

Listen very carefully...

Listening is such an integral part of careers guidance and coaching it's surprising that we don't think more about it. We talk about the importance of active listening — but that's about as far as we go. Is there more to learn about listening? Should we be more aware of what we are doing when we listen to someone?

There are quite a few different types of listening that we could be engaged in at any moment. It may improve our effectiveness as listeners if we become aware of what type of listening we are doing and determine whether it is appropriate for the task in hand.

Discriminative listening

Listening to hear

The word 'barbarian' comes from the ancient Greek word *bárbaros*. When the Greeks listened to foreigners all they heard was 'bar-bar-bar-bar'. They were unable to recognise individual words and phrases. In this most basic type of listening, you are able to distinguish between sounds, tones, stresses and inflections. 'So what?' I hear you say, 'It's not like we are trying to provide guidance in a foreign language. Why is this worth talking about?' There are a couple of reasons why it might be useful to go back to thinking about listening at this very basic level.

Are you listening?

How often, when listening to someone else, has your mind become preoccupied with your own thoughts? Perhaps you have begun to wonder what you are going to say next or perhaps your thoughts have gone off at a tangent. Without realising it, you have let the other person's words fade into a background 'blah-blah-blah'. You have moved out of discriminative listening into false listening. The other person's words fail to make the journey from your ears to your brain. You have turned the other person into a barbarian. It is important to train yourself to spot as quickly as possible those moments when you are drifting out of discriminative listening and to return your full attention to the speaker. This will involve trusting that when the time comes for you to speak you will find something to say — and if you listen attentively that will probably be true.

Silence is an important tool for a listener. The importance of external silence is obvious; it's hard to listen when you yourself are talking. To demonstrate that you are really listening, it can be a good practice to regularly leave a few seconds of receptive silence after the speaker has finished before you respond. This gives you more time to review what the other person has said, and it may even prompt them to say more without any intervention from you.

In addition to keeping your mouth shut, it is also useful to develop internal silence — stilling the hubbub in your brain so that you can focus more mental resources on hearing. We'll come back to this when we talk about open listening.

What can you hear?

There may be a limit to the amount or type of discriminative listening you can do depending on your background. For example, it has been shown that babies are born with the ability to distinguish a wide range of vocal sounds. However, if certain sounds do not occur in the speech that you hear in your first year, then your brain loses the ability to hear them. So, for example, it's not just that Japanese adults cannot pronounce L and R separately; it has been shown that they cannot hear the difference between the two sounds because the Japanese language doesn't use them.

It is important to think about what we hear and don't hear when we are listening to someone because it's not only the words we are listening to. Some people are better than others at hearing the subtle emotional nuances in another person's speech — the stresses, the pauses, the hesitations and other non-verbal cues. This may be to do with upbringing or even slight differences in brain function. If you are not hearing this emotional tone and colour, then you cannot take it into account when seeking to understand another person.

However, there is hope for the emotionally hard of hearing. Research has shown that adult brains can be trained to develop new pathways or reactivate disused ones: Japanese adults can be taught to distinguish between L and R. Similarly, greater emotional sensitivity can be developed through practice and reflection. Sometimes, perhaps when listening to a recorded discussion, it might be useful to filter out the actual words and just listen to the tone of someone's voice. Try listening to a foreign radio station and see if you can work out what is going on just from the emotional tone.

Empathic listening

Listening to connect

Often, a good listener will go beyond the mere recognition of the emotional tone and feelings of the speaker. In order to listen effectively, you may have to share those feelings and experiences. In empathic listening you engage your own emotions and connect them with the emotions of the speaker. Whether they are sad, confused, angry, frustrated, hesitant, or excited, you feel some of what they feel.

A responsive environment

When you experience some of the speaker's feelings for yourself, as opposed to just dispassionately observing their presence, you are more likely to display some sign of this in your own non-verbal signals. They frown because they are perplexed; you connect with their perplexity; you frown. The speaker is likely to pick up on this feedback either consciously or subconsciously and recognise the fact that you are in tune with them. This makes it more likely that they will listen to anything you say. If you have accepted them as they are, they might be more willing to respond positively to a suggestion about how they could change.

Some NLP practitioners suggest that you should consciously 'mirror' the other person's posture, tone of voice and pacing in order to establish rapport. This may be a sensible approach as long as it's not taken too far. If you are just copying the other person's non-verbal cues rather than expressing your own natural reaction to a shared emotion, there is a danger that the other person will pick up something artificial in your behaviour and distrust you.

There is another reason why attempting to share the emotional state of the speaker could be important if you are trying to help them change something: it is essential to know exactly where someone is right now before attempting to move them somewhere else.

A common starting point

If you are listening empathically to someone, you are trying to put yourself in their shoes, trying to see the situation as they see it. If they are feeling angry or fatalistic about a problem, that may not be particularly helpful from an external perspective. However, everyone has a valid reason for feeling the way they do at a particular moment. If you can appreciate how their emotional state has come about and recognise the impact it is having on them, you are more likely to be able to help them negotiate their way through it to something more useful than if you just stand on the outside and tell them where they ought to be.

