

Right
Listening



6. *Be slow to criticize, argue or disagree*

Under stress, many conversations become laced with criticism, argument and disagreement. When we engage in these behaviors as a listener, we can't hear what the other person is trying to say. Attempting to force our point across keeps us from hearing what actually wants to be expressed. A skillful listener listens to others' beliefs, points of view and versions of truth. It may be hard to hear things we don't like (Skill No. 35), things we might want to change, but skillful listening allows the speaker full rein to say whatever they may need to say.

Using other listening skills recommended in this book can help put an end to argument, criticism and disagreement. It takes discernment and practice to be open to things that are difficult to hear or what we think needs to be corrected, but in the long run, any bottom-line truth that has room to emerge from another person is worth far more than "being right," or "changing another's mind." Being slow to disagree, argue or criticize goes a long way to allow truth, understanding and compassion to organically unfold.

Practice: Observe several different conversations over the next few days. Listen for how much argument, disagreement, or criticism passes for conversation. Pay particular attention to its effect on your body – how it makes you feel. How does it affect your breathing? Heart rate? Sensations in the pit of your stomach?

7. *Pay attention to the need for control*

How many times have you observed or taken part in a conversation where two or more people are talking at the same time? If such a situation goes on for any duration, each participant will keep raising his or her voice, trying to out-decibel the other until it actually becomes quite comical.

At such times very little listening is occurring, and a power struggle is taking place, even though that might not be so obvious to the participants. In fact, many exchanges that pass as dialogues are really exercises in one-upmanship and competition for control of the conversation. The irony is, in many conversations it is the *listener* who potentially holds the greatest power by virtue of what he or she chooses to ignore or respond to. By electing to selectively attend to content and focus on emotional tone or immediate context, a skillful listener can turn a conversation or conflict 180 degrees in a matter of moments.

Many people are reluctant to give over control in a discussion for fear that it is something given over forever or that it signifies weakness. The biblical injunction to "seek first to understand, and then to be understood" is good advice. It's not only possible, but advantageous to temporarily give the floor over to another. Once a person has had the opportunity to express what they need to, frequently they have more energy available to pay attention to what you have to say. As it is written in an ancient book of wisdom: "Yield and overcome."

Practice: Observe people in conversation over the course of several days. Who does most of the talking? Who interrupts? Can you see where the balance of control lies? Are you aware of any control issues in your own conversations? With whom and over what? What do you need most to manage in yourself in these interactions?

8. Cultivate “Beginner’s Ear”

Beginner’s ear is a way of paying attention to the present moment that is open and curious. It holds a sense of wonder and delight and the possibility of discovery in the midst of focusing on increasingly finer detail.

To gain a sense of what Beginner’s Ear might be like, we can think of how the sounds of the world affected us as a small child. We can recall what it was like on a warm summer night and we heard that very first cricket chirp and then heard smaller details – the rhythm, the silence between chirps, and the answering call of the other crickets.

Other sounds of childhood might also help us recall the feel and flavor of Beginner’s Ear. Everything was new and thrilling because we were curious, slowed things down, and paid close attention to what had captured our fancy. It is paying close attention to ever-finer detail that comprises the core of Beginner’s Ear. Attention to discriminating detail is the remedy that literally works best to keep things from “going in one ear and out the other.”

Richard Davidson⁵ at the University of Wisconsin, has shown that contemplative practices help integrate the parts of the brain involved with “executive function.” What this means is that the more we practice listening with a Beginner’s Ear, the more neural resources we grow to be able to practice it even more.

Practice: Hold a conversation with someone you regularly talk to. Listen with a new sense of curiosity and wonder. What are some things you hear that you may not have heard before? What does curiosity feel like in your body? What does wonder and delight feel like in your chest? In your head?

9. Practice being with silence

The plain and simple truth is that few of us are perfectly comfortable with silence. We live and work with radios and TVs blaring. We use cell phones and carry on conversations in spaces that used to be silent and sacred. The extinction of silence is taking place all over the world, right before our very ears.

Becoming comfortable with silence is a necessary and critical aspect of skillful listening. It is in the silent spaces inside ourselves, or between two people in dialogue, that deeper, more creative ideas begin to emerge. In silence, something bordering on magic transpires: as a listener we offer others a chance to discover what they think, how they feel, what they want. The same is true when we listen in silence to ourselves.

