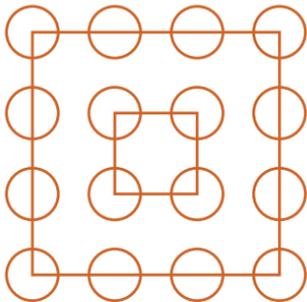




**Harvard
Business
Review**
Press

Emotional Intelligence

MINDFUL LISTENING



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Mindful Listening

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Mindful Listening

HBR EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE SERIES

1

What Great Listeners Actually Do

By Jack Zenger and Joseph Folkman

Chances are you think you're a good listener. People's appraisal of their listening ability is much like their assessment of their driving skills, in that the great bulk of adults think they're above average.

In our experience, most people think good listening comes down to doing three things:

- Not talking when others are speaking
- Letting others know you're listening through facial expressions and verbal sounds (“mm-hmm”)
- Being able to repeat what others have said, practically word-for-word

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In fact, much management advice on listening suggests doing these very things: encouraging listeners to remain quiet, nod and “mm-hmm” encouragingly, and then repeat back to the talker something like, “So, let me make sure I understand. What you’re saying is . . .” However, recent research that we conducted suggests that these behaviors fall far short of describing good listening skills.

We analyzed data describing the behavior of 3,492 participants in a development program designed to help managers become better coaches. As part of this program, managers’ coaching skills were assessed by others in 360-degree assessments. We identified those who were perceived as being the most effective listeners (the top 5%). We then compared the best listeners to the average of all other people in the data set and identified the 20 items that showed the largest significant difference. With those results in hand we identified the differences between great and average listeners and analyzed the data to determine

what characteristics their colleagues identified as the behaviors that made them outstanding listeners.

We found some surprising conclusions, along with some qualities we expected to hear. We grouped them into four main findings:

- *Good listening is much more than being silent while the other person talks.* To the contrary, people perceive the best listeners to be those who periodically ask questions that promote discovery and insight. These questions gently challenge old assumptions but do so in a constructive way. Sitting there silently nodding does not provide sure evidence that a person is listening, but asking a good question tells the speaker the listener has not only heard what was said but that they comprehended it well enough to want additional information. Good listening was consistently seen as a two-way dialogue, rather than a one-way “speaker versus

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hearer” interaction. The best conversations were active.

- *Good listening includes interactions that build a person’s self-esteem.* The best listeners made the conversation a positive experience for the other party; that doesn’t happen when the listener is passive (or, for that matter, critical). Good listeners made the other person feel supported and conveyed confidence in them. Good listening was characterized by the creation of a safe environment in which issues and differences could be discussed openly.
- *Good listening is seen as a cooperative conversation.* In these interactions, feedback flowed smoothly in both directions with neither party becoming defensive about comments the other made. By contrast, poor listeners were seen as competitive—as listening only to identify errors in reasoning or logic, using

their silence as a chance to prepare their next response. That might make you an excellent debater, but it doesn't make you a good listener. Good listeners may challenge assumptions and disagree, but the person being listened to feels the listener is trying to help, not trying to win an argument.

- *Good listeners tend to make suggestions.* Good listening invariably included some feedback provided in a way others would accept and that opened up alternative paths to consider. This finding surprised us somewhat, since it's not uncommon to hear complaints that "So-and-so didn't listen, he just jumped in and tried to solve the problem." Perhaps what the data is telling us is that making suggestions is not itself the problem; it may be the skill with which those suggestions are made. Another possibility is that we're more likely to accept suggestions

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from people we already think are good listeners. (Someone who is silent for the whole conversation and then jumps in with a suggestion may not be seen as credible. Someone who seems combative or critical and then tries to give advice may not be seen as trustworthy.)

While many of us have thought of being a good listener as being like a sponge that accurately absorbs what the other person is saying, what these findings show instead is that good listeners are like trampolines: They are someone you can bounce ideas off of and, rather than absorbing your ideas and energy, they amplify, energize, and clarify your thinking. They make you feel better not by merely passively absorbing but by actively supporting. This lets you gain energy and height, just like someone jumping on a trampoline.

Of course, there are different levels of listening. Not every conversation requires the highest levels,

but many conversations would benefit from greater focus and listening skill. Consider which level of listening you'd like to aim for:

Level 1: The listener creates a safe environment in which difficult, complex, or emotional issues can be discussed.

Level 2: The listener clears away distractions like phones and laptops, focusing attention on the other person and making appropriate eye contact. (This behavior not only affects how you are perceived as the listener; it immediately influences the listener's *own* attitudes and inner feelings. Acting the part changes how you feel inside. This in turn makes you a better listener.)

Level 3: The listener seeks to understand the substance of what the other person is saying. They capture ideas, ask questions, and restate

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issues to confirm that their understanding is correct.

Level 4: The listener observes nonverbal cues, such as facial expressions, perspiration, respiration rates, gestures, posture, and numerous other subtle body language signals. It is estimated that 80% of what we communicate comes from these signals. It sounds strange to some, but you listen with your eyes as well as your ears.

Level 5: The listener increasingly understands the other person's emotions and feelings about the topic at hand and identifies and acknowledges them. The listener empathizes with and validates those feelings in a supportive, non-judgmental way.

Level 6: The listener asks questions that clarify assumptions the other person holds and helps

the other person see the issue in a new light. This could include the listener injecting some thoughts and ideas about the topic that could be useful to the other person. However, good listeners never hijack the conversation so that they or their issues become the subject of the discussion.

Each of these levels builds on the others. Thus, if you've been criticized (for example) for offering solutions rather than listening, it may mean you need to attend to some of the other levels (such as clearing away distractions or empathizing) before your proffered suggestions can be appreciated.

We suspect that in being a good listener, most of us are more likely to stop short rather than go too far. Our hope is that this research will help by providing a new perspective on listening. We hope those who labor under an illusion of superiority about their listening skills will see where they really stand. We also

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hope the common perception that good listening is mainly about acting like an absorbent sponge will wane. Finally, we hope all will see that the highest and best form of listening comes in playing the same role for the other person that a trampoline plays for a child: It gives energy, acceleration, height, and amplification. These are the hallmarks of great listening.

JACK ZENGER is the CEO of Zenger Folkman, a leadership development consultancy. Follow him on Twitter [@jhzenger](#). JOSEPH FOLKMAN is the president of Zenger Folkman. Follow him on Twitter [@joefolkman](#). Zenger and Folkman are coauthors of the October 2011 HBR article “Making Yourself Indispensable” and the book *Speed: How Leaders Accelerate Successful Execution*.

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2

What Gets in the Way of Listening

By Amy Jen Su and Muriel Maignan Wilkins

As your role grows in scale and influence, so too must your ability to listen. But listening is one of the toughest skills to master—and it requires uncovering deeper barriers within oneself.

Take, for example, our client, Janet, a successful principal in a management-consulting firm. She recently received 360-degree feedback from colleagues that she needed to improve her listening skills. This confused her: She had always thought of herself as an active listener. When we asked her colleagues why, they described how she wouldn't exactly answer questions in meetings—and how she often had

different takeaways from the rest of the team. Janet wanted to explore what was happening. It seemed simple enough, and yet why was she having trouble? The key, ironically, was for her to focus on herself. Here's what she—and you—should do.

