

# Back to basics

**Tania Coke** revisits the forgotten skill of listening

**“B**usiness people need to listen at least as much as they need to talk. Too many people fail to realise that real communication goes in both directions.” Listening, as observed by Lee Iacocca, former CEO of Chrysler Corporation, is one of the most fundamental business skills but is hugely undervalued and rarely, if ever, taught. In this article, we go back to basics and ask why listening is so important, what it involves and how it can be learned.

For the purpose of this article, I define listening as simply the attempt to understand the speaker's outlook. It is relevant to every interaction between two or more people in organisational life: from formal interactions such as performance reviews, AGMs, negotiations, sales meetings, team meetings and negotiations, all the way through to chance encounters in the corridor.

## The fruits of listening

Why is listening so important? There are three fruits of genuine listening. Most tangibly, listening bears fruit in the form of more effective outcomes. By truly listening to the needs of all relevant stakeholders in any form of negotiation, we are far more likely to reach effective, collaborative decisions.

The vendor who waxes lyrical about his company's cutting edge technology and unrivalled service, without pausing to ask the potential customer about their needs, will invariably end up with a sub-optimal sale (or none at all). The manager who, with the best will in the world, imposes an outcome on disputing team members without first listening to their ideas is far less likely to see a lasting resolution.





Secondly, listening bears fruit in the form of deeper relationships. Listening engenders trust and builds meaningful connections between people. To use the examples above, the potential customer is more likely to trust a vendor who makes the effort to understand their specific needs. The manager builds a deeper connection with, and between, the disputing parties by giving them an opportunity to express their unique perspectives on the situation.

What's more, listening can be infectious. Through a kind of virtuous circle, if the manager listens deeply to the disputing parties, they are in turn more likely to listen to one another.

Thirdly, listening bears fruit in the area of personal development. When we truly listen, we open our minds to the worldview of another, however distasteful that worldview may be. By doing so, we expand our own worldview, gaining in self-awareness and compassion. Even if we ultimately disagree with the speaker, the attempt first simply to understand their perspective can open our eyes to new ways of thinking. This expansion of worldview can be deeply fulfilling.

So listening produces more mature, fulfilled workforces; healthier, collaborative relationships, and more effective decisions and outcomes.

### **Screaming into the wind**

Listening has always been difficult but it seems to be getting ever more so. Three things may help explain this. Firstly, the exploding volumes of information that are thrown at us. Information is disseminated through an ever-expanding range of channels. The portals of information dissemination are everywhere: through laptop, iPhone, PA system, television, snail mail, magazines etc, we are bombarded with advertising, email, propaganda and news. And many of these portals never sleep: at any time of the day or night, the phone rings, the PA blares, the screens flicker. Acquiring relevant knowledge is often more a matter of filtering out than tuning in.

Secondly, we are confronted with an increasing diversity of opinions as social and ethnic groupings collide. For any opinion stated on the Internet, search hard enough and you are bound to find its opposite. This means that a huge amount of information we receive goes against our habitual way of thinking, making listening all the more difficult.

Thirdly, the speed of living and doing business seems to accelerate continuously. Time is money, we are told. Don't waste time talking. Make that decision, clinch that sale, write that report. Little wonder, then, that, unless we are extremely vigilant, we block our ears, leap to assumptions or



fall back on habitual solutions that perhaps served us well in the past but fail to take into account the uniqueness of the present situation.

### **The being and doing of listening**

So the stakes are high in the listening game – and the challenges too. But what does it mean to listen, and how can we do it better? We can distinguish two dimensions to the art of listening: the state of listening (the being) and the act of listening (the doing).

Real listening requires a certain state. Being in this state does not require any tangible action (verbal or otherwise). As such, it is hard to define in concrete terms, but we can identify several characteristics of this state. It is a state of openness – a willingness to receive what is being expressed in its full force. For example, an employee who was passed over for a promotion may express her hurt by lashing out at her manager with accusations of unfairness and cronyism. Real listening on the part of the manager involves opening up and taking in the full force of the hurt, before trying to defend, discredit or sympathise. This is an immense challenge, requiring humility and respect.

Another quality of the state of listening is attentiveness. Listening is hard work – it requires concentration. We need ideally to engage all the faculties of perception, including the senses, the intellect and the emotions. Listening in our definition is not just about paying attention to the verbal message of the speaker, but also to the way the words are spoken, the emotions behind the words and the body language.

There is an excellent TED talk by the percussionist Dame Evelyn Glennie, called “How to Listen”, in which she talks of “using the body as a listening chamber”. For her, listening is an embodied state. And this applies as much in the business world as in the musical one. Even if we are not consciously able to ‘interpret’ non-verbal messages, simply paying attention to them is part of the being of listening. Learning to listen means learning to notice the vocal intonations, gestures and pauses that accompany a verbal message.

