

Chapter 2 The Secrets Of Listening Skills Revealed

“I’m listening.”

—Dr. Frasier Crane (played by *Kelsey Grammer*) on his call-in radio show, from the television sitcom *Frasier*

When we think of expert listeners, counselors and therapists come to mind. We imagine a patient lying on a couch next to a box of tissues. The therapist sits off to the side listening passively with clasped hands, jotting down the occasional note. In the movie *Analyze This*, gangster Paul Vitti, played by Robert DeNiro, mocks his therapist, Dr. Sobel, played by Billy Crystal. Vitti says, “This is you: ‘Oh, that’s interesting. What does that mean to you? Anger is a blocked wish.’”

In popular media, portrayals of psychologists can be somewhat simplistic. They ask their patients what they’re thinking or feeling. They repeat statements their clients have just made. Or they use mystifying psychological terms.

In reality, psychologists are highly skilled and trained professionals. They’re knowledgeable in many psychological processes and disorders and skilled in various therapeutic techniques and exercises¹². In

Thank You for Listening

addition, they are trained and experienced in different listening techniques.

How exactly do these techniques work, and when do they fail? The appropriate listening techniques give you the resources and flexibility to achieve your listening goals. The following are a few of the more well-known listening techniques that we'll discuss in this chapter:

- Removing distractions and paying attention
- Paraphrasing
- Asking open-ended questions

PAYING ATTENTION AND A MATTER OF INTEREST

Researchers list four broad types of barriers or noise that interfere with communication: physiological, physical, psychological, and semantic¹³. Physiological barriers refer to your physical being. If you're tired or hungry or sick or had a few drinks, or if you have a headache, it will interfere with your ability to communicate. If the physical surroundings are too hot, too cold, or too noisy, it will also negatively affect communication.

Psychological barriers refer to things such as trust and biases and so forth. If you're not honest or truthful or you believe the other side not to be so, it will interfere with communication. If you're angry or overcome with sadness, it will hinder communication. Semantic barriers refer to unclear words or sentences or jargon. Therefore, to facilitate communication, you

The Secrets of Listening Skills Revealed

should make sure both speaker and listener are comfortable and not preoccupied. You should also try to have an open mind about what you're hearing. If the speaker thinks you might be shocked or offended by what he wants to say, he may decide to hold back.

In addition to barriers, you must also pay attention to the speaker's appearance and actions. Is she hesitating? Is she pausing with a look of consternation on her face? Is she shifting around uneasily in her chair? Does her body language match the words she's saying, or is there a discrepancy that warrants further investigation? Is her voice tense or nervous?

Paying attention to a speaker is like looking for "tells" during a poker game. A poker tell is a poker player's unconscious reaction to the good or bad cards being dealt and to the ongoing game play. Tells can reveal information useful to other players. Wikipedia states that:

Some possible tells include leaning forward or back, placing chips with more or less force, fidgeting, doing chip tricks, or making any changes in one's breathing, tone of voice, facial expressions, direction of gaze or in one's actions with the cards, chips, cigarettes or drinks.¹⁴

Of course, listening is not a competitive game where participants bluff and quit in the middle of a round by folding. The speaker is not your opponent and the purpose of good observation is not to outwit the speaker. But the analogy is still useful. For example, in poker, it isn't just a matter of noting that one player bet a dollar and another raised the bet by two dollars. How each player places his bets can also be important.

Thank You for Listening

“I bet one dollar,” he said a bit too casually.

“I bet one dollar,” she said aggressively.

When you hear someone say, “I feel sad,” you also need to pay attention to the way it was said.

“I feel sad,” he said a bit too casually.

“I feel sad,” she said aggressively.

In addition, how is the speaker reacting wittingly or unwittingly to his story and to the ongoing conversation? What non-verbal signals is he sending? Did his breathing change when he talked about his wife? Is he looking at his feet when he talks about his father. Does he glance around the room or stare off into the distance?

Playing poker also requires putting on a “poker face”—an attempt to conceal from opponents all motives and emotion—that is, all information. But when you listen, you’re not trying to hide or suppress your own reactions. Instead, you want to be aware of anything you’re doing that might interfere with the other person’s willingness to speak freely. What signals are you sending, consciously and unconsciously?

Some are obvious. If you can’t stop checking your watch or email, then perhaps you should be honest with the speaker and let him know you’re preoccupied. If you find yourself yawning despite your best efforts to stay focused, then you may simply be too tired or uninterested.

Your reactions might also be a bit more subtle. Did you tense up because you heard something you didn’t like? Did you start tapping your feet impatiently as you listened to a story you’d already heard twice before? If so, ask the speaker to clarify the conversation’s significance. Take a coffee break, or even reschedule altogether. If you’re offended and wince with

disapproval, then you might wish to excuse yourself politely from the discussion.