Ignore your inner critic

Janet realized that she wasn't tracking to the dialogue because she was nervous about her own performance. Her mind was attuned to a different voice—that of her own inner critic—monitoring how she was doing in the meeting. This was especially true during presentations. Janet's performance anxiety overshadowed her ability to hear the concerns underlying each question and kept her from noticing the audience's cues to move along. *Shift your focus from "getting a good grade" to the presentation's greater purpose. What excites you about the topic or audience?*

Expand how you see your role

To fully listen, you must first believe doing so is a critical part of your job. To quote from Boris Groysberg and Michael Slind's *Harvard Business Review* article "Leadership Is a Conversation," "Leaders who take organizational conversation seriously know when to stop talking and start listening." As Janet continued to explore why she wasn't listening, she realized she'd boxed herself in. As a management consultant, she described her role as "providing efficient solutions to clients." We discussed how she might update her view from problem solver to trusted adviser: one that not only provided counsel but also listened deeply to clients' issues and concerns. *Consider if you've boxed yourself in by role definition. Do you believe your only job is to provide direction?*

Put aside your fear and anticipation

Listening demands being fully present and ready to respond to what might get thrown your way. But our listening shuts down when we're anticipating what might happen next. Janet found that while another person was talking, her mind was already thinking about what she might say next or anticipating what might be said. This was especially true during difficult conversations, when she anticipated confrontation. She'd rush through what she wanted to say without listening as a way to avoid her fears of conflict. But listening is an especially important skill in navigating difficult conversations, where multiple interests and agendas must be aligned. Our full attention is demanded to understand what the hot-button issues are or what the potential misunderstandings might be. *Notice if your listening shuts down when you're emotionally uncomfortable. Are you aware of your triggers?*

Be open to having your mind changed

Janet also realized that she was working hard to appear confident and to make sure she was offering her point of view in meetings. In trying to be more assertive, she came off as having prematurely made up her mind. One of Janet's partners shared this tip: "I do have a viewpoint going in, but I don't assume or try to show I'm the smartest person in the room. In fact, I go in with the assumption that my colleagues are smart too and therefore might have good reason for having a different position. I'm willing to hear them out for the sake of getting to the best answer, not just my answer." Listening, then, is actually a sign of incredible self-confidence. *Are you trying too hard to convey confidence and missing others' perspectives in the process?*

While tactically there are many ways to strengthen your listening skills, you must focus on the deeper, internal issues at stake to really improve. Listening is

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a skill that enables you to align people, decisions, and agendas. You cannot have leadership presence without hearing what others have to say.

AMY JEN SU is a cofounder and managing partner of Paravis Partners, a boutique executive coaching and leadership development firm. Follow her on Twitter [@amyjensu](#). MURIEL MAIGNAN WILKINS is a cofounder and managing partner of Paravis Partners. They are the coauthors of *Own the Room: Discover Your Signature Voice to Master Your Leadership Presence* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2013).

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April 14, 2014 (product #H0ORDP).

3

Listening to People

By Ralph G. Nichols and Leonard A. Stevens

Editor's note: In their classic 1957 article, Ralph G. Nichols and Leonard A. Stevens explain why listening is a key component in business communication and why so many people struggle with it. In this excerpt, they describe how emotions can affect what we hear—and provide two ways to train yourself to get more out of your conversations.

In different degrees and in many different ways, listening ability is affected by our emotions.¹ Figuratively we reach up and mentally turn off what we do not want to hear. Or, on the other hand, when someone says what we especially want to hear, we open our ears wide, accepting everything—truths, half-truths, or fiction. We might say, then, that our emotions act as aural filters. At times they in effect cause deafness, and at other times they make listening altogether too easy. If we hear something that opposes our most deeply rooted prejudices, notions, convictions, mores, or complexes, our brains may become overstimulated, and not in a direction that leads to

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good listening. We mentally plan a rebuttal to what we hear, formulate a question designed to embarrass the talker, or perhaps simply turn to thoughts that support our own feelings on the subject at hand. For example:

The firm's accountant goes to the general manager and says: "I have just heard from the Bureau of Internal Revenue, and . . ." The general manager suddenly breathes harder as he thinks, "That blasted bureau! Can't they leave me alone? Every year the government milks my profits to a point where . . ." Red in the face, he whirls and stares out the window. The label "Bureau of Internal Revenue" cuts loose emotions that stop the general manager's listening.

In the meantime, the accountant may go on to say that here is a chance to save \$3,000 this year if the general manager will take a few simple steps. The fuming general manager may hear this—if the

accountant presses hard enough—but the chances are he will fail to comprehend it.

When emotions make listening too easy, it usually results from hearing something that supports the deeply rooted inner feelings that we hold. When we hear such support, our mental barriers are dropped and everything is welcomed. We ask few questions about what we hear; our critical faculties are put out of commission by our emotions. Thinking drops to a minimum because we are hearing thoughts that we have harbored for years in support of our inner feelings. It is good to hear someone else think those thoughts, so we lazily enjoy the whole experience.

What can we do about these emotional filters? The solution is not easy in practice, although it can be summed up in this simple admonition: *Hear the man out.* Following are two pointers that often help in training people to do this:

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1. *Withhold evaluation.* This is one of the most important principles of learning, especially learning through the ear. It requires self-control, sometimes more than many of us can muster, but with persistent practice it can be turned into a valuable habit. While listening, the main object is to comprehend each point made by the talker. Judgments and decisions should be reserved until after the talker has finished. At that time, and only then, review his main ideas and assess them.
2. *Hunt for negative evidence.* When we listen, it is human to go on a militant search for evidence that proves us right in what we believe. Seldom do we make a search for evidence to prove ourselves wrong. The latter type of effort is not easy, for behind its application must lie a generous spirit and real breadth of outlook. However, an important part of listening comprehension is found in the search for negative

evidence in what we hear. If we make up our minds to seek out the ideas that might prove us wrong, as well as those that might prove us right, we are less in danger of missing what people have to say.

RALPH G. NICHOLS was nationally known for his many articles and lectures on communication problems. He served as the president of the National Society for the Study of Communication. LEONARD A. STEVENS is a freelance writer and a consultant on oral presentation to a number of leading companies and also is affiliated with Management Development Associates of New York. Nichols and Stevens coauthored the book *Are You Listening?*

Note

1. See Wendell Johnson, "The Fateful Process of Mr. A Talking to Mr. B," *Harvard Business Review*, January–February 1953, 49.

Reprinted from *Harvard Business Review*,
September 1957 (product #57507).

4

Three Ways Leaders Can Listen with More Empathy

By Christine M. Riordan

Study after study has shown that listening is critical to leadership effectiveness. So why are so few leaders good at it?

Too often, leaders seek to take command, direct conversations, talk too much, or worry about what they will say next in defense or rebuttal. Additionally, leaders can react quickly, get distracted during a conversation, or fail to make the time to listen to others. Finally, leaders can be ineffective at listening if they are competitive, if they multitask such as by reading emails or text messages, or if they let their egos get in the way of listening to what others have to say.

Instead, leaders need to start by really caring about what other people have to say about an issue. Research also shows that active listening, combined with empathy or trying to understand others' perspectives and points of view, is the most effective form of listening.¹ Henry Ford once said, "If there is any great secret of success in life, it lies in the ability to get the other person's point of view and to see things from that person's angle as well as from one's own."

Research has linked several notable behavior sets with empathic listening.² The first behavior set involves recognizing all verbal and nonverbal cues, including tone, facial expressions, and other body language. In short, leaders receive information through all senses, not just hearing. Sensitive leaders pay attention to what others are *not* saying and probe a bit deeper. They also understand how others are feeling and acknowledge those feelings. Sample phrases include, "Thank you for sharing how you feel about this situation, it is important to understand where

everyone is coming from on the issue,” “Would you share a bit more on your thoughts on this situation,” and “You seem excited (happy, upset) about this situation, and I would like to hear more about your perspective.”

The second set of empathic listening behaviors is processing, which includes the behaviors we most commonly associate with listening. It involves understanding the meaning of the messages and keeping track of the points of the conversation. Leaders who are effective at processing assure others that they are remembering what others say, summarize points of agreement and disagreement, and capture global themes and key messages from the conversation. Sample phrases include, “Here are a couple of key points that I heard from this meeting,” “Here are our points of agreement and disagreement,” “Here are a few more pieces of information we should gather,” and “Here are some suggested next steps—what do you think?”

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The third set of behaviors, responding, involves assuring others that listening has occurred and encouraging communication to continue. Leaders who are effective responders give appropriate replies through verbal acknowledgments, deep and clarifying questioning, or paraphrasing. Important nonverbal behaviors include facial expressions, eye contact, and body language. Other effective responses might include head nods, full engagement in the conversation, and the use of acknowledging phrases such as “That is a great point.”

Overall, it is important for leaders to recognize the multidimensionality of empathetic listening and engage in all forms of behaviors. Among its benefits are that empathetic listening builds trust and respect, enables people to reveal their emotions (including tensions), facilitates openness of information sharing, and creates an environment that encourages collaborative problem-solving.

Beyond exhibiting the behaviors associated with empathetic listening, follow-up is an important step to ensure that others understand that true listening has occurred. This assurance may come in the form of incorporating feedback and making changes, following through on promises made in meetings, summarizing the meeting through notes, or—if the leader is not incorporating the feedback—explaining why they made other decisions. In short, the leader can find many ways to demonstrate that they have heard the messages.