If you put yourself in their position, you can get a better understanding of what they are able to see and what is hidden from them. This will make it easier for you to guide them to a position from which they can see their situation differently. Because you are sharing their state of mind you may also be able to anticipate how they might perceive any intervention from you. This could reduce the risk of your words and actions being misinterpreted.

Comprehensive and reflective listening

Listening to understand

In most cases, as you listen to someone you will be trying to understand what they are saying. Of course, this requires a shared vocabulary and syntax. This is not just true for the words spoken but also for the inflection and the body language that goes along with them. The tendency of inhabitants of some English speaking countries such as Australia to put an upward inflection at the end of a sentence can make a statement sound like a question to someone from the UK. The politeness and respect which inspires people from some Asian countries to nod and smile enthusiastically can be mistaken for agreement or understanding by westerners. It is worth being cautious whenever you speak to someone new; the words, gestures and intonations they use may not have the meanings you assume.

Being selective

Gaining understanding always requires a certain amount of selectivity. Some words carry more information than others. For example, you can extract most of the articles and prepositions from a sentence and it will still (mostly) make sense — you can often do without many of the pronouns and adjectives too. ('Can extract articles prepositions from sentence, will make sense.') When you are trying to understand what someone is saying, you will automatically attempt to identify the words, phrases, gestures and tones that carry the most significance. In doing this, there is always a danger that you are highlighting the wrong things.

The Greek word *exegesis* means to lead or to guide *out* of something. It is used in textual or scriptural analysis to describe the process of trying to understand what the words of a document would have meant to the writer or the intended audience within the timeframe and context in which they were written. In the same way, the task of a comprehensive listener is to work out what the words mean to the person speaking them. The opposite of *exegesis* is *eisegesis*, which means to lead into something. This describes the practice of reading your own meaning into someone else's words based on your own context and presuppositions. This can lead to partial or selective listening in which you only pay attention to the things you are expecting to hear. In order to counter this,

you first need to be aware of your own assumptions about what is significant and then you need to actively listen for indications that your assumptions are inappropriate. Getting other people's perspectives can be helpful in this process, as can a good grounding in career theories.

Being reflective

Obviously, to gain maximum understanding it is usually necessary to interject in order to clarify any potential misunderstandings — listening is usually a two-way process. Techniques of reflective listening can be useful here.

In reflective listening, you as the listener will try to limit your interjections to statements, summaries and questions that primarily reflect the speaker's own words back to them rather than paraphrasing with your own words and concepts. The aim of such interjections is to encourage the speaker to expand and elaborate on particular concepts without the listener introducing their own interpretive bias. In effect the listener becomes a mirror, reflecting back what the speaker has said and allowing them to reflect on the words they have used. Quite often this allows the speaker to discover something new about their own words. Perhaps they are using unfocussed concepts expressed in vague language. Perhaps they are using stereotypes without really thinking. Just hearing that repeated back can make you think again about what you really mean.

Interpretive and evaluative listening

Listening to diagnose

Quite often we will listen with questions in our minds to which we are trying to discover answers. Typically, we might be trying to assign what the speaker is saying to a pre-defined category — 'Is this an example of X or Y?' What you are doing is translating the speaker's comments into your own frame of reference. Whenever you do this it is important to seek confirmation that you have translated accurately, using paraphrasing and questioning to check with the speaker that your interpretation is correct and acceptable to the speaker.

Putting things in boxes

This categorisation can be merely interpretive. In which case, the categories are relatively equal and neutral. For example, 'This person seems to be making a statement about their *self image* as opposed to, perhaps, a statement about their *understanding of particular options or the relative importance of this to their decision making.*' Here you are just putting the speaker's statement into one of a number of possible boxes. In this case, all the possible boxes are equally valid. Of course, you have to be careful that you are not forcing something into a box where it doesn't fit just because you happen to have that box handy.

Any dedicated listener should be aware of their own frame of reference. They should regularly examine it for validity and experiment with new frames of reference, new categories — new boxes. Sometimes the first step to doing this is to become explicitly aware of the categories you are using. Replay a conversation either by remembering it or recording it. As you re-hear the speaker's comments try to remember how you classified them at the time. What alternative labels could you have given them?

Weighing things on scales

It is also possible to assign what someone is saying to categories that are not equally valid, for example 'true' versus 'false', 'something I agree with' versus 'something I dispute', 'useful' versus 'unhelpful', 'constructive' versus 'flippant'. In each of these cases one of the categories has more value to you than the other. You are evaluating the speaker's statements; weighing them against your own internal value system. This isn't necessarily wrong, but it should be done with conscious awareness and with great care lest you fall prey to biased listening. Regularly reviewing discussions and asking, 'What if I was wrong about that?' can often be useful.

Reflexive listening

Listening to yourself

As I said before, listening is usually a two-way process. Therefore, as a good listener you should be listening to both sides of the conversation. Whether, at a particular moment, you are saying something yourself or not there is always something to listen to in yourself.