Additionally, just as a poker player has to think about the game's logic, the listener has to think about the logic of the story to which she is listening. A poker player thinks about her chances of getting a good hand. A good listener thinks about the plot of the speaker's story. Who is the good guy? Who is the bad guy? What is the conflict?

Good observation and analysis allow a poker player to easily recall an opponent's behavior in a previous hand. The poker player not only saw how her opponent acted, but she thought about her opponent's motives. The good listener thinks about why the speaker acted the way he did in the story he's telling. Good observation and analysis allows a listener to concentrate on the important elements of what she is hearing, and to remember significant points.

A good listener pays as much attention to the speaker as a good poker player does at the gambling table. She observes the speaker's body language, looks for clues that might reveal the speaker's emotional state, and is aware of her own physical reactions and emotions. A good listener is present and attentive to the entire conversation, open to both the speaker's and her own presence and experience, and thinks critically about the story or issue. Being "there", "present", "in tune with," and "on the same wavelength" are some of the ways we describe this state of awareness. At the end of a good poker game (or sports event or movie, for that matter), you feel mentally alert, and you can recall highlights in delicious detail. At the end of a good conversation, you feel mentally alert, and you can vividly recall detailed highlights. Paying this kind of

Thank You for Listening

attention and having these reactions is one way you know you have truly listened to and engaged with the speaker.

Now, before you all run out and use this as an excuse for playing more poker, may I remind you that the opposite argument can also be made. Call me crazy, but I'll bet your spouse will want you to spend more time listening and improving your observational and self-awareness skills before you head off to your poker game.

On the other hand, if you're speaking and your listener seems distracted, feel free to confirm with him that it's a good time to talk. If the listener doesn't seem to be as engaged or present as he should be, pause for a moment and reiterate the significance of the information you're trying to relay. Feel free to email more background information and come back later to resume the discussion. In other words, be more aware of whether both of you are paying attention or losing interest, and look for ways to correct the situation.

Casinos are noisy and full of distractions, yet poker players manage to remain focused. Likewise, we can all remember good jokes or stories we heard at parties or at noisy bars. If you were engrossed or captivated, you might even remember what hors d'oeuvres you were eating as you listened, and recall the moment someone bumped your elbow and you almost spilled a drink. If you were engaged in the moment, you easily recollect it in terms of yourself and the environment. Our ability to focus, even under non-ideal conditions, is driven naturally by our curiosity, desire to understand, and by the emotional impact of the event.

Listening is easy when interest is high. Poker players don't have to go through a laundry list to remind

The Secrets of Listening Skills Revealed

themselves how to pay attention at the card table, just as party-goers don't need to remind themselves how to listen to good stories.

Exercise—Distract Me

Have a friend help you with this. First, think of something you find interesting. Then talk to your friend about it. Ask your friend randomly to do one of the following while you're talking:

Scratch his head

Look at his watch

Clear his throat

Check his cell phone

Yawn

Lift his hand to cover his eyes

Did you notice when it happened? How did it feel?

Now repeat the exercise. But this time, when you see your friend becoming distracted, ask a question to bring the conversation back on track. For example:

“Are you tired?”

“Do you need a break?”

“Is something wrong?”

“Do you need to do something?”

Be careful not to use accusatory questions or statements, which tend to make people angry or defensive, or both. For example:

“Did you hear what I said?”

“Are you paying attention?”

“Hey! Wake up!”

Thank You for Listening

Can you list other accusatory questions or statements?

SHOWING INTEREST

Most of us have no problem paying attention to good movies and favorite television shows. We drop everything to check out the latest viral Internet video. We're interested—maybe even fascinated. On the other hand, if the topic is something we find boring or uninteresting, you'd have to pay us to watch it. Furthermore, it's usually more pleasant to listen to a fun story rather than a sad story, to an exciting story rather than a story of frustration. If we're not interested in something, good luck getting us to listen!

Exercise—What Makes Them Tick?

What are some things that your family members like to talk about that don't interest you?

What are some things that people at work like to talk about that you're not interested in, or that frustrates you to hear?

What are some things that you wish your family members would be more interested in hearing you speak about?

Why is there a lack of mutual interest?

The Secrets of Listening Skills Revealed

An important part of holding a listener's interest is to keep her in the loop. When people get news out of the blue, they feel surprised and caught off guard. Your listener might need time to catch up. "I didn't realize we were so far behind on that! Why didn't you tell me sooner?" Or she might even demand an explanation: "Why wasn't I informed earlier?" Make sure employees, managers, customers and family members are informed of significant events. For example, if you want your father to buy you a skateboard, you might approach it this way:

"Dad, you know how I've been practicing hard? I want to take it to the next level. I'd like some money to buy a better skateboard."

Keeping people informed seems like common sense or common courtesy. But when we feel our bosses are a pain, our spouses are too critical, our parents too out of touch, our customers too demanding, then we stop communicating to avoid the hassle. In these cases, try to get to the bottom of the problem and resolve it so that you feel heard and can better hear others.