The ability and willingness to listen with empathy is often what sets a leader apart. Hearing words is not adequate; the leader truly needs to work at understanding the position and perspective of the others involved in the conversation. In an interview, Paul Bennett, chief creative officer at IDEO, advises leaders to listen more and ask the right questions. Bennett shared that, “For most of my twenties, I assumed

that the world was more interested in me than I was in it, so I spent most of my time talking, usually in a quite uninformed way, about whatever I thought, rushing to be clever, thinking about what I was going to say to someone rather than listening to what they were saying to me.”³

Slowing down, engaging with others rather than endlessly debating, taking the time to hear and learn from others, and asking brilliant questions are ultimately the keys to success.

CHRISTINE M. RIORDAN is the provost and professor of management at the University of Kentucky. Her research focuses on labor force diversity issues, leadership effectiveness, and career success.

Notes

1. Christopher C. Gearhart and Graham D. Bodie, “Active-Empathic Listening as a General Social Skill: Evidence from Bivariate and Canonical Correlations,” *Communication Reports* 24, no. 2 (2011): 86–98.

Three Ways Leaders Can Listen with More Empathy

2. Tanya Drollinger, Lucette B. Comer, and Patricia T. Warrington, “Development and Validation of the Active Empathic Listening Scale,” *Psychology & Marketing* 23, no. 2 (2005): 160–180.
3. Grace Nasri, “8 Successful Entrepreneurs Give Their Younger Selves Lessons They Wish They Had Known Then,” *Fast Company*, May 9, 2013, <https://www.fastcompany.com/3009482/8-successful-entrepreneurs-give-their-younger-selves-lessons-they-wish-theyd-known-th>.

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January 16, 2014 (product #H00MQE).

5

If You Aspire to Be a Great Leader, Be Present

By Rasmus Hougaard and Jacqueline Carter

Some years ago, we worked with a director of a multinational pharma company who'd been receiving poor grades for engagement and leadership effectiveness. Although he tried to change, nothing seemed to work. As his frustration grew, he started tracking the time he spent with each of his direct reports—and every time he received bad feedback, he pulled out his data and exclaimed, “But look how much time I spend with everyone!”

Things improved when he began a daily 10-minute mindfulness practice. After a couple of months,

people found him more engaging, nicer to work with, and more inspiring. He was surprised and elated by the results. The real surprise? When he pulled out his time-tracking spreadsheet, he saw that he was spending, on average, 21% *less* time with his people.

The difference? He was actually *there*.

He came to understand that, even though he was in the same room with someone, he wasn't always fully present. He let himself become pre-occupied with other activities or let his mind drift to other things. And, most of all, he'd listen to his inner voice when someone was talking. Because of his lack of presence, people felt unheard and frustrated.

Our inner voices are the commentaries we lend to our experiences. They often say things like, "I wish he would stop talking." Or, "I know what she's going to say next." Or, "I've heard this all before." Or, "I wonder if Joe has responded to my text."

To truly engage other human beings and create meaningful connections, we need to silence our inner voices and be fully present—and being more mindful can help.

As part of the research for our book, *The Mind of the Leader*, we surveyed more than 1,000 leaders who indicated that a more mindful presence is the optimal strategy to engage their people, create better connections, and improve performance.

Other research bears this out. In a survey of 2,000 employees, Bain & Company found that among 33 leadership traits—including creating compelling objectives, expressing ideas clearly, and being receptive to input—the ability to be mindfully present (also called *centeredness*) is the most essential of all.¹

Research also suggests that there's a direct correlation between leaders' mindfulness and the well-being and performance of their people.² In other words, the more a leader is present with their people, the better they will perform.

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Based on our work, here are some tips and strategies that may help in your quest to be more present in your daily life.

Be here now

Like all CEOs, Dominic Barton, who was global managing director of McKinsey & Company, knows about having a daily schedule of back-to-back meetings. All of these meetings are important, all include complex information, and most require far-reaching decisions. Under these conditions, being present moment to moment, meeting after meeting, is a challenge. But in Barton's experience, presence is not a choice. It's a necessity.

“When I'm with people during the day, I'm doing my best to be focused, I'm present with them,” he told us. “Part of this is because I get energy from being with people. But the other part is because if you're

not focused, if you're not present, it's discouraging to the other people. They lose motivation. If you're not present, I think you may as well not have the meeting. It can sometimes be difficult to do, but it's always important."

The person in front of you does not know what you were dealing with a moment ago, nor should they. It's your responsibility to show up and be fully present to effectively use the limited time you have with each person you meet.

Barton believes being mindfully present requires discipline and skill. It takes discipline to stay on task and not let yourself be affected by nagging challenges or distracted by mental chatter. And it requires skill to have the mental ability to stay laser focused and present. When he's present throughout his day, he finds it deeply gratifying. Being present becomes the cornerstone to getting the most out of every moment with each person.

Plan for presence

In his decade as CEO of Campbell Soup Company, Doug Conant developed rituals for physically and psychologically connecting with people at all levels in the company, which he called touchpoints.

Every morning, Conant allocated a good chunk of his time to walking around the plant, greeting people, and getting to know them. He would memorize their names and the names of their family members. He would take a genuine interest in their lives. He also handwrote letters of gratitude to recognize extraordinary efforts. And when people in the company were having tough times, he wrote them personal messages of encouragement. During his tenure, he sent more than 30,000 such letters.

To Conant, these behaviors were not just strategies to enhance productivity; they were heartfelt efforts to support his people.

Do less, be more

Gabrielle Thompson, senior vice president at Cisco, has found that when an employee comes to her with a challenge, sometimes it needs a simple solution. But often, the problem just needs to be heard. “Many situations simply need an ear, not action. Oftentimes, problems don’t need solutions—they need presence and time,” she says. As leaders, having the ability to be fully present and listen with an open mind is often the most powerful way to solve issues.

As a leader, your role can be simply to create the safe space for people to air their frustrations and process their problems. Through mindful presence, you become the container in which they have space to process the issue, without you stepping in to solve, fix, manipulate, or control the situation. Presence in itself can help resolve the issue. This kind of presence

not only solves the problem but also creates greater connection and engagement.

Embodied presence

Loren Shuster, chief people officer at the LEGO Group, explained that when he has very important meetings or presentations, he takes five minutes to ground himself in his body. He visualizes coming fully alive in each cell of his body. As he explained to us, “When you’re not grounded, when you’re not connected to your body and surrounding environment, you don’t have a strong sense of direction or purpose. You’re just floating. The smallest thing can distract you. This grounding technique helps me clear my mind, recharge my energy, strengthen my instincts, and calm my emotions.”

After this five-minute practice, he walks differently, he talks differently. With more gravitas. With more weight. With more vigor. And as a result, he’s

able to be more fully present mentally *and* physically with those around him. It grounds him in the room like a rock.

When we have embodied presence, our posture shifts. Rather than slouching, crossing our arms, and literally closing in on ourselves, we assume a more balanced, uplifted, open, and inclusive posture. This includes sitting up straight, with our arms open.

This shift in posture can influence how we think, behave, and communicate. In the same way that we can catalyze qualities like confidence through assuming a bold posture, we can induce qualities like awareness, focus, inclusion, and compassion through an uplifted, dignified posture.

The act of sitting up and opening up has a positive effect on the chemistry of our brains. It cultivates our capacity for higher-functioning thought processes. It gives us access to wisdom that comes from heightened awareness, compassion that comes from increased openness, and confidence that comes from the strength of vertical alignment.

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Notes

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December 13, 2017 (product #H042IC).

6

Become a Better Listener

An interview with Mark Goulston
by Sarah Green Carmichael

Mark Goulston is a psychiatrist and the author of many books, including *Just Listen: Discover the Secret to Getting Through to Absolutely Anyone*. In this interview, he discusses how you can improve your listening skills by helping your counterpart “feel felt” and encouraging them to open up to you at deeper and deeper levels.

Sarah Green Carmichael: *When you talk about listening and helping people become better listeners, are you working from one definition? Or do you have many definitions?*

Mark Goulston: There are four levels of talking: talking over, at, to, or with. They parallel the four kinds of listening, and there's a one-to-one correlation.

