



Seek first to understand

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When I was still in hotel management, I was fortunate to work for a hotel group that believed in investing in leadership skills for their colleagues. I therefore got to attend and complete “The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People”, a course created by the late, great Stephen Covey.

Unlike some courses out there, the information and experience imparted, could be applied to any circumstance or relationship that we encounter in our lives. These habits are simple and to many, would appear to be obvious but most importantly - just like the label says, they are “highly effective”.

I am not here to regurgitate the learnings of the course. Instead, I'd like to talk about the habit that I believe has been my most crucial tool in life but more specifically in my successful coaching relationships. This has been the habit of seeking first to understand.

Daily interactions with my athletes remind me just how important this is and it keeps me true to a cause and career in which I invest much passion. There are times that I will set a goal in a training session only to find that the session has not gone quite the way I expected to. This is despite my athletes best intention to deliver as instructed.

Moments like this could play out in a number of ways and they have potential to be disastrous. However they have just as great potential to evolve into something wonderfully positive. It all comes down to how the situation is handled.

I will be honest here... younger, arrogant me would have reacted differently and become “very South African” - a term that my multitude of non- South African friends like to use when I am at my bluntest. However, the older version has battered herself by hitting her head on walls and running into metaphoric fences enough to know that no good can come from this approach.

Through my life experiences (and less-than-fine moments), it would be fair to say that I have been compelled to change my approach. The cliched definition of insanity (doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result) resonates. This is where I come back to seeking first to understand.

Having to practice this many times has not only strengthened my relationships with my athletes but it has also given me the opportunity to do things better. Instead of voicing disappointment, frustration or annoyance - I have learnt to investigate the situation and ask questions to give me a larger perspective. It has given me opportunities to find more meaningful ways of presenting both myself and my work. For this I am both grateful and relieved.

The blunt and often direct South African in me would go so far as to say that I do not believe that it is possible to have any successful relationship, let alone an athlete-coach relationship if this habit is not firmly in place. The athlete-coach relationship is complex. It is a balance of development through both technical and emotional spheres. This requires trust and confidence in the coach from the athlete and it requires technical competence and emotional intelligence from the coach.

If the coach is not achieving it, the athlete certainly won't be feeling it. Get practicing.