You might object that the speaker cannot even tell if the listener is in a state of listening – and, if so, why bother? Even if that is so, the speaker can probably tell that the listener is trying to listen. And this attempt is enough to produce the second fruit of listening mentioned above: improved relationships. Moreover, through this attempt to listen, the listener is far more likely to reap the fruits of personal development: to step into the world of another and expand beyond their limited worldview.

## *Listening has always been difficult but it seems to be getting ever more so*

However, the listener can also take active steps to demonstrate his listening, and this is what we call the act of listening. A core component of this act of listening is reflecting back verbally what the speaker has expressed. This can take the form of a single word or a longer summary, to play back what seem to be key elements of the speaker’s message. It can be in the speaker’s own words, or paraphrased. It can include not just what the speaker has said, but observations as to his body language, the contradictions in what he says, the things he has left unsaid.

This skill is slowly gaining currency in some areas of business practice. For instance, a facilitator may well conclude a meeting with “let me summarise what we have agreed”. A vendor may recap the potential customer’s needs: “So your main criteria are speed, price and product range.” And a mentor may intervene during a coaching session with: “Your eyes seem to light up when you mention...”

These are all examples of the skill of reflection – a vital component of the act of listening. To do it well takes practice. We need to be sensitive to timing. We need to learn to vary our interventions so as not to sound like a parrot; sometimes making longer, sometimes shorter, interventions, sometimes reflecting back words, sometimes body language. It is also important to reflect with a suitably tentative tone, to indicate that the reflection is offered in the spirit of trying to understand, not to judge. The speaker will ideally feel free to reject the reflection or deny the listener’s interpretation, if he wishes.

Another listening skill is asking open questions: questions that are driven not by the listener’s own curiosity but by the intention of following the speaker’s flow of thought. An example might be: “I notice you’ve referred to the word ‘professional’ a couple of times – would you like to say more so I understand what that word means to you?”

For both reflection and questioning, the skill lies in trying to enter impartially into the world of the speaker without judging, offering opinions, filtering, sympathising, sharing one’s own experiences or trying to fix anything. Krishnamurti writes about the difference between listening with and without an agenda: “Our listening is always





with a preconception or from a particular point of view... Most of us are after results, achieving goals; we are forever overcoming and conquering and so there is no listening."

To be entirely free of agenda is probably beyond most of us. Hence the importance of self-awareness, so that we may at least be conscious of our personal motives and filters and how these are affecting our listening.

Of course judging, offering opinions and filtering have an important part to play in a professional's work. But they do not constitute listening. Ideally, the listening happens first. Once a level of mutual understanding has been achieved, then the parties can move on to use that understanding as the basis for judgments, opinions, decisions, solutions, agreements and other outcomes.

### Building a listening organisation

Listening as defined here is not an intuitive skill. The vast majority of us do it very badly, which is why it requires training. Listening training can be offered as a stand-alone module or as part of another training programme such as sales, management or especially conflict

management – for all of which listening is a core skill. Whatever the scope of the training, it will ideally address both the being and the doing of listening, including the specific skills of reflection and open questioning described above. To have any profound impact, the training will need to be highly experiential. A good way to achieve this is through role play, in which participants experience the difference between listening and not listening, in the role of both speaker and listener.

In addition to training, listening can be promoted through example-setting. Good listening, as mentioned above, is infectious. If senior leadership consistently demonstrates attentive, open listening, they will raise the quality of listening among the rest of the workforce. Another way to embed the skill of listening is to introduce mediation as a means of conflict management in the organisation. Mediation is a discipline centred on listening. Mediators are trained to listen impartially to the disputing parties. Very often, by participating in mediation as a disputing party, people actually improve their listening skills.

Another way that mediation can improve employees' listening levels is if the organisation trains its own internal mediators, rather than using third party specialists. In this case, the trained mediators act as internal role models for listening, both in and out of their job as mediators, helping to set the tone for a listening organisation.

In truth, learning to listen is a life-long undertaking. Through training programmes and role models, we can get a glimpse into what it really means to listen. Beyond that, it is down to each one of us to find opportunities to learn and to practise. And those opportunities may lie in unexpected places.

### Conclusion

Listening is the building block of all communication, a sine qua non of collaborative, engaged and productive workforces.

Listening builds trusting relationships and promotes empathy and tolerance. It leads to more constructive, collaborative outcomes, decisions and solutions and it is relevant for everyone at all levels of the organisation in everything they do.

And, like any skill, it can be learned. **TJ**

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