What goes along with talking over someone is what I call *removed listening*. Removed listening is when you're really not there. Now, if you're someone who can multitask, you can be kind of foolish, and while someone's trying to get your attention—perhaps a spouse or something like that—you can put down your iPad and you'll parrot back exactly what they said, because you're a great multitasker. And if you then smile, taking delight in how you were able to spout that back to them, you're going to spend the night in the den. So removed listening is insulting, and it goes along with when someone's talking over you.

Now, when someone's talking *at* you, that is the second level, which is *reactive listening*. That's when no matter what the other person says, you

get defensive. You take an issue with it. You're taking it personally. Doing that is actually fairly upsetting to the conversation.

When someone's talking *to* you, that goes along with *responsible listening*. You're being responsible to the conversation.

But the gold standard—and for me it's the gold standard because I think we need to connect better in the world—is what I call *receptive listening*, which goes along with talking *with* someone. The difference between responsible listening and receptive listening is that if you can imagine a young child is freezing and they knock on the door and come in, responsible listening is to say, "Oh, you were out in the rain. You must have been out there for a long time. You're drenched." That's responsible listening, while that little child is shivering.

In receptive listening, you don't even need the words. You can say, "My god. You look chilled to the bone. Let's get you into some dry clothes. Let's

get you near the heater, and let's get you out of those things.”

So can you feel the difference between responsible and receptive listening? One of the things that I talk about in *Just Listen* is the difference between feeling figured out, feeling understood, and feeling felt. And again—you're already catching my bias—I go to the feeling felt issue.

There's an anecdote that I often speak about from *Just Listen*, where I was meeting with a CEO. I was trying to get an appointment. It wasn't easy. He was a big footballer type of guy, must've been 270 pounds, with trophies behind him. As I'm seated with him, I can see that the last thing he wants to do is have a conversation with me.

Now, I can be a little bit bold. So I'm seated there, and I'm not keeping his attention. So imagine this (and this is what you can do when you don't work for a company, because your company would fire you): I said to him, “How much time do

you have for me?” And he looked at me. He said, “What?” I said, “Yeah. Look on your schedule. How much time do you have for me?” I knew he was going to throw me out then.

He said, “20 minutes.” I knew I had about 30 seconds to turn this around.

But I got his attention. I said, “Look, we’re into minute three, and what I wanted to talk to you about is worth your undivided attention, I believe. You can’t give me your undivided attention because you’ve got a lot of things on your mind and there are several things that I think you need to take care of.

“So here’s the deal. Let’s stop now. You take the next 16 minutes, take care of whatever’s on your mind, and we’ll reschedule this. Or you can just tell your assistant that I was just too rude and bold, and you never have to see me again. But take the next 16 minutes, which maybe you don’t have the rest of the day, and take care of whatever’s on

your mind. We'll redo this another time. It's less important."

At that point, he looked at me and he teared up. And I said to myself, Mark, you promised yourself you wouldn't make these people cry in the business world. I mean, you're a psychiatrist. Can't you just leave that behind?

Yeah, that escalated very quickly.

It did. It did. And he looked at me and said, "You know, you've known me for three minutes. There are people 20 yards from where we are that don't know what you know, because I'm very private. My wife's having a biopsy and it doesn't look good.

"My wife's stronger than me. And she told me, 'You go to work.' So I'm here at work, but I'm really not here."

Then I immediately switched from brazen to compassion. I said, "Wow. I'm sorry to hear that.

Go be with her. You're not here. Go be with her or make a call. Go do that."

And it was interesting. He was like a big Newfoundland dog coming in from the rain. He shook his shoulders and went, "pfff." He centered himself and said, "You know, I'm not as strong as my wife, but I'm pretty strong. I served a couple tours in Vietnam. You've got my undivided attention, and you've got your full 20 minutes."

What's the point of this story? He felt *felt*. There he was, feeling alone in this and didn't want to burden his wife. And he was this big CEO. It shouldn't surprise you that not only did I get his undivided attention, we've been friends ever since.

Well, and that raises a really interesting point, which is that we can all be doing everything we can to listen at all these different levels that you've mentioned, but it doesn't really count unless the other person feels like we've heard them. So walk me through how we can

do a better job at making other people feel heard or feel felt.

In my training of people to be better listeners—and I work with major consulting companies about how to turn a conversation into getting hired—when I’ve finished the presentation, what I’ve said is, your main goal when you first meet a prospect, a potential client, is to get a second meeting that they initiate. It’s not to sell them anything in the first meeting.

As you’re asking them questions, there will be a point at which they say, “What do you think?” What I suggest—and this is not for all cases, you have to pick and choose—but I suggest that you never answer the first question they ask you after you’ve had some conversation. Instead, what you focus on are four things: hyperbole, inflection, adverbs, and adjectives.

Hyperbole is when people use words like “outlandish,” “horrendous,” or “wonderful.” Inflection

is when they raise their voice. Notice adverbs and adjectives, because an adverb is a way of embellishing a verb: “We need to do this quickly.” And an adjective is a way of embellishing a noun: “This is an amazing opportunity.” You need to notice. Be a first-class *noticer*.

When you notice hyperbole, inflection, adverbs, and adjectives, you’re being given an invitation to a deeper conversation. You have the chance to take the conversation to a level that your competitors don’t.

So when they’ve said something and they ask you, “What do you think?” you say, “I can tell you what I think, but say more about having to do this thing quickly,” or “Say more about the amazing opportunity.” What you’ll notice, if you’re face-to-face with them, is that they will start to use hand gestures, and their hands will go up from their hips to midabdomen.

Then, there’s something else I talk about in *Just Listen* called *conversation deepeners*. “Say more

about such and such” is one of them. But then after they finish whatever they’re saying, another conversation deepener is to say, “Really?” Then what you’ll see is they’re going to raise their hands even more. “Oh, yeah. This is really amazing. If we could do this, this would change everything.”

In your mind’s eye what you’re trying to do is to get them to open up at deeper and deeper levels, because then they’ll be invested in the conversation more than just at a transactional level. You’re helping them get everything off their chest, from the positive to the negative. And even then, if they ask “So what do you think”—because now they’re really intrigued—I say, “I can tell you what I think, but I’d like to take our conversation to the ICU.”

Now, I can get away with saying that because I’m a medical doctor, but they’re going to say, “What?” Tell them, “ICU stands for important, critical, and urgent. Important is a year, two years from now. Critical is three to six months. And urgent is this

week. I can guess at which of the things we talked about are important, critical, and urgent. But rather than my guessing, why don't you tell me?"

What you're trying to do is get them to just dump everything into the conversation at deeper levels. They may be a little bit off balance, because you've just invited them to dump it all out, but now you're giving them the opportunity to focus it and prioritize it. And what you really want to focus them on is what's urgent.

Can you get a sense of just how this is uncovering all kinds of things in the conversation? If I'm dealing with training a consultant, at that point they're going to say, "Well, what do you think? I've told you what's important, critical, and urgent."

Even then what I say is, "You know, I can give you an answer right now. But it would be a B, B+ answer. You've just shared with me things that are important, critical, and urgent, and it would be my best answer, based on what I know now. I'd like

to take a day or two days to check on something so I could give you an even better answer. What it comes down to is, how urgent is this that you've talked to me about, and how interested would you be in my getting my best answer for it. What do you think?"

What you want them to do is say, "It's urgent, and I'd like that best answer soon." And then you let them initiate it, as opposed to the unfortunate thing that many of us do, where, out of our own nervousness, we need to prove how smart we are. Sometimes in a conversation, we're there impressing them with all this brightness, and then at the end they pause, and they start to disengage. On the heels of us impressing them with all our brightness, we're scurrying, saying, "So what do we do next? Do you have any other questions?" By then, the cow has left the barn.

So can you picture this? It's almost like a surgical approach to a conversation.

It's interesting because I feel like we started out talking about listening. And I had this assumption that it was all about reining in your own feelings and any distractions so you could be fully present. But actually it seems like a lot of what we've ended up talking about is getting other people to talk, like getting other people to share the information with you that maybe is in their head but that they just weren't disclosing before.

Absolutely true. The key is helping them talk about what's most important, critical, and urgent to them. I think we're in a world in which people want to buy, but nobody wants to be sold. People don't want to be persuaded. And people don't even like to do the persuading.