In relationships you might want to make a bargain by sharing interests. "I'll go along with ballroom dancing if you go with me to football games."

Even better, help the other person appreciate your interests or understand your point of view by sharing your enthusiasm and expertise on the topic. For example, what are the current rivalries in tennis? What are the latest developments in digital photography? Make it fun for them to develop an interest in your passions. Tie your hobby with an interest of theirs. "You like to cook and I love to take photographs. Why don't you make a complicated recipe and I will take pictures and we can post them on our Facebook page?"

Thank You for Listening

Go slow. Don't expect your spouse to become an instant expert. But who knows? You might discover that you both like similar things, as in the famous song "Escape" by Rupert Holmes¹⁵.

Realistically, however, there are always going to be interests that you just can't share. No two people can agree on everything. Even deciding what should be a priority and what is no big deal can shut down constructive communication.

I remember one occasion when I was in a client's office and the phone rang. It was my client's wife calling to remind him to bring home supplies for their son's birthday party. My client was a little exasperated. "My son's one year old! He doesn't even know what's going on!" But the birthday party was most likely important for the mother, who was anxious about the cake and the treats and the success of the party. The birthday party was an opportunity for friends and neighbors to get together. It would reflect badly on the mother if the guests were not fed and entertained and made comfortable in every reasonable way. The mother would understandably feel pressure to get everything done right, which meant she would pass some of that pressure on to the father.

Society imposes expectations on us that can be difficult to avoid. Worse yet, we readily judge others based on those same, seemingly arbitrary, criteria. If a child is not well dressed, we're more likely to blame the mother than the father. If a dinner party is not successful, we're more likely to blame the hostess than the host. If a man drives an old, beat-up car, we tend to think he's either cheap or poor. If a little boy doesn't know how to play sports, we tend to blame the father. The best thing to do in these cases is for both parties to

The Secrets of Listening Skills Revealed

acknowledge that the problem stems from different, and possibly conflicting, priorities. Discuss these potential flash points as early as possible, before arguments happen.

What are your expectations for household cleanliness?

How should money be spent? How should children be disciplined?

What about sex?

There are no right or wrong answers. Listening carefully to the other's point of view and feeling heard in return is a valuable experience. When issues inevitably come up, try to appreciate each other's reasons, compromise, and do a little give and take. If all else fails, agree to disagree.

Exercise—What Makes Them Tick, Part 2

List topics about which you and those around you hold different priorities. For example:

Peer acceptance for teenagers, wearing the “right” clothes, going to the “right” parties, etc.

Playing video games

Watching sports

In-laws

Independence versus safety for children and teenagers

Holidays, anniversaries, celebrations and other traditions

Household cleanliness

Sex

Profits

Customer service

Recycling and eco-friendliness

Thank You for Listening

How to spend money

What is important to you?

DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME?

When you're writing a research paper and you need to reference original material, you have to follow the appropriate citation guidelines to quote, paraphrase and summarize. When you listen to someone, you can repeat back what they've said in order to clarify their message. You can also paraphrase what they've said.

Merriam-Webster defines "paraphrase" as:

"a restatement of a text, passage, or work giving the meaning in another form."

Consider the following examples:

ORIGINAL: I'm worried about my job.

PARAPHRASE: I might get fired.

ORIGINAL: We had a computer security breach.

PARAPHRASE: Some hackers got into our computer systems.

ORIGINAL: The judge handed down an unfavorable decision.

PARAPHRASE: We lost the court case.

Paraphrasing can be very useful when confirming our understanding. It can also be used to put things in

The Secrets of Listening Skills Revealed

more straightforward terms by clarifying jargon or indirect language.

Merriam-Webster defines “summary” as:

“COMPREHENSIVE; *especially*: covering the main points succinctly”

In addition to paraphrasing and summarizing, it is useful to think about “generalizing.” Merriam-Webster defines “generalize” as:

“to derive or induce (a general conception or principle) from particulars.”

To illustrate, here’s an example. I was having lunch with a couple of friends when I noticed something odd in my salad.

“It’s just a piece of ginger,” said Shirley.

I carefully pushed the object to the side of my plate.

“That looks like a complimentary protein supplement to me,” I said skeptically. “Besides, ginger doesn’t have limbs.”

Bill leaned in to get a closer look.

“Ginger doesn’t have legs!” he laughed.

Bill obviously got the joke. Bill was paraphrasing here. If he had said, “Ginger doesn’t have hair,” it would not be paraphrasing and it might have taken the conversation in a slightly different direction. Plus, I might not be as squeamish about hair.

“Or wings!” he continued.

“Yeah, we get it!” said Shirley. “Ginger doesn’t have insect parts.”

