

Consciousness, Courage and Communications

Part II: Listening

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Receiving Messages

Almost every presentation on effective interpersonal communications (and I've sat through a lot of them) makes reference to a process called "active listening,"¹ so I assume it must be pretty important. When I am on the receiving end of messages I am supposed to listen carefully, make eye contact, and occasionally repeat back what the other person is saying, e.g., "what I hear you saying is..." This oversimplified description of the method attributed to American psychologist Carl Rogers is intended to let the speaker know that I am attentive, concerned and that I understand. This seems generally good advice, although I sometimes get the feeling that this is merely a technique being used on me to give the *illusion* of concern, in which case it has the opposite effect and I become annoyed, suspicious and cautious.

It seems like listening would be a pretty straightforward thing, and most people think they are good listeners, but it isn't always the case. Like beauty, listening is in the eye of the beholder, or should I say "ear of the behearer." The way we



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"Nothing feels so good as being understood, not evaluated or judged. When I try to share some feeling aspect of myself and my communication is met with evaluation, reassurance, distortion of my meaning, I know what it is to be alone."

—Carl Rogers

listen sends a message to others about how we feel about them. I think most people are well meaning but perhaps a little clumsy, lacking skillfulness in listening, and like with any skill, we can get better at it with practice. To explore how this works we can use a model of Levels of Listening,² similar to the Levels of Openness³ developed by Will Schutz to become more aware of how we listen (or do not listen) on parallel levels.

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Levels of Listening

Level -1. Unaware: Did you ever try to have an important conversation with someone while they were watching TV, writing an e-mail, or texting on their iPhone? Have you ever noticed that glazed look in someone's eyes and realized they are not listening to a word you are saying? Have you ever expressed sincere feelings or deep convictions only to have them ignored, deflected or worse yet, brushed aside with a flippant response? If so, you have experienced the unaware listener, so preoccupied with their own thoughts or activities they are simply not available to listen to what you have to say. You probably noticed the negative feelings you had about the person, but we seldom notice when we ourselves listen at the unaware level, because, well, we are unaware.

Levels of Listening

| Level | Looks Like | Example |
|-------|-----------------------|---|
| -1 | Unaware | I don't notice you. |
| 0 | Avoiding | I actively don't want to notice you. |
| 1 | Arguing | "No, you are... 'the problem,' or 'wrong.'" "Let me tell you how it is..." |
| 2 | Negating | "You shouldn't feel angry." |
| 3 | Advising Hijacking | "What you should do is," or "You think you have problems..." |
| 4 | Inquiring | "Tell me more. Help me understand your point of view." |
| 5 | Reflecting | "What I hear you saying (and feeling) is... you are upset because I turn my work in late." |

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only serves to escalate emotions and limits the possibility of genuine dialogue, understanding or successful resolution.

Another form of arguing is the person who is ever so quick to correct your facts. *"That's not how it is at all. Let me tell you what it really goes on around here..."* Some people listen defensively, expecting to be attacked or criticized, and as such, hear only what they expect to hear, whether it is actually being said or not. As the philosopher, Paul Simon said, *"A man hears what he wants to hear and disregards the rest."*⁴ Either form of Level 1 listening inevitably deteriorates into an *"I'm right – you're wrong"* argument.

Level 2. Negating. *"You shouldn't feel that way."* At Level 2 the listener is quick to correct any "inappropriate" feelings being expressed (meaning any feelings that make the listener uncomfortable). If the speaker expresses anger, sadness or disappointment, the listener may feel awkward or threatened and try to get the speaker to block their feelings, or at least keep quiet about them.

This strategy takes one of two forms; the self-righteous "professional" (*"The office is no place for those feelings. Leave them at home."*) or the sympathetic "helper" (*"There, there, everything will be all right. Cheer up. So you lost your job, you have cancer and your wife left you – don't worry, be happy!"*). Whichever form it takes, this level of "listening" tends to stop further communication so neither party understands the other well.

Level 3: Advising/Hijacking. *"What you should do is..."* or *"You think YOU have problems...!"* Level 3 listening, characterized by frequent interruptions, is merely listening for an opportunity to take over the conversation.