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7

**To Change
Someone's Mind,
Stop Talking
and Listen**

By Nilofer Merchant

Samar Minallah Khan, the feminist Pakistani anthropologist and filmmaker, was enraged. Local tribal leaders were trading little girls as compensation for their male family members' crimes.

These leaders, responsible for settling legal disputes in their villages, act as local judges. A long-standing practice was to address major crimes by "compensating" a harmed family with a daughter of the family doing the harm. The guilty father or uncle was then considered "free" and the village was told this issue was "resolved." Samar thought this tradition, called *swara*, was horrendous: It forever changed a young girl's life, through no fault of her

own. But although Samar was angry, she realized she'd never get to the outcome she wanted if she led with that anger.

So she tried something else. First, she listened more than she talked. She listened to the religious (male) leaders explain the use of swara and its benefits, and she asked how that tradition would have been interpreted by the Prophet Mohammad. She listened to the fathers and uncles who allowed their crimes to be expiated this way. And by listening, Samar learned so much that it enabled her to bridge a seemingly unbridgeable chasm of difference.

Samar had first assumed that the fathers whose crimes were being forgiven this way were happy to let their daughters suffer for their crimes, but when she listened to them, she heard that they were not. They wanted another way. She heard from local leaders that they placed an extremely high value on tradition. She heard from religious Muslim legal scholars that swara was a form of “vicarious liability,” which is not

allowed in Islam. And finally, she heard that in earlier times, disputes were also resolved by sending a girl to an enemy's family, but she didn't stay there permanently; instead, she would be given gifts and then sent back to her parents' home. All of this, she taped.

She convened local communities to watch these videos and talk with one another about the tradition and its implications. One by one, local tribal leaders changed what they considered true justice. They decided that swara could be replaced by monetary compensation. Samar created change not by selling *her* idea, but creating a way for everyone to arrive at a new idea, together.

What Samar did was to ask people to share their perspective, without trying to convince them of hers. It sounds like something for a movie script, not necessarily practical advice for business leaders. But maybe it should be.

I found myself thinking, somewhat wistfully, of Samar the other day during a terrible, but not unusual,

meeting. A leader had asked 30 of his best and brightest to gather so that he could hear their input on what he perceived as a marketing gap. But the very design of the meeting meant he would be hearing very little: The agenda called for three hours of presentations and about 15 minutes total of Q&A (if none of the presentations ran over, that is).

I left feeling that he didn't really want to listen, that what he wanted was to convince the 30 people present of his perspective so that we could become his mouthpiece and fix his "marketing gap" for him. And because of the format of the meeting, I left unconvinced that I wanted to do that.

Even though it doesn't work very well, this approach is, of course, common—in any setting where one party is trying to convince another party to change, whether that's in an organization, during a political debate, or at a contentious family dinner. *Identify what key ideas could convince them. Find persuasive facts. Enthusiastically share. Beat their facts back with your facts.*

That isn't the way to create lasting change. The best way to sway others is not to tell them *your* answer, but to arrive at an answer together. Listening is the key pathway to go from *your* idea to *our* idea. To reshape the idea as needed. And ultimately to create the kind of shared ownership that is needed for any idea to become a new reality.

The next time you head into a meeting where a major decision will be made or an important issue discussed, try the following exercise I've used to prepare for the workshops I run on innovation and leadership:

Find an index card or sheet of paper (even a paper napkin will do). On one side, write key ideas that could be useful for you to share. I say "could" because you will reevaluate any of it once you learn more. On the other side, brainstorm questions you want to ask and things you hope to learn.

For example, at last year's Drucker Forum conference in Vienna, I was part of an executive round table with John Hagel, Julia Kirby, and Hal Gregersen to

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talk about “the power to innovate.” Before our session kicked off, I jotted down a handful of questions on the back of an index card:

- Why are these executives attending our session? What is their motivation?
- What is the core “power to innovate” problem at their firms? What does that *specifically* look like?
- Do they think they have enough ideas, too many ideas, or ideas of poor quality?
- Is innovation, to them, a problem of idea selection, market connection or execution, or something else?
- Can “innovation” be discussed in general terms—without a specific context—and have it be useful?
- Who or what set of ideas are they listening to now about innovation? What is missing, or why is that idea set not working?

I didn't end up asking all of these questions, but writing them down meant that I was *primed* to be curious and to listen for motivations, needs, and emotions. Developing a list of questions can help you be ready to really listen to what is actually going on.

Most of us don't do that. Most of us listen to the degree that we can understand points of agreement or disagreement, or to prepare what to say in response, rather than to learn. But when we do that, we're not so much hearing other people as we are waiting for our turn to speak.

To listen is to pay attention to. Listening means stepping outside one's own interests, to actually want to know more, and to care what others' interests are. To not just hear words but to pay attention to the underlying needs and frames of reference.

Which gets to why we aren't already great listeners. We're afraid that if we're listening, we're not advocating for our own ideas and why those ideas matter. We're afraid we're giving up on our convictions.

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But we can all have more faith in ourselves. And each other.

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8

Defusing an Emotionally Charged Conversation with a Colleague

By Ron Friedman

Work with anyone long enough and you're bound to encounter a difference of opinion. Most of the time, these disagreements are resolved amicably. But if you're like most people, every now and then you find yourself immersed in a conversation so emotionally charged it seems to have nothing to do with the issues you're supposedly discussing.

What do you do when a conversation is spiraling out of control? When you've tried all the patient listening you can muster, and the other person still won't budge? How do you get the conversation back on track?

Anthony Suchman has invested a good portion of his career in searching for an answer. A charming physician with a profound intellect, Suchman has been studying the dynamics of human relationships for more than three decades and has published his results in some of the world's leading medical journals.¹

According to Suchman, every workplace conversation operates on two levels: a task channel and a relationship channel. Occasionally the two get fused, which is when disagreements intensify and collaborations break down.

Here's what he means: Suppose you and I are working together on a project. Along the way, we have a difference of opinion about our next steps. Perhaps I think we should use PowerPoint to deliver an important presentation, and you see PowerPoint as a poor communication tool. When I express a point of view that's different from yours, you may take our disagreement at face value by saying, "Hmm, I guess Ron sees it differently." But if we're new to

working together, or if we've had a few run-ins in the past, you're likely to read beyond my suggestion and use it to draw inferences about our relationship. For instance, you may misinterpret my suggestion as a lack of trust, a sign of disrespect, or even proof of competition.

It's at this point, Suchman argues, that our task-focused disagreement becomes contaminated with concerns about our relationship. And when that happens, things escalate. Fast.

Neurologically, what Suchman is describing is the activation of a fear response. When we perceive danger, our hypothalamus sends a signal that releases adrenaline and cortisol into the bloodstream. That triggers a fight-or-flight response that sends our bodies into overdrive, short-circuiting our ability to concentrate or think creatively. We experience tunnel vision.

In the evolutionary past, having an automatic reaction to fear was quite useful. It helped protect us

from oncoming predators and kept us alive long enough to reproduce. But in today's workplace, an involuntary fear response can interfere with our ability to work collaboratively with others. It's one reason why the greater the emotional charge, the harder it is to get either side to listen.

To defuse an emotionally volatile situation like this, Suchman believes the first step is to disentangle the task and relational channels. "When people disagree, it's often because one party misinterprets the feedback they've received as a personal attack," he says. "So it becomes: 'If you like my idea, you like me,' and 'If you don't like my idea, you don't like me.' That puts a huge encumbrance on the task channel and makes it really hard to speak openly."

Our mental capacity is limited, Suchman points out, which means we can attend to either the task channel or the relationship channel. It's when we get the two channels crossed that our ability to collaborate constructively suffers. One approach to reducing

tensions during disagreements involves deliberately attending to the relational channel and reaffirming your commitment to the relationship. This way there's no confusion about what the argument is really about. By momentarily focusing on the relationship, you disentangle the personal from the business.

Suchman recommends using a specific series of relationship-building statements to make the conversation more productive, which are represented in the acronym PEARLS:

Partnership

- “I really want to work on this with you.”
- “I bet we can figure this out together.”

Empathy

- “I can feel your enthusiasm as you talk.”
- “I can hear your concern.”