Bill and I were laughing like little kids at this point. Shirley was summarizing here, stopping Bill from listing

Thank You for Listening

all the insect parts that ginger doesn't have. We all looked a little closer. As it turned out, it was indeed a piece of ginger.

"I just don't like suspicious looking things in my salad," I concluded, generalizing about salads in order to excuse my false alarm.

As you can see, paraphrasing, summarizing and generalizing can be very useful. You can use them when you're writing research papers, when you're talking about computer security, court cases, and foreign objects in food! These techniques are fairly commonplace. By laughing, Bill showed outward signs that he understood and appreciated the joke. By paraphrasing, he demonstrated it conclusively. Paraphrasing is a highly effective way of confirming that you understand someone.

You can paraphrase when there's a lull in the conversation. In effect, you're saying, "Yes, I agree. Please continue." You can paraphrase when the speaker hesitates or repeats himself as if trying to make sure you understand. You can also paraphrase if the speaker says either of the following:

"Do you know what I mean?"

"How else can I say it?"

In addition, by paraphrasing, Bill also participated in and shared in the joke. Shirley, on the other hand, used summarizing to stop Bill from continuing down that conversational track. As per the definition, a summary can be comprehensive. If someone makes a series of statements and you're able to comprehensively summarize, then you have completed the thought.

Summarizing can be used not just to confirm that you understood the speaker, but to broaden the scope

of the topic. Shirley was also able to participate in the joke.

In my concluding remark about salads, I used generalizing to express an overall sentiment.

Applying these ideas to emotions, when a friend tells you something is troubling him and you sigh, you are showing that you understand his frustration. When you accurately paraphrase his concerns, you demonstrate intellectually and verbally that you hear him. You demonstrate it conclusively. If you can summarize his feelings, you prove you can make a comprehensive statement about it. If you can generalize his thoughts, then it means you have inferred something from what he has told you.

But things can go wrong. Everyone knows that it isn't always easy to re-tell a joke. A joke, or a sentiment, or a feeling, can be very hard to capture. A joke dies if you mess up the punch line or get the timing wrong. Similarly, we can easily tell when a listener poorly reflects an emotion back to the speaker. We can feel it. When that happens, it sounds insincere.

Doing a poor job is one thing. Faking it is worse.

In addition, the listener has to acknowledge the implications of what the speaker is saying within the overall context of the situation, especially if it's an urgent one.

"I can't find the tickets."

"We're late already. Did you check your wallet?"

A straight paraphrase here can actually make you sound mean or sarcastic: "I just heard you say you don't have the tickets!"

If you're sympathetic to the speaker, you will use the tools of paraphrasing, summarizing and generalizing effectively. But if you force yourself to do it, when you

Thank You for Listening

don't understand or appreciate what the speaker is saying or going through, then you're just patronizing the speaker. You sound insensitive and insincere. There is much more to demonstrating understanding than coming up with synonyms. Done badly, you end up sounding like a jerk. This is why it's easy to parody incompetent listeners. Just paraphrase something poorly and we immediately recognize the listener's failure to "get it". With summarizing and generalizing, there is also the additional risk that you have taken meanings too far or in the wrong direction. Be sure to check back with the speaker to see if you are on target.

If, for whatever reason, it feels inappropriate to paraphrase, summarize or generalize, you can use opposite and complementary concepts to demonstrate understanding.

"The results are up in the air," said one.

"At least your plan was down to earth," replied the other.

"I'm interested in teaching," said one.

"Great! I'm interested in learning," replied the other.

You can use these various language techniques for different listening goals. By themselves, they are neutral. In fact, in the salad example above, Shirley used summarization to stop Bill. These language techniques can be used just as easily to validate feelings or to show disapproval.

They can also be overused. You cannot reword everything someone says in a conversation, or keep saying, "I understand." People get bored or even annoyed if you overuse or misuse these language

devices. To avoid offending someone when paraphrasing, be honest about your feelings.

Make sure you understand the joke or feel sympathetic toward the speaker's concerns. If you don't, then ask the speaker to clarify. Make sure you think about the implications of what you're hearing. If you still don't understand or you disagree, let the speaker know that you aren't the most appropriate audience for that particular issue. In the long run, you cannot quote, paraphrase, summarize and generalize your way out of genuine sympathy and concern.

Exercise—"You Can't Handle the Truth!"

Here's a fun exercise that you can try alone or with others. Try to paraphrase your favorite movie quotes. For example, in the 1992 movie *A Few Good Men*, Colonel Jessup (played by Jack Nicholson) is cross-examined and challenged in court by Lieutenant Daniel Kaffee (played by Tom Cruise). In response, Jessop thunders the memorable line, "You can't handle the truth!" How do you feel about the following alternatives:

"You can't handle reality!"

"You don't appreciate the life-threatening circumstances we face and you don't respect the unpleasant choices we are forced to make!"

