



Listening to Understand

In 2003, I was hand selected for a special unit for the Marine Corps, Marine Corps Special Operations Command Detachment One (MC SOCOM Det 1). The unit was to be utilized as a proof of concept for a larger plan within the Marine Corps which is now called “MarSOC.” To prepare for a combat deployment to the Middle East, we went through an intense seven-month long training cycle. It was during this training that I learned something that has impacted my life since, and it had nothing to do with shooting, fighting, or blowing stuff up.



In order to be successful in combat we needed to train to an elite standard in Close Quarter Battle tactics. Close Quarter Battle is when we go into a house or building, often filled with bad guys. Essentially, it is the military version of SWAT. We started the four-week training session and we had hired outside help; his name was Larry. Larry would be training us on advance tactics “tried and true” from combat experience inside of an elite unit. Training was going great, while we shot in a square bay shooting targets, but then we moved to an indoor structure training scenario and things changed. We were a very regimented organization and had been trained to do things one way and it had been successful during our time. However, it had not really been tested in combat, yet. Larry saw our way of doing things and he attempted to change it. He had a conversation with our leadership and all members of the section were present for the meeting. The conversation from Larry started off with his reasons on why he would change our methods and tactics inside the structure. Our leadership was very quick to defend and argue why we cannot adopt a new concept. The conversation became more intense and finally Larry said something that no one was expecting him to say. He looked around at all of us, paused, and then said, “Fine, don’t do what I am telling you. You hired me, and I get paid regardless if I train you or not. I will sit over here for the next two weeks and collect the paycheck, but look around. Decide which three of you are not coming home after your deployment. Decide which three of you are willing to die for your tactics.” Larry then walked off.



What did I learn in that critical moment? Larry was there to train us, and our experience had become a vulnerability to our ability to listen and learn. What I really learned at that moment, when conversing with someone, is we must LISTEN to UNDERSTAND. Too many times we get caught up in our own experiences or lessons that we become resistant to the answer right in front of us. We all don't have the "Larry" in our lives that can throw something out there that will stop us in our tracks and look around. Not only look around, but to look around and picture not existing anymore, or one of teammates no longer being there. Larry threw out his words and they cut us all very deep. I realized at that moment, most conversations I found myself in, I am listening to respond and not listening to understand. Too many times, I find myself hearing the words coming out of someone's mouth and I am waiting for them to stop talking so I can give an answer or advice. I am listening to respond, but I am failing to really hear them. I am failing to really understand what they are saying. Most of the time, I am waiting to give my experience or to compare the story. Most of the time we listen to respond in an argument because we allow our emotions to control our actions.

Since that moment, I have made a conscious effort to stop, and listen to what the person I am speaking with has to say. I am attempting to listen to UNDERSTAND. I then will give a response based on the information I hear and show that I understand. There is a difference.



Sometimes it is not a response at all. Sometimes it is a look or a touch or sometimes it is a rephrasing of what they just said, so I can process the information and then provide my concurrence or ask a question for clarifying information. Listening to understand when in a heated conversation or argument is very challenging. However, if you can take the second to listen to what is being said, process the information, understand and acknowledge the person you are speaking with, most of the time, you will diffuse the situation and build trust with the person with whom you are speaking. This does not mean you have to agree all the time. You are showing that you did hear them and that you understand what they are saying, which is what we all want.

Larry changed our way of thinking and we changed our tactics at that moment. We deployed for seven months and we brought everyone home. I think of Larry's conversation with my leadership a lot. He changed our organization and made us better. What will it take to make you stop, look at your situation or conversation? Listen to your significant other, sibling, co-worker, or teammate. Understand what he or she is saying and regain the trust or confidence again.

Listening to UNDERSTAND is the most powerful part of any conversation and will help you to become a better leader, father, mother, sibling, confidant or teammate. Thank you for reading to UNDERSTAND, now go out there and enjoy your next conversation.



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