Acknowledgment

- “You clearly put a lot of work into this.”
- “You invested in this, and it shows.”

Respect

- “I’ve always appreciated your creativity.”
- “There’s no doubt you know a lot about this.”

Legitimation

- “This would be hard for anyone.”
- “Who wouldn’t be worried about something like this?”

Support

- “I’d like to help you with this.”
- “I want to see you succeed.”

Using relationship-building statements can feel unnatural at first, especially when you're not accustomed to complimenting others. I know they did for me when I first started using them in workplace conversations. The key, I've discovered, is to employ them sparingly at first and to only say the ones that genuinely reflect how you feel.

Almost immediately, you'll notice that inserting a well-timed PEARLS statement can dramatically alter the tenor of a conversation. Because no matter how far up we climb on an organizational ladder, we are still stuck using an emotionally driven brain. When fear enters the equation, it's impossible to get people to do their best work, which is why restoring confidence in the relationship can be a powerful tool.

The value of relationship-building statements extends far beyond the workplace. They're as effective with spouses, children, and friends as they are with colleagues. The reason is simple: Anytime you attend to people's psychological need for connection,

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you have the potential to improve the quality of an exchange. The more heated the argument, the more vital the statements become.

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Note

1. Anthony L. Suchman, "A New Theoretical Foundation for Relationship-Centered Care," *Journal of General Internal Medicine* 21, no. 1 (2006): S40–S44.

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9

The Power of Listening in Helping People Change

By Guy Itzchakov and Avraham N. (Avi) Kluger

Giving performance feedback is one of the most common ways managers help their subordinates learn and improve. Yet research has revealed that feedback can actually hurt performance: More than 20 years ago, one of us (Avraham) analyzed 607 experiments on feedback effectiveness and found that feedback caused performance to decline in 38% of cases.¹ This happened with both positive and negative feedback, mostly when the feedback threatened how people saw themselves.

One reason that giving feedback (even when it's positive) often backfires is that it signals that the

boss is in charge and the boss is judgmental. This can make employees stressed and defensive, which makes it harder for them to see another person's perspective. For example, employees can handle negative feedback by downplaying the importance of the person providing the feedback or the feedback itself. People may even reshape their social networks to avoid the feedback source in order to restore their self-esteem.² In other words, they defend themselves by bolstering their attitudes against the person giving feedback.

We wanted to explore whether a more subtle intervention, namely asking questions and listening, could prevent these consequences. Whereas feedback is about telling employees that they need to change, listening to employees and asking them questions might make them *want* to change. In a recent paper, we consistently demonstrated that experiencing high-quality (attentive, empathic, and nonjudgmental) listening can positively shape speakers' emotions and attitudes.³

WHAT MAKES LISTENING POWERFUL?

Listening as an avenue for self-change was advocated by the psychologist Carl Rogers in a classic 1952 HBR article, “Barriers and Gateways to Communication.” Rogers theorized that when speakers feel that listeners are being empathic, attentive, and nonjudgmental, they relax and share their inner feelings and thoughts without worrying about what listeners will think of them. This safe state enables speakers to delve deeper into their consciousness and discover new insights about themselves—even those that may challenge previously held beliefs and perceptions.

For example, consider an employee who believes that she always respects her colleagues’ and customers’ feelings. If someone tells her this isn’t true, it will likely lead her to protect her view of herself by doubling down on her belief and discounting the other

(Continued)

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person's judgment. By contrast, if someone asks her to describe her interactions with other people at work and listens attentively while encouraging her to occasionally elaborate, she is likely to feel more secure with the listener and open up in ways she might not otherwise. She might remember incidents where she was disrespectful to customers or got angry at her colleagues and be more open to discussing them and ways to change.

For example, in one laboratory experiment, we assigned 112 undergraduate students to serve as either a speaker or a listener and paired them up, sitting face-to-face. We asked speakers to talk for 10 minutes about their attitudes toward a proposal for universal basic income or a possible requirement that all university students must also volunteer. We instructed

the listeners to “listen as you listen when you are at your best.” But we randomly distracted half of the listeners by sending them text messages (such as “What event irritated you the most recently?”) and instructed them to answer briefly (so the speakers saw that they were distracted). Afterward, we asked the speakers questions about whether they were worried about what their partner thought of them, whether they acquired any insight while talking, and whether they were confident in their beliefs.

We found that speakers paired with good listeners (versus those paired with distracted listeners) felt less anxious and more self-aware and reported higher clarity about their attitudes on the topics. Speakers paired with undistracted listeners also reported wanting to *share* their attitude with other people more compared with speakers paired with distracted listeners.

Another benefit of high-quality listening is that it helps speakers see both sides of an argument (what

we call “attitude complexity”). In another paper we found that speakers who conversed with a good listener reported attitudes that were more complex and less extreme—in other words, not one-sided.⁴

In a lab experiment we instructed 114 undergraduates at a business school to talk for 12 minutes about their fitness to become a manager in the future. We randomly assigned these speakers to one of three listening groups (good, moderate, and poor). Speakers in the good listening condition talked to a trained listener, who was either a certified management coach or a trained social work student. We asked these trained listeners to use all their listening skills, such as asking questions and reflecting. Speakers in the moderate listening condition talked to another undergraduate at the business school who was instructed to listen as he or she usually does. Speakers in the poor listening condition talked with a student from the theatre department who was instructed to

act distracted (such as by looking aside and playing with their smartphone).

After the conversation, we asked the speakers to indicate separately the extent to which they thought they were suitable for becoming managers. Based on these answers, we calculated their attitude complexity (whether they saw both strengths and weaknesses that would affect their ability to be a manager) and extremity (whether they saw only one side). We found that speakers who talked to a good listener saw both strengths and weaknesses more than those in the other conditions. Speakers who talked to a distracted listener mostly described their strengths and barely acknowledged their weaknesses. Interestingly, the speakers in the poor listening condition were those that, on average, reported feeling the most suitable for becoming a manager.

We tested the relevance of these lab findings in three field studies conducted among city hall

employees, high-tech workers, and teachers (180 workers, in total).⁵ In these studies, we asked employees to talk about their colleagues, their supervisor, or about a meaningful experience at work, before and after participating in a listening intervention known as a listening circle. In the listening circle, employees are invited to talk openly and honestly about an issue, like a meaningful experience they had at work. They're trained to listen without interrupting, and only one person talks at a time.

We replicated all of our lab findings. Namely, employees who participated in the listening circles reported lower social anxiety, higher attitude complexity, and lower attitude extremity regarding various work-related topics (such as attitude toward a manager) by comparison with employees who participated in one of the control conditions that did not involve trained listeners.

In concert, our findings suggest that listening seems to make an employee more relaxed, more self-

aware of his or her strengths and weaknesses, and more willing to reflect in a nondefensive manner. This can make employees more likely to cooperate (versus compete) with other colleagues—as they become more interested in sharing their attitudes but not necessarily in trying to persuade others to adopt them—and more open to considering other points of view.

Going back to giving feedback, of course we do not claim that listening must replace feedback. Rather, it seems that listening to employees talk about their own experiences first can make giving feedback more productive by helping them feel psychologically safe and less defensive.⁶

Listening has its enemies

Our findings support existing evidence that managers who listen well are perceived as people leaders,

generate more trust, instill higher job satisfaction, and increase their team's creativity.⁷ Yet if listening is so beneficial for employees and for organizations, why is it not more prevalent in the workplace? Why are most employees not listened to in the way they want? Research shows that a few barriers often stand in the way.

1. *Loss of power.* Research from our team has shown that some managers may feel that if they listen to their employees they are going to be looked upon as weak.⁸ But at the same time, it's been shown that being a good listener means gaining prestige. So it seems managers must make a trade-off between attaining status based on intimidation and getting status based on admiration.
2. *Listening consumes time and effort.* In many instances, managers listen to employees under time pressure or while they're distracted by

other thoughts or work. So listening is an investment decision: Managers must put in the time to listen in order to see the future benefits.

3. *Fear of change.* High-quality listening can be risky because it entails entering a speaker's perspective without trying to make judgments. This process could potentially change the listener's attitudes and perceptions. We observed several times that when we trained managers to truly listen, they gained crucial insights about their employees; they were stunned to learn how little they knew about the lives of people they'd worked with for many years.