You can take further inspiration from the American Film Institute's *AFI's 100 Years...100 Movie Quotes*. Don't worry about being as pithy or concise as the original. Are some quotes easier to paraphrase than others? Why? How does it feel to paraphrase something? Does it help to be "in character" when

Thank You for Listening

you're paraphrasing? Why do you think it is fun to paraphrase movie quotes?

What technical terms and jargon have you come across in your work? How would you rephrase those words to clarify meaning to customers or management?

Next, try to summarize or generalize your favorite movie quotes. Describe the implications of those quotes. For example, you might generalize Jessup's statement as follows: "People who haven't served on the frontline aren't capable of handling the reality of our nation's security!" And the implication of the statement might be: "I will make you pay for your disrespect!"

The improper use of terminology has a similar effect as bad paraphrasing. If you misuse technical terms, you appear incompetent. For example, if you call the five common cards in Texas Hold'em "public cards" instead of "community cards", people will immediately think you're an amateur. Make sure you understand the technical terms used in your field. Learn the proper way to talk about processes at work. Learn the new things that are impacting or changing your industry, and use the right terms to describe them.

OPEN-ENDED AND OTHER TYPES OF QUESTIONS

I keep six honest serving-men
(They taught me all I knew);
Their names are What and Why and When
And How and Where and Who.

—*Rudyard Kipling*

Any doctor will tell you: Asking the right question can be a matter of life and death.

Lawyers will tell you that asking the right questions in court can be the difference between freedom and imprisonment.

Scientists say the right questions lead to the most startling breakthroughs and discoveries.

Perhaps most importantly, teachers understand that the correct questions can open doors to new ideas—whole new ways of thinking!

When someone asks a good question, you know they have listened. Good questions show that you have heard and thought about the content. You're not just passively absorbing what is being said. You're thinking about it, then forming your own ideas and questions based on what you've heard.

I once had a couple of status meetings at key points during a project. I provided updates and raised different issues for discussion. What I remember most from those meetings were the intelligent and thoughtful questions asked by one of the managers. He would hone in on the most relevant solution and ask, "You mentioned an option in your presentation. What are the costs and benefits of that option?" I never felt his questions were mean or designed to make my

Thank You for Listening

presentations look lacking. They allowed me to elaborate on certain points and emphasize specific details. His questions kept me on my toes and I always looked forward to them.

What are the types of questions we should ask? Journalists have used “What, why, when, how, where, and who” for years to guide them in writing their stories. A story is considered complete if it answers all these questions. Our purpose as listeners, however, is a little different. We use questions to help the speaker to discover the key points of his or her story. What is the problem—or the cause for celebration? What are they upset or worried about? Why are they worried or upset about it? When did it start to bother them? How did it happen? Where did it take place? Who is involved?

One advantage of these questions is that they are open-ended. An open-ended question is a question that doesn't lend itself to a yes or no answer, but rather encourages a more detailed response. The following are some examples of closed and open-ended questions:

Closed questions:

“Did you get a raise?”

“Did you like the movie?”

“Is that a new shirt?”

Open-ended questions:

“What happened at the meeting with your boss?”

“What did you like about the movie?”

“Where did you buy that shirt?”

Besides journalistic questions, you can also use questions to clarify implications. If your friend says, “Well, isn't it convenient how that worked out!” in a

The Secrets of Listening Skills Revealed

sarcastic tone, you can say, “Do you think this is rigged or unfair in some way?” If your friend is unusually silent or makes a face, you might ask, “Do you have any concerns or reservations about this?” Use these questions to encourage people to voice their concerns.

On the other hand, if you ask these questions in an aggressive manner, then you’re just silencing people, as if you’re challenging them: “You have something to say!?”

Questions can be used to discover the scope of an event or situation. For example:

“We canceled the holiday party for budget reasons.”

“Really? What else are they cutting? Are you still going to have a bonus this year? Are they going to start firing people?”

The purpose here is to allow the speaker to elaborate. If the speaker wasn’t your friend talking about her company, but one of your co-workers talking about yours, you might react with much more panic and concern. That is because your own interests would be threatened. On the other hand, if you don’t work there, you might not care as much about budget cuts at your friend’s company.

Gentle questions can also be used to check assumptions and refocus our attention:

“Why are you trying to solve so many problems at once?”

“Why are you so upset about your co-workers?”

“Why is this so important to you?”

“Why do you expect this optimistic or unfavorable outcome?”

“Why is going to the concert so important to you?”

“Why are you being so hard on yourself?”

Thank You for Listening

“Why are you being so hard on everyone else?”

These questions are useful when someone is anxious, critical or excited about something. You're asking the speaker to consider whether their agitation is proportional to the significance of the underlying event. Maybe it is. Maybe it deserves even more attention! Maybe there just needs to be an agreed upon plan, with a time-table and intermediate goals to better organize efforts. Maybe there are good reasons for you to be supportive and you just needed to give the speaker a chance to tell you.