Listen to your speaking

When discussing empathic listening I mentioned the idea that it might give you an insight into how your own words might be received by the other person. Whether you are able to anticipate responses in this way or not, what you can do is listen to what you are saying as you say it. You can become more aware of the words and phrases you most commonly use — or overuse. You can become more sensitive to the tone, inflection and pacing of your own voice — how much do they vary in response to other people and to what extent are they always the same? Most importantly, as you speak you can observe the person who is now the listener. How are they responding to your words? What non-verbal signals are they giving you about how close you are to the target?

A danger of listening to yourself as you speak is that you become too self-conscious about your words. You can end up rephrasing and rephrasing the same statement or question until it becomes incomprehensible. However, if you really are listening to your speaking, you will be aware that you are doing this and can counteract the effects by summarising at the end in order to make your eventual purpose clear.

One good way to listen to your speaking is to record the discussion and listen to it imagining that you are the other person in the conversation. Does everything you say make sense? Does everything follow from what the other person just said? Do you make it easy for the other person to see how you are connecting things?

Listen to your listening

As should be obvious by now, one aspect of good listening involves being aware of what is going on inside you as you listen. Are you really listening to the speaker or are you listening to your own thoughts? How are you, as a human with emotions, responding to the human with emotions who is speaking to you? How much are you identifying with the person speaking to you? What information are you labelling as important and what are you ignoring? How are you judging what you hear; within what frame of reference?

In addition to this it is important to listen to your own feelings and responses. Are you feeling confused or worried about what is expected of you? How is this affecting your ability to relate to the person in front of you? Do you like or dislike this person? Being aware of this, and admitting it to yourself can enable you to consciously take steps to treat them impartially rather than allowing the feelings to undermine the help you give them.

But beware! You don't want to get so involved in listening to your listening that you forget to listen to the speaker.

Open and transformational listening

Listening to everything

Is it possible to do all of this listening at the same time? To listen to everything that's going on in a conversation? It seems unlikely that we can do this with our conscious mind, given that we are only able to handle seven (plus or minus two) cognitive tasks at any one time.

One way to hear more is to replay the conversation. This can be done by listening to a recording after the event. OK, this isn't much use at the time. However, it will help you to practise listening for things you don't normally hear, so that next time you might be more likely to be aware of them in the moment. Donald Schön calls this 'reflection on action' leading to 'reflection in action'. The more you review afterwards, the better you get at responding during.

A more immediate solution might be to replay the speaker's words in your head during the discussion, listening for more clues. This is another argument for a few more pauses and silences before you launch into speaking.

A further solution might be to bypass the conscious mind and try to use your non-conscious thought processes instead.

Hearing the whole

In a special issue of the journal *Learning Inquiry* on the subject of listening, Leonard Waks talks about what he calls *apophatic* listening in which you suspend your internal questions and categorisation. You immerse yourself fully in the experience of just listening without trying to decide, decipher or define. Your whole attention is focused on taking in everything you can from the speaker — swallowing it whole without chewing. You allow the words and other signals to go into your memory without filtering by your conscious mind so that your non-conscious thought processes can go to work on the raw material. Other authors in the same issue dispute whether this is ever possible. Maybe it just becomes harder as an adult. Our brains try to build ready-to-use constructs and shortcuts that enable us to survive in the world without using too much energy thinking. However, when we were children, we didn't have these constructs; we had to build them from scratch by listening and observing what was going on around us. If you observe small children, you will often notice them paying lots of attention to things you as an adult think are irrelevant and ignoring things that you think they should be interested in. Perhaps it is possible to recapture some of this childlike, open-minded listening by becoming more silent on the inside.

It may be that some people are more naturally adept at stilling their internal mental machinery. I find it hard myself. If I've done it, then it was only for a short period of time before the conscious analysis kicks back in again. However, I think that I have observed other people doing it for longer. They listen and, from my perspective, seem to be ignoring things the speaker has said that I would naturally pick up on. Eventually though, it all seems to come together in some sort of gut instinct and they ask a fantastic question out of the blue that I might have groped my way towards eventually. In this way, it becomes a form of creative listening.

Creativity and emergence

Perhaps if we can listen in this way, instead of using our existing categories and ways of looking at the world, we are creating new ones. We become like a child again, seeing the world through fresh eyes, without preconceptions. Otto Scharmer calls this generative listening, in which we create new rules for dealing with the world rather than relying on existing ones. In this mode we are living in the moment and alert to the emergence of new possibilities and connections. This could be particularly important for situations and issues that may be outside our normal experience, or for dealing with people for whom our normal range of approaches don't seem to work. If you don't know what to do, then do more listening.

If we listen in this way, changing our internal frame of reference, we are re-creating ourselves. In the words of Gene Knudsen Hoffman, creator of the Compassionate Listening project for reconciliation and conflict transformation, 'if we truly listen to our fellow human beings, we ourselves will be changed.'

A note on words

The definitions of the different types of listening have been inspired by some of the sources below, but not copied from them. Sometimes I have used the same words they used to describe a type of listening; often I have used my own words or adapted their words to my own purposes. For example, some authors use the phrase reflexive listening to mean what I have described as reflective listening.

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