For example, several managers reported that when they tried listening to employees whom they'd confronted about poor attendance, they learned that these employees were struggling with supporting a

family member (a wife dying of cancer, a sibling with a mental disability). This realization threatened managers' attitudes and views about themselves—an experience called cognitive dissonance that can be difficult.

Tips for becoming a better listener

Listening resembles a muscle. It requires training, persistence, effort, and, most important, the intention to become a good listener. It requires clearing your mind from internal and external noise—and if that's not possible, postponing the conversation for when you can truly listen without being distracted. Here are some best practices.

Give 100% of your attention, or do not listen. Put aside your smartphone, tablet, or laptop, and look at the speaker, even if they do not look back at you. In an

ordinary conversation, a speaker looks at you occasionally to see that you're still listening. Constant eye contact lets the speaker feel that you are listening.

Do not interrupt. Resist the urge to interrupt before the speaker indicates that they are done for the moment. In our workshop, we give managers the following instruction: "Go to someone at your work who makes listening very hard on you. Let them know that you are learning and practicing listening and that today, you will only listen for ___ minutes (where the blank could be 3, 5, or even 10 minutes), and delay responding until the predetermined listening time is up or even until the following day."

Managers are often amazed at their discoveries. One shared, "In six minutes, we completed a transaction that otherwise would have taken more than an hour." Another told us, "The other person shared things with me that I had prevented her from saying for 18 years."

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Do not judge or evaluate. Listen without jumping to conclusions and interpreting what you hear. You may notice your judgmental thoughts, but push them aside. If you notice that you've lost track of the conversation due to your judgments, apologize and explain to the speaker that your mind was distracted, and ask them to repeat. Don't pretend to listen.

Don't impose your solutions. The role of the listener is to help the speaker draw up a solution on their own. Therefore, when listening to a fellow colleague or subordinate, refrain from suggesting solutions. If you believe you have a good solution and feel an urge to share it, frame it as a question, such as "I wonder what will happen if you choose to do X?"

Ask more (good) questions. Listeners shape conversations by asking questions that benefit the speaker.⁹ Good listening requires being thoughtful about what

the speaker needs help with most and crafting a question that would lead the speaker to search for an answer. Ask questions to help someone delve deeper into their thoughts and experiences.

Before you ask a question, ask yourself, “Is this question intended to benefit the speaker or satisfy my curiosity?” Of course, there is room for both, but a good listener prioritizes the needs of the other. One of the best questions you can ask is “Is there anything else?” This often exposes novel information and unexpected opportunities.

Reflect. When you finish a conversation, reflect on your listening, and think about missed opportunities—moments in which you ignored potential leads or remained silent when you could have asked questions. When you feel that you were an excellent listener, consider what you gained and how you can apply this type of listening in more challenging circumstances.

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10

**When You're
the Person Your
Colleagues
Always Vent To**

By Sandra L. Robinson and Kira Schabram

Divani (not her real name) is a senior analyst at a large telecommunications firm. She proudly describes herself as her department's "resident cheer-upper." As she says, "I have always been the person that people turn to for support . . . I listen really well, and I like to listen, I like to help." But the year before I spoke with her, Divani's organization was going through a major change initiative: "I already had so much on my plate, and so many colleagues were leaning on me, turning to me to process, commiserate, ask for advice. It was hard to get through my own deadlines and also be there for my coworkers. I was drowning in stress and nearing

burnout.” She told us about feeling down on Sunday nights, feeling increasingly angry and cynical, and having trouble sleeping because she couldn’t “shut my mind off.” She took up smoking after having given it up for four years and let her exercise routine falter.

Divani is what the late organizational behavior professor Peter Frost and one of us (Sandra) termed a “toxic handler,” someone who voluntarily shoulders the sadness, frustration, bitterness, and anger that are endemic to organizational life just as are joy and success. Toxic handlers can be found at all levels of an organization, but particularly in roles that span disparate groups. And they are by no means confined to management roles. Their work is difficult and critical even if it often goes uncelebrated; it keeps organizations positive and productive even as the individuals within it necessarily clash and tussle. By carrying others’ confidences, suggesting solutions to interpersonal issues, working behind the scenes to prevent

pain, and reframing difficult messages in constructive ways, toxic handlers absorb the negativity in day-to-day professional life and allow employees to focus on constructive work.

This isn't easy, and as Sandra's and Frost's research of over 70 toxic handlers (or those who managed them) revealed, individuals in these roles frequently experience untenably high levels of stress and strain that affect their physical health and career paths and often mean they have a diminished capacity to help others in the long run—a side effect that is most troubling for handlers.

But if handlers can recognize that they're playing a role that is both highly valuable *and* burdensome, they can see their own emotional competence in a new light and recognize the signs of serious strain while there's still something they can do about it.

How do you know if *you're* a toxic handler? Here are some questions to ask yourself:

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- Are you working in an organization that is characterized by lots of change, dysfunction, or politics?
- Are you working in a role that spans different groups or different levels?
- Do you spend a lot of time listening to and offering advice to colleagues at work?
- Do people come to you to unload their worries, emotions, secrets, or workplace problems?
- Do you have a hard time saying no to colleagues, especially when they need you?
- Do you spend time behind the scenes, managing politics and influencing decisions so that others are protected?
- Do you tend to mediate communication between a toxic individual and others?

- Are you a person who feels compelled to stand up for the people at work who need your help?
- Do you think of yourself as a counselor, mediator, or peacemaker?

If you answered yes to four or more of these questions, then you may be a toxic handler. Before you panic at that label, recognize that there are both positives and negatives to fulfilling this role. On the positive side, being a toxic handler means you have valuable emotional strengths: You're probably a good listener, you're empathetic, and you're good at suggesting solutions instead of piling on problems. The people around you value the support you provide. It's important too to understand that this role is strategically critical to organizations: You likely defuse tough situations and reduce dysfunction.

Now for the bad news. Chances are that you're taking on more work than is covered in your formal job

description (and in fact, as an unsung hero, you may not be getting any kind of formal credit from the organization for these efforts and how much of yourself you bring to them). Listening, mediating, and working behind the scenes to protect others takes important time away from your other responsibilities. More important, being a toxic handler also takes tremendous emotional energy to listen, comfort, and counsel others. Because you are not a trained therapist, you may also be inadvertently taking on others' pain and slowly paying a price for it. Sandra's research shows that toxic handlers tend to take on others' emotions but have no way to offload them. As a person who is constantly helping others, you may be unlikely to seek support for yourself. And finally, this role may be part of your identity, something that brings you fulfillment—so it is difficult to step away from.

Consider Sheung-Li (not his real name). His manager was a star with a great track record, but he created a lot of turmoil. The manager wouldn't take the

time to get to know anyone on Sheung-Li's team personally and totally disregarded more-junior members. He was also obsessed with lofty performance goals that seemed to come out of nowhere. "My main role became protecting everyone on my team, reassuring them, keeping them focused on our objectives and away from the tensions this guy continually created," Sheung-Li described. "I spent an inordinate amount of time massaging the message, trying to persuade my boss to reconsider his decisions so as to avoid the obvious fallout they would bring, and playing mediator when our team was not delivering. I felt like I was treading water all the time. And I'm not even sure I was protecting my team from the pain he was causing. I was losing sleep over what was happening to my team, I lost weight, and I was starting to get sick with one bug after another. I don't know if that was the cause, but I know this was a really tough time in my life. It was hard to concentrate on anything else."

So if Sheung-Li's and Divani's stories sound familiar, how can you continue to help your colleagues (and your organization) while also protecting yourself? How can you keep playing your valuable role in a sustainable way?

Start by assessing whether the role is indeed taking a toll. Some toxic handlers are naturally able to take on more than others; you need to know what's right for you at any given time. Look for evidence of strain and burnout: physical symptoms like insomnia, jaw pain and TMJ, heart palpitations, and more sickness than usual. Do you have a shorter fuse than normal or an inability to concentrate? Sometimes these symptoms can sneak up on you, so it may help to check in with others to see if they've noticed a change. If you're not experiencing stress as a result, there's nothing you need to change other than being aware and keeping an eye out. Being a toxic handler only needs to be fixed if it's actually hurting you. If it is, here's how.