Questions can be used to help us examine our motives or goals:

“What is the point of working so many hours that you never see your family?”

“Do you really think your current actions will solve the problem, or are you just retaliating or venting your frustration?”

“Do you really want what's best for your children, or are you more concerned that they will make the same mistakes you did?”

“Are you trying to make someone be nice to you?”

“Are you trying to make a sale or help a customer?”

“Are you trying to make someone give you what you want?”

Questions can be used to help your friend understand why something is bothering her and to discover what she can do about it.

Imagine your friend tells you that her boyfriend is always flirting with other women. You can come right out and ask her to choose between two alternatives:

The Secrets of Listening Skills Revealed

“Is he just friendly or do you feel he enjoys women’s attention a little too much for your comfort? Does he like to flirt in general? What exactly does he do?”

This leads to a few follow-up questions:

“Are there any other warning signs that he might be cheating? Is he dedicated and devoted to his relationship with you? What do you think he should do to reassure you? What would you like to see happen?”

In other words, is there a straightforward explanation for what is happening or is there something more going on? What further information might illuminate the situation? Is there a better way to determine the situation’s severity? What, ideally, would your friend like to see happen?

In order to come up with questions to ask her, you can ask yourself, “What would I do if the problem happened to me? What if my boyfriend flirted with other people?” Things take on more immediacy and meaning when we imagine our own welfare is at stake.

If that doesn’t work, imagine a similar situation, or a more extreme one. “What if your boyfriend pinched attractive women?” In that case, it’s obvious that his actions are inappropriate to the women being pinched, and insensitive to you. Does this exaggerated assessment apply to your friend’s original problem about her boyfriend’s flirting? What’s the solution to the similar or more extreme case? These what-if scenarios help us to see the caveats and the considerations of the current situation more clearly. Can the solution to the imagined situation then be used to solve the original problem?

In some cases, we’re guilty of double standards. We’d like others to do more than we, ourselves, are

Thank You for Listening

willing to do. If your friend thinks his wife shouldn't have spent money on something, you might ask:

“What if you wanted to buy something?”

What if the tables were turned around?

Is it okay for him to lie to his kids or his subordinates?

Is it okay for his kids or his subordinates to lie to him?

What kinds of things did he do when he was younger? What trouble did he get into?

What kinds of things does he not want to tell his spouse?

If your friend feels stuck in a tricky or unpleasant situation, there are a series of exploratory questions that can help her examine expectations and plan what to do next. For example, ask her the following questions:

“What do you think will happen if you don't change things?”

“Do you expect the situation to change? If so, when?”

“What would prompt you to try something different to resolve the issue? Do you really want to wait for that to happen? Has it already happened?”

“What's the worse that would happen if you made a change?”

“What are the benefits of making a change?”

“What are the costs of making a change?”

“What exactly are we trying to do or fix here?”

“If we use this fix, will it cause problems elsewhere?”

“What do you think is the right thing to do?”

The Secrets of Listening Skills Revealed

“What would make the current situation more acceptable to you? Is there a way to make that happen?”

“Is there a way for everyone to win?”

By asking these questions, you’re trying to get your friend to entertain different possibilities and understand her options. You might want to brainstorm some ideas. Concentrate on the positive and getting things done right. The quickest or most convenient or most superficially painless solutions may be tempting, but they don’t always last and often have other costs. Avoid options where one party wins and the other party loses. Be brave and accept solid solutions that require some short-term sacrifice. Look for long-term solutions where everyone gains something.

When faced with a problem that doesn’t seem to have any answers, it can be useful to start with broad questions and to gradually narrow things down. “What is the worst-case scenario? What is the best-case scenario?” These questions reduce panic and help limit the range of possibilities that have to be considered. If the worst case is indeed dire, such as a company going bankrupt and laying off all the workers, then what is the likelihood of that happening? What are further signs that the company is headed down that path? And what can be done to stop it or prepare for it?

Then consider: How likely is the best-case scenario? What actions can be taken to enhance the probability that it will happen?

In addition to the best and worst cases, ask yourself: Is there a most-likely scenario?

Thank You for Listening

Exercise—Go Ahead, Ask Me!

Think about as many current or past situations as you can where there was some confusion. What kind of questions might have helped clarify things?

Think of an ambiguous situation at work or at home. What would you do under a similar or worse situation?

What questions would you ask to determine the scope of an event or the implications of a situation?

A friend asks you, “Should I quit my job and go back to school?” What questions would you ask to help them explore the reasons and feasibility of such an undertaking?

Look at your favorite advice column. Instead of giving advice, what questions would you use to help someone sound out their thoughts and concerns and perhaps arrive at their own solution?