One form of this type of listening is the *advisor* who eagerly waits for an opportunity to demonstrate their ability to find solutions and solve problems. *"Let me tell you what you should do..."* This style of "listening" seems to be more common for men than women.^{5,6} Whereas women more commonly communicate to show support, build relationships and gain intimacy, men communicate to make decisions and demonstrate competence. The advisor assumes you come to them because you trust them to know what to do. In fact the sooner he/she can diagnose and fix your problem the more proficient the advisor feels (and, no doubt, the more impressed and grateful you will be). The advisor is often so quick with solutions the speaker does not feel listened to or understood. Speakers feel cut off, as if the listener is uninterested, impatient or does not want to be bothered. Because advisors must fix the problem in order to be successful, they invariably only diagnose the kind of problems they know how to solve (a frequent dilemma for organizational consultants as well).

In contrast, the *hijacker* is an expert in "one-upsmanship" who can always top your story with his or her own successes or calamities. *"You think you have problems! That's nothing! When I ran this department we had half the staff and I still had to make my quota."* This "listening" has the effect of shifting attention away from the speaker and onto themselves. Whichever form Level 3 takes, this level of "listening" does not create an environment where the speaker feels comfortable to disclose personal feelings or bring up even more difficult or

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more personal issues in the future. In fact, none of the levels discussed so far are really “listening” at all.

Level 4: Inquiring: *“Tell me more.”* This level is a significant departure from the ones above. At Level 4 you invite the speaker to explain their point more fully, give examples, discuss more thoroughly how they feel and why. Only here do others begin to feel you genuinely care and want to understand. So why is this simple phrase so rarely used? It turns out to be a difficult thing to do if you are uncomfortable with the speaker’s emotions (or your own), and especially if the content of the message feels like a personal attack, as in criticisms or accusations. Who in their right mind would say, *“Tell me more”* when being roundly criticized? Frequently people come on so strongly because of their own discomfort. They often expect to be cut off, dismissed, or rejected because of past experiences in trying to have difficult conversations. Inviting speakers to say more is both courageous and disarming. *“I can see this is very important to you, and I want to understand fully. Please, tell me more about how you feel.”*

No, it is not easy, but it is a powerful way to diffuse the emotion in a heated conversation. It changes the tone of the interaction and invariably puts the other person more at ease, and, in turn, makes them more likely to eventually listen to what you have to say as well. Notice that inviting others to say more does not imply agreement with what they are saying. You are just letting them have their say first. Stephen Covey⁷ and Roger Fisher⁸ have both written eloquently about the value of listening with the purpose of understanding rather than for finding flaws to attack.

Roger Fisher,^{8,9} author of *Getting To Yes* and *Getting Together*, tells a moving story of the power of Level 4 listening.

At an international peace conference a hard-line Jewish Rabbi began to publicly and angrily berate Nelson Mandela for maintaining diplomatic ties with Libya’s Moammar Kadafi. The tension in the room was palpable. Mandela did not respond back in anger. He did not attempt defend his actions or even try to explain his rationale. Instead he thanked the man for raising the issue and for explaining how passionately he cared about the matter. Mandela went on to say that the things the Rabbi was saying was very important for him to hear, and perhaps if they could have lunch together they could talk more. Instantly the tension melted and a hostile situation transformed into one that held the promise of deeper understanding.¹⁰

Level 5: Confirming: *“What I hear you saying (and feeling) is....”* When you paraphrase and reflect back the other person’s concerns, especially when you are able to include the quality and quantity of their feelings, they know they have been understood. Here again, this does not mean that you agree with what they are saying, just that you understand their point of view. This process of reflecting (active listening) permits you to clear up misunderstandings in ways that other levels of listening could never do.

Finally, the thing that distinguishes genuine Level 5 listening from mere technique and gimmickry is *intent*. When you listen with the intention of truly understanding, that intent will come through. If your intention is to use reflection as a technique to manipulate, to get your way while appearing to care, that too will be understood. George Burns said it best: *“Sincerity is everything. If you can fake that you’ve got it made.”* Guess what – it cannot be done. ❧

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