Reduce symptoms of stress. Turn to tried-and-true methods for stress relief: meditation, exercise, enough sleep, and healthful eating. Because toxic handlers have trouble doing things just for themselves, keep in mind that you're helping your colleagues by taking care of yourself. Set your colleagues as the intention for your meditation or yoga practice.

Pick your battles. It's hard to ask yourself where you'll have the most impact if you're emotionally drawn to every problem, but it's an exercise that will allow you to be more helpful where you can actually make a difference. Who is likely to be fine without your help? In which situations have you not even made a dent, despite your best efforts? Step away from those interactions.

Learn to say no. It's hard to say no to things you want to do, but it's important. Here's how to do it while still being supportive:

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- **Convey empathy:** Make it clear that you feel for your colleague in their pain—you're not denying that they are having a legitimate emotional response to a situation.
- **Tell them you're currently not in a position to be most helpful to them right now, and, to the extent you are comfortable, explain the reasons why.**
- **Consider alternative sources of support:** Refer them to another support person in the organization or someone having a similar experience (so they can provide mutual support to one another). Suggest an article, book, or other resource on the topic, be it something on managing conflict or handling office politics. Or, if you know from experience that the person is good at coming up with creative solutions on their own, you can simply offer them encouragement to do so.

Let go of the guilt. If you feel guilty that you're not stepping in to help someone, here are some things to consider.

- Recognize that conflicts are often better solved by the parties directly involved. If you're stepping in repeatedly, you're not helping people acquire the skills and tools they need to succeed.
- Question whether you are truly the only one that can help in a particular situation. Enlist trusted others in the organization to help you think this through—you may identify a way to share the load.
- Remember that there is only so much of you to go around: Saying yes to one more person means you are agreeing to do less for those people and projects you have already committed to.

Form a community. Find other toxic handlers to turn to for support. These could be others in similar roles

in your organization or other team members whom you see dealing with the fallout from the same toxic leader. You can also identify a pal to vent to or create a more formal group that comes together regularly to share their experiences. This is a particularly good option if your whole team or organization is going through turmoil and you know there are others experiencing the same challenges. Keep these outlets from turning into repetitive venting sessions by focusing the conversation on creative problem solving and advice.

Take breaks. These can be as small or as dramatic as you need. Divani started working with her door closed, which she had never done before. “I felt terrible about it, as if I were abandoning my coworkers who needed me. But if I lost my job I wasn’t going to be much good to anybody,” she explained. Consider giving yourself a mental health day off from work or planning a significant vacation. In more dramatic

situations, you could also consider a temporary re-assignment of your role. Because jobs that require you to mediate between multiple teams or groups tend to come under particular fire, if you are able to step away from that role for a time you're more likely to get the respite you need.

These breaks don't need to be forever, though. "Things have since calmed down at work," Divani has reported, "and I find I have gravitated back to being the person people lean on for emotional support. But at this point, it is totally doable."

Make a change. If nothing you are doing has resulted in a shift, your best option may be to leave. Sheung-Li explained: "After two years of this [toxic situation], and at the encouragement of my wife, I saw a therapist. It then became clear to me this work reality was not going to change, this toxic manager was not going anywhere, the stress was eating me alive, and I am the one who needed to change. I did a bunch of

things, but I think the key thing I did was make a lateral move in the company to escape this role and to protect my long-term well-being. It was the best decision I ever made.”

Consider therapy. It may sound dramatic, but Sheung-Li’s bid to talk to a therapist is a highly useful one. A trained psychologist can help you identify burn-out, manage your symptoms of stress, help you learn to say no, and work through any guilt. Not only can they help you protect yourself from the emotional vagaries of being a toxic handler, they can also assist you in your role. Clinical psychologists are themselves trained to listen to their clients empathetically without taking on their emotions. They can help you build the skills you need to help others without absorbing too much of the emotional burden yourself.

Finally, here are some “solutions” we suggest you avoid. While they seem like good answers on the surface, they often aren’t as helpful as you’d think.

Just venting. While it's good to unburden yourself of your emotions—catharsis *can* reduce aggression—too much venting can actually increase stress levels. You want to move forward rather than dwell on problems. And this is as true for those confiding in you as it is for you. When people come to you to vent, consider saying something like, “I hear you! How about we think about what we can change to make this better?”

Going to your boss or HR. Sadly, the role of toxic handler is often under-recognized and underappreciated in organizations, despite its tremendous value. This means that while your boss may want to help, it can be risky for them in many organizational cultures. Similarly, many firms are unlikely to intervene in a toxic situation on behalf of the handler.

Yet toxic handlers are critical to the emotional well-being of organizations and the people in them. If you're a toxic handler, learn to monitor yourself

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for signs of emotional or physical fatigue—and know how to step away when you need to—so that you can keep doing what you do best.

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11

Managing the Critical Voices Inside Your Head

By Peter Bregman

At 8:20 a.m., my 12-year-old daughter, Isabelle, was rushing to meet her ski group. She was 20 minutes late and stressed: She takes her skiing very seriously and was training for a race in a couple of days.

Near the competition center, she ran into one of her coaches, Joey. He looked at her, then his watch. “If this were a race day,” he told her, with a disapproving scowl, “I would tell you to turn around and go home.”

His words stung, and she burst into tears. A few moments later, she was greeted by another one of her coaches, Vicky, who saw how stressed she was.

“Honey, don’t worry,” she said. “This isn’t a race. It’s okay that you’re running a little late. You’ll just catch up with your group on top of the mountain.”

Two vastly different coaches, two vastly different responses. Who’s right? I bet you have an opinion.

But that’s not the point.

My advice to Isabelle? You will have Joeys in your life, and you will have Vickys. They will show up as teachers, bosses, colleagues, and friends. So I said to her, “It’s a good idea to get used to the different responses without getting thrown off balance. You can’t control how people respond to you, but you can control how you take them in and how you respond to them.”

But let’s go one step further. The truth is, we all have a Joey and a Vicky inside, and they can both be useful. Joey might seem unkind, but his high expectations and low tolerance for failure can be helpful in driving us to be our best. On the other hand, sometimes we need empathetic support. To some, Vicky

may appear soft. But her comfort and reassurance can be useful, especially during times of stress.

Here's the key: Be strategic and intentional about whom you listen to—and when—even if the voices are inside your head. In fact, *especially* if the voices are inside your head. Those can be the sneakiest. It's pretty easy to call Joey a jerk and ignore him; it's much harder to dismiss the voice inside your head because, well, it's you.

Try this tactic: When you hear the voices, give them names and personalities. Imagine a Joey on one side, a Vicky on the other.

1. Notice the voices in your head as voices. A lot of the time, most of us simply believe what we hear—either from other people or from ourselves. If your inner voice calls you lazy, it's hard not to think you're lazy. It helps if you imagine it's Joey calling you lazy instead.

2. Resist the urge to judge whether the voices in your head are right. It's impossible to know, and it doesn't matter anyway. Are you lazy? The truth is that you probably are, in some ways. And in other ways, you're not. But that's not the right question.
3. Instead, think about the outcome you want, and ask this question: Is what this voice is saying—and how it's saying it—useful right now? This is the same question you should be asking if you're confronted by an actual Joey or Vicky. Is this voice helpful to me in this particular moment? If you think it'll motivate you, listen to it. If it will demoralize you, don't.

This is an important skill: the ability to ignore critical voices when they're destructive, without discounting them entirely. They might be useful another time.

The goal is flexibility. Cultivate a varied group of critics and coaches, both internal and external. Be aware of whom is speaking and when you should listen.

Feeling comfortable with multiple voices is particularly important if you are a manager. You need to be able to be Joey or Vicky, depending on the situation. Sometimes people need to feel your high expectations and disapproval. Other times they need your gentleness and empathy. Don't default to one or the other. Pause to assess what's needed, and then make a choice.

"It's hard," Isabelle told me after we spoke about the different voices and messages they brought with them. "How do I stop from thinking Joey is just a jerk? Or that I'm lame for being late?"

"He might be a jerk, and you may be lame," I said, "but not because he said so. Here's the question: Will you be more likely to be on time tomorrow because of what he said?"

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“Yes,” she conceded. “But it felt terrible.”

“And, when you feel terrible, can you hear Vicky’s voice too?”

“Yes,” she said, beginning to smile.

“Then it’s a good thing you have two coaches,” I told her.

Because sometimes, both voices are the perfect combination.

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