In silence, we can listen and discover what’s required to live more fully. MIT organizational scientist and co-author of *Presence*, Peter Senge⁶ identifies this as “generative listening” – the art of developing deeper silences that work to slow the mind’s hearing to the ear’s natural speed.

One way to become increasingly comfortable with silence is to spend increasing amounts of time with it. As we do, silence’s rhythms and sensations will become intimately familiar to us. It is, after all, this spacious emptiness at the sub-atomic level that quantum physicists tell us mostly makes up who we are!

Practice: Make it a point to be aware of how silence in a conversation feels to you. Does it cause anxiety? Do you automatically rush to fill the space? Be mindful of the quiet and see if you can allow silence to be a part of your conversations, a time to sit and reflect on what the speaker has told you, a time to honor and hold precious what has been said.

19. Double check for meaning

Author and researcher, Larry Barker advised skillful listeners to remember, "words have no meaning – people have meaning."¹⁰ Assigning meaning to words is an internal process; meaning comes from inside us. Although our experiences, knowledge and attitudes may differ, we often misinterpret each other's messages, while simultaneously operating under the illusion that we've attained a common understanding.

Psychologists have identified over 100 thinking biases. It is very difficult not to overlay or add on to what we hear based on the biases our experiences and perceptions create. We take the words a person says, filter them through screens of meaning and then draw conclusions or construct interpretations that don't accurately reflect what the speaker intends. Great misunderstandings frequently result.

One way to counter this process is to double check for accuracy often, by repeating or paraphrasing what we think we hear *and* the meaning we make in response to whomever we are listening. Skilled listeners do their best to reflect back a speaker's truth and deeper reality, and not simply a version of their own.

As we experiment with this practice, we might discover we can be wrong far more often than right. It takes time to get it right. This is fine so long as we remember that what we're trying to discern is truth and accuracy, and this messy, often cumbersome process is one way to go about it.

Practice: In a conversation with someone you trust, explain that you want to practice something "silly" to help you with your listening skills. Ask for permission to reflect back the meaning of what you heard. Ask for feedback. Each time you do this successfully, you hone a great listening skill. You actually learn how to "get" what the other person deeply wants you to know.

20. Listen for meaning, not delivery

For a variety of reasons, some of us have a hard time saying what we really want to say directly. We may have a speech impediment or a very slow or very fast way of processing information, or we may be carrying some form of traumatic history that doesn't permit easy self-expression. Listening to someone who stutters, for example, can be quite challenging. It's difficult not to offer the word the stutterer is stuck on in order to ease our own internal anxiety.

Other people may talk fast, or slow, or with a heavy accent, or lace their speech with epithets or euphemisms. There are countless ways a speaker can deliver a message that distracts us. Being mindful that the truth lies beyond the content of the message no matter how it is delivered, helps keep our focus where it needs to be – on the value of the person. We can keep our mind on what is said and who is saying it, not necessarily on how it is being said. When we negatively judge someone or his or her message based on their delivery, we lose what's most important – the person. Moreover, we lose the chance to open our hearts and connect with another in ways that can make a life-changing difference. Respectfully listen for meaning, not delivery, and you will hear far, far more! Why? Because people will entrust you with the deepest parts of themselves.

Practice: Identify someone whose style of speech and delivery is challenging for you. Can you remain calm and alert as you pay particular attention to the content of the message? What helps that practice? What hinders it?

21. *Be genuinely curious*

Some people are born with a natural inclination to curiosity. They ask lots of questions and explore new topics with gusto. These people seem naturally inclined to be curious about other people and often want to listen and learn more about others. Brenda Ueland, a contemporary of Robert Frost, had a way of making everyone she talked to feel extremely important.¹¹ She gently asked question after question, sincerely wanting to know: "And then what happened?" or "And how did you feel?" Her favorite response to a speaker was, "Tell me more."

For those of us not born with a strong inclination to curiosity, we can develop it by remembering what it was like when we were a young child and everything was new and fascinating. When we try on the eyes and ears of a child as we encounter our world and the people in it - people whose hearts, brains, minds and bodies are constantly changing - we become ever more curious about who they are and what they might want us to know.

