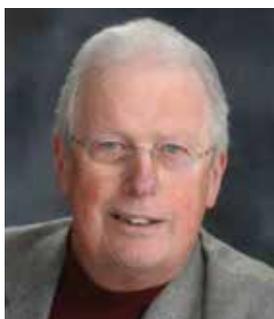


# Seek First to Understand

Find out what your customers think so you can effectively communicate with them

“What’s the point of talking to anyone if you don’t tell them what you think?”

– Jon Krakauer (1952 – ) American writer, mountaineer, Pulitzer Prize finalist.



By Patrick T. Malone

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I suppose that when you are a Pulitzer Prize finalist, some people might want to know what you think, but when I read the quote above, the words arrogant and self-centered came to mind.

Unfortunately, many sales representatives have come across the same way, causing decision-makers to build walls to shield themselves from this behavior. These walls may be the gatekeepers who cannot buy but control access to the actual

decision-maker, or those who cannot say yes but can say no. Many office managers or practice managers have been assigned this role.

On the other end of the spectrum are some sales reps who are also talkative, but their motivation

is self-protection. Their descriptors are timid, unsure, scared and often “new.” Their biggest fear is the decision-maker will ask them a question to which they won’t have an answer. In an attempt to prevent that

embarrassing situation, they try to control the conversation by doing a data dump on their audience. Once again, the walls that decision-makers have built are effective in screening out these amateurs.

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## The point of a conversation

Some years ago Stephen Covey wrote *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. One of the habits he wrote about was “Seek first to understand and you will be understood.” In answer to this column’s lead question, the point of talking with another person is to discover what they think as much as it is to tell them what you think.



Many people will say this is easy to understand but difficult to do. I'm convinced you can simplify the process if you will remember the following four tips. Try these and then determine if they help you understand more about your clinics, do more business with those clinics and reach a quiet confidence that is the mark of a real professional.

- 1. Give the other person your undivided attention.** Our computers and smart-phones are excellent at multi-tasking, but most human beings are mediocre at best. Do one thing at a time – be present in the conversation. Make the other person feel as if they are the only person in the room. Then take it one step further. Clear your mind by suspending your own point of view at that moment in time. When you do this you will hear things you missed before and understand the other situation so clearly that the perfect solution will appear with little effort.
- 2. Respond appropriately.** The appropriate response is much like driving a car in traffic. If the other traffic is going 20 mph in the slow lane, it would be inappropriate to try to drive 80 mph with your hair on fire. Slowing down or speeding up based on the other's reactions in the conversation demonstrates that your responses are appropriate to their situation.
- 3. Prove you understand.** The operative word is PROVE. Too many times we say we understand and then do or say something that shows we actually have no idea about the situation at hand. So instead of saying you understand, prove you really do understand by asking a relevant question or restating a brief summary of the situation as you understand it.
- 4. Demonstrate respect for other points of view.** This appears to be most difficult when facing a point of view which is the polar opposite of your own point of view. For some the fear of losing respect is interpreted to meaning you should "agree," but nothing could be further for the truth. You are simply demonstrating respect for the other person's right to hold a different point of view than your own at this point in time. Unless you do this you will never have the opportunity to explore and influence other points of view.

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These four suggestions are effective in getting others to open up and feel comfortable telling you exactly what they think, and in many cases, why they think that way. That allows you to tailor your conversation in such a way that it makes good sense to those with whom you are talking. But if you need to simplify it even more, just remember the word RESPECT. If you demonstrate sincere

respect for varying points of view, the other three suggestions will happen naturally as a consequence.

So in spite of the Pulitzer Prize finalist's thoughts, the real purpose of conversation is not to tell people what you think. The real purpose is to find out what they think so you can communicate what you think in the most effective manner. ■