosity.

The power of a good question is not just the information you get back. Good questions can also lead to fresh perspectives and transformation for both parties.²⁵

²⁵ In fact, there is no greater compliment than “that is a good question.”

The most important questions are often accompanied by a sense of discomfort when we come to ask them. Perhaps we think asking it will make us look stupid, the other person feel uncomfortable, or we might get an answer we don't want to hear.

There is no such thing as a stupid question except the one you didn't ask when you needed to, and you won't know **any** answer without asking.

Asking questions only helps understanding if we listen to the answers.

In many situations, we give partial attention to listening, as we have too much noise in our heads.²⁶

Only when we listen with nothing on our mind²⁷ can we be fully present. This gives us the best chance of picking up all the signals, verbal and non-verbal, in the conversation. We can then understand what is being said and avoided and notice what is present but not being spoken.

We have two ears and one mouth at our disposal. This may well be an essential clue for how to have powerful conversations.

*"Nothing strengthens authority so much as silence." –
Leonardo Da Vinci*

When answering or thinking up a challenging question, we need to allow time for considered responses to form. This means becoming comfortable with silence in a conversation.

26 This internal noise is often us thinking what to say next, so we sound clever.

27 Imagine listening to someone like you listen to a piece of music.

When faced with the spaces between words, we have an overwhelming impulse to fill them with noise, to break the deafening silence.

Yet, it is in the space between words where insight and transformation occur.

When we allow each other the space to contemplate, we allow new perspectives, possibilities, ideas and actions to emerge.

Understanding others requires powerful questioning and intense listening. It also requires that we put our biases, assumptions, opinions and pre-existing beliefs aside.

It is easy (and lazy) to use our assumptions and opinions to make sense and meaning in what other people tell us. It limits what we can learn and the influence/inspiration we can create in the conversation.

In an era characterised by uncertainty and change, we need to collaborate freely, openly share data, perspectives and ideas, even if we disagree with or don't like them.

The more we allow ourselves access to different ideas, opinions and perspectives, the more we have the potential for new breakthroughs and insights.

It doesn't matter whether our perspective or opinion is right or wrong. What matters is that we explore and identify the most optimum ideas and solutions.

When you deeply understand how another person sees the world, you can craft and use language that will have meaning to them. Then, when it is your turn to talk, you will be able to influence and inspire them, or at least part company on mutually helpful and friendly terms.