Go to the Forum section of my website www.8StepListen.com and review the topic “Practice asking good questions”. Here, you can practice asking questions, vote on other people’s responses and even submit your own scenarios. See what helpful questions the community is able to generate.

We all have uncomfortable questions that we’d rather not answer. We certainly don’t want to be forced to answer personal questions under a spotlight. I’m also not saying you should ask questions to show off how smart you are, or to show that you have done your research. Those are good things, but they don’t necessarily prove that you have listened. The point of

all this is to examine why things are the way they are and what can be done to change it for the better. It isn't important for the speaker to supply the answers. There may not even be any answers, but just thinking about the questions might lead to some interesting results. And the results don't have to be spoken. As listeners, we're not trying to interrogate or cross-examine. Our purpose isn't to challenge people or to find fault. We're not conducting an interview either, or trying to uncover juicy nuggets for our own amusement. We're simply using questions to help the speaker to explore and understand his or her unique situation. Whether people share any resulting thoughts and feelings is entirely up to them.

ART VERSUS TECHNIQUE

Listening is an art. As an art form, it resembles movie making in several interesting ways. Good movies make us laugh and cry, think and feel. Good movies connect with the audience. When I'm with a good listener, I can laugh at my own mistakes, cry without feeling embarrassed, talk through the steps and options of a complicated problem, and feel my excitement and sorrow. A good listener allows me to connect with *my own* story.

In a movie, the story has to resonate with the viewers. The movie-making magic is used to tell the human story. Your listening has to reach the speaker, or perhaps more accurately, allow the speaker to reach himself. This is the spirit, the goal of listening. In fact, you want to help the speaker talk out his emotions,

Thank You for Listening

even if his ideas are not well-formed, his arguments are not crystal clear, or his feelings are hurt. You want the speaker to feel good, maybe even relieved, after he's spoken to you. You use the various listening techniques to help the speaker tell his story, share his excitement or displeasure, and discover the meaning or truth, if there is any, behind his confusion or suffering.

In addition to using movie techniques to advance the story, movie makers also have to be careful not to introduce errors. Errors distract the viewer from the story at hand. They wake the viewer from the suspension of disbelief. Instead of enjoying the moment in the movie, I notice that a Roman gladiator is wearing a watch. If the errors continue, I end up spending more time looking for them rather than following the story. I get upset with the director and I become completely distracted. Poor listening prevents the speaker from immersing himself in his own story. Instead of being able to feed off genuine interest and shared reactions with the listener, the speaker notices that you're not "with him".

Movie errors might include visual gaffes and discontinuities. A vase that is broken suddenly appears intact on the table moments later. If the speaker gave you a crucial piece of information earlier, and you ask about it again, it tells the speaker that you weren't paying attention. I'm not saying you can't make any mistakes. You just can't make too many of them. You need to keep up with the story.

In order for a movie to work, it also needs a satisfying ending. But that doesn't always happen. A story that ends abruptly by pulling a rabbit out of a hat

is called a "deus ex machina"*. For instance, a hero wins the lottery the night before his fight. He never faces his challenge yet he lives happily ever after.

The ending is unsatisfying because the resolution completely sidesteps the hero's opportunity to either rise above or come to terms with his obstacles. It doesn't honor the struggles and efforts of the hero. Our response to these contrived endings or plot devices help to explain why we should not make certain comments when we listen to someone. Look at the following statements:

"It'll work out. Time heals everything."
"Maybe it was all for the best."

Comments like these don't honor the pain, suffering, confusion, and efforts of the speaker. We sometimes say these things because we don't know what else to say. We wrongly wish for the speaker to just feel better quickly. Maybe we don't want to be bummed out by the speaker. So we offer them a rabbit out of a hat. It's as if we're saying:

"Time heals. I don't know how. But feel better anyway."

"I can't tell you why it's for the best. I can't share any experience or insight to back this up. Maybe we can think of something worse that will make your current suffering seem less significant!"

* The phrase "deus ex machina" is Latin for "god from the machine". For more information and examples of this in different media, visit http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deus_ex_machina.

Thank You for Listening

To avoid saying these kinds of inappropriate things, we need to remind ourselves that we cannot just make things all okay, nor do we need to. Remember to give the speaker a chance to feel, and to talk about those feelings. We should respect our friend's sadness, anger, or confusion, and allow them to discover at their own pace, their own dignity and courage within the situation.

Finally, overused movie plotlines can fail to capture the viewer's imagination. Boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy wins girl back. The same story gets tiring after a while. Even good listening techniques, when used in a formulaic and predictable manner, might prompt the speaker to question your sincerity and interest. Our problems may be universal, but they are personal and have specific meaning to us. We don't want to tell stories of our unique experiences to someone who is merely going through the motions.

The next time you listen to someone, think about movies first. Remember that listening and movies both have rich and sophisticated methods, and are subject to similar pitfalls. But when they work, they can both touch and change lives.