Curiosity makes us sincerely interested in the person we are listening to. When we are curious, we ask more open-ended questions and are eager for the answers. Our curiosity conveys to a speaker that we care for and appreciate them. Curiosity fuels a desire to lead the speaker deeper and deeper into their personal experience and invites them to share it with us.

Practice: Put on "the eyes and ears of a child" the next time you speak with someone. What things do you become curious about? What questions can you ask to discover more about who that person in front of you is right now?

22. *Listen for underlying needs*

In one way or another, much human communication is an expression of a need. It may take the direct form of a straightforward request: "Would you present the teaching to the new students this month?" "Do you worry about our finances?" or "May I have a cookie?"

Communication can also indirectly express needs that lie below the surface: "Would you present the teaching?" may mean, "I am too scared/busy/unprepared to do it." "Do you worry about our finances?" may mean, "Some-thing's happening to our money that doesn't make sense?" Or, "May I have a cookie?" may mean "Do you love me?" A skilled listener listens for the underlying needs of the speaker. To get to underlying needs, we can ask a simple question - "Why do you ask?" or "What do you need exactly?" or "Tell me more."

Listening for needs can work to identify areas of common interest around which exciting, positive, creative collaborations can be built. For example, if we listen to the colleague who is anxious about presenting the teachings to the new students, we can open up a host of alternative creative possibilities. But it all starts with the realization that virtually all communication is intended to express any variety of needs. The skillful listener is constantly listening for what those needs may be. Ralph Nichols summed it up best when he said, "The most basic of all human needs is the need to understand and be understood. The best way to understand people is to listen to them."¹²

Practice: Things that our friends, family and colleagues need in any communication are often hidden, even from them. Over the next few days, spend some time asking people this simple question: "What is it you need?"

23. Identify defensiveness; practice non-defensiveness

When a person we are listening to feels under attack, either rightfully (if an attack can ever be right) or wrongfully, they frequently defend with either silence or violence.

When they react with silence, the conversation stops cold. When they react with violence, either by retaliatory verbal attacks or outright physical assault, this can escalate into even further violence.

Violence can take more subtle forms as well. Sarcastic or snide remarks also have the seeds of violence in them. Any remark that has the effect of diminishing, discounting, belittling, or marginalizing someone has violence at its core.

If we recognize that a defensive response is often rooted in a painful personal history and reactivated by either our behavior or our verbal responses, it can become easier to hear what truths may be lurking under the defensiveness. As such, it's best if we can practice ways of being non-defensive ourselves. We don't defend against the things that evoke a reaction of silence or violence, but rather help the speaker search for what may be causing them to feel attacked. If we believe that skillful listening can truly heal, skillful listeners are open to trying to root out the source of pain and make it safe to explore it further. Defensiveness often begets more conflict. Skillful listeners listen for defensiveness and all the reasons for it, and offer apologies and amends when necessary.

Practice: Pay attention to the need of others to defend themselves in a conversation. Do you easily recognize when someone feels the need to defend? What might you have said or done that triggered such a reaction?

24. Listen for differences

When we listen to others, often what we listen for are the things we understand or things we agree with. We find comfort in discovering the ways that others are like us. People who are clearly different from us make us uncomfortable. In addition, those whom we thought were very much like us, who turn out to be very different from us, make us uncomfortable as well. We don't like to hear about differences.

A skillful listener deliberately seeks out and pays attention to the ways others are different. We begin to appreciate the way human beings have been shaped, molded, and often biased by culture, schooling, family of origin, genetic makeup, and any number of other unknown factors. Like snowflakes, except at the higher elevations, no two people out of billions and billions are ever exactly alike.

After we've learned to listen for differences and to develop an appreciation for them, we can begin to cherish and celebrate our special uniqueness. From this perspective we can turn ourselves into personal and professional planetary citizens, perfectly at home in all our radiant diversity at any place on the planet, and at the same time, we can do the same with others.

Practice: Spend time paying close attention to things people say that surprise you or that you don't understand or that you disagree with. Consider what you expected them to say. What assumptions underlie your expectations? Can you appreciate how our differences hold the potential to make the world an exciting and interesting place?