Exercise—Photos Versus Memories

There are many areas in life where the emotional response or sentimental attachment carry more weight than the techniques used to create them. Many commercial products and services have value greater than the sum of their parts. Childhood memories give old toys a special place in our hearts. A good story is better than good grammar and punctuation. The irreplaceable family photos are priceless to you and nobody else because of the memories associated with them. Athletes entertain

The Secrets of Listening Skills Revealed

and inspire. A luxury car is more than a means of transportation.

How are your hobbies and interests more than just a pastime? How is your work or your company's product greater than the sum of its parts?

THE RESPONSIBLE LISTENER

It is the province of knowledge to speak and it is the privilege of wisdom to listen.

—*Oliver Wendell Holmes*

If you are genuinely interested in someone's opinions and feelings, it's easy to focus on what they are saying. During the course of the conversation, there will be natural opportunities for you to confirm your understanding by paraphrasing the speaker. There will be moments when it is appropriate to summarize what has been discussed or to generalize what has been said. It will not be difficult to find questions that encourage the speaker to think things through and to express their thoughts.

If you are listening for the right reasons, with the right frame of mind, you will have some good ideas as to how to proceed and how to behave. You won't have to remind yourself to make eye-contact. Instead, your eyes will naturally convey your concern and engagement. You will notice the speaker crossing his arms and withdrawing. You will know when to lean forward and use a soft voice. You will know how to put people at ease and to allow them to talk.

Thank You for Listening

However, if you force the use of listening techniques, you will appear insincere, your words and actions contrived.

Imagine the following dialogue:

“Daddy, why are you crying?” asks Meghan in a soft voice. Daddy wipes his tears but doesn’t answer.

The little girl leaves the room and returns moments later.

“When I’m unhappy, I like to hold onto Mr. Brown,” she says, handing her father a well-worn teddy bear.

When it comes down to it, no technique can replace sincere sympathy and a genuine desire to help. Meghan wants to know what is troubling her father, but never pushes for a response. And even though she is never given an answer, she is still willing to hand over her most cherished possession to comfort her father. She knows she cannot solve her father’s problems, but she does not let that stop her from caring and offering comfort. She doesn’t know the cause of her father’s tears, yet she recognizes and responds to his sadness. Meghan’s actions don’t make her weak. In fact, she is the one in this picture with poise and presence. She isn’t embarrassed by her father’s tears. She doesn’t look down on him for becoming emotional.

Of course, a little girl has certain advantages because of her innocence. She is not suspected of having any ulterior motives. But she also has some disadvantages. A little girl is not expected to understand the complexities of adult life. She doesn’t have the vocabulary or the experience to discuss adult themes.

As an adult and a good listener, you have to earn the trust of the speaker. Your desire to help and your motivations for helping should be as pure as the little

The Secrets of Listening Skills Revealed

girl's. You use all the tools for the selfless purpose of helping the speaker. Even if you know the answers, you don't just tell people what to do. You accept people's pain without judgment. You help people calm down first and then you help them find their own answers. If you're not able to help, for whatever reason, you admit it frankly. Finally, like Meghan, you give the speaker the best that you can offer.

Exercise—It's Not the Size That Matters

Can you think of any small actions that convey sincere sympathy and a genuine desire to help?

Exercise—Earned Rewards

How do the ideas in this chapter help you receive the following feedback when you listen to others?

- I really enjoyed our chat.
 - You gave me your undivided attention.
 - You asked good questions. You didn't make me self-conscious or embarrassed.
 - You made me think. You got me thinking.
 - You didn't judge. You didn't make me feel bad.
 - You understood what I was saying.
-

SUMMARY

In summary, pay attention and engage in the conversation. Observe the speaker and also be aware of your own reactions to the conversation. You may not

Thank You for Listening

be interested in listening for a wide variety of reasons. Whenever possible, try to anticipate differences. If this cannot be done, then try to acknowledge that the issue has different levels of significance to each party and work toward a compromise. Failing that, agree to disagree.

Tools such as paraphrasing, summarizing, and generalizing allow you to intellectually and verbally confirm that you understand a speaker and also to participate in a conversation. They are not a substitute for understanding and sympathy.

Use questions to help other people understand the issues they are facing. What is the beginning, middle, and end of their story? Who are the players? Use questions to keep a conversation on track, to clarify confusion, and to resolve conflicting information. You can use questions to explore possibilities, to encourage thinking and understanding, and to find ways to make things better.

Listening techniques are the tools that allow you to help the speaker express his or her own story and delve deeper. At the end of the day, it is your honest and selfless desire to help that should drive the use of any technique. But please remember that you can't use a technique to mask indifference, silent judgment, hidden agendas, or carelessness.

With a thorough understanding of listening techniques, you can clear up misconceptions, diagnose problems, and set clear goals for improvement.