

Chapter 1 Six Things To Know Before Listening

BORE, n. A person who talks when you wish him to listen.

—*Ambrose Bierce, Devil's Dictionary*

Listening is a dynamic and rich activity. In this chapter, we'll look at the reasons for listening, the different problems we face in listening, as well as the rewards and benefits we should focus on when we listen. This will lay the groundwork for exploration in later chapters.

WHY BOTHER TO LISTEN?

Why should we bother to listen to people? What's in it for us? Well, in addition to not being a bore, consider this: Sun Tzu, in *The Art of War*, advises: "One can assess advantages through listening."² Dale Carnegie devoted an entire chapter in *How to Win Friends and*

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Influence People to recounting stories about listening, including how he personally listened to others. He recounted stories of customer problems being resolved by listening. At the end of his chapter, he states: “Be a good listener. Encourage others to talk about themselves.”³

Stephen Covey, in *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, listed Habit Five as “Seek First to Understand, Then to Be Understood”⁴. He talked about four developmental stages of empathic listening: mimic content, rephrase content, reflect feeling, rephrase the content and reflect the feeling.

A *New York Times* article on March 13, 2011, titled “Google’s Quest to Build a Better Boss,”⁵ listed “listen to the issues and concerns of your employees,” as a key behavior of a good manager. The article said:

What employees valued most were even-keeled bosses who made time for one-on-one meetings, who helped people puzzle through problems by asking questions, not dictating answers, and who took an interest in employees’ lives and careers.

The Los Angeles Times published an article called “Hey, Doc, Are You Listening?”⁶ on July 7, 2011, discussing the importance of listening for doctors. It said:

When a physician listens respectfully, asks questions and picks up on clues, patients tend to be more involved in their care, more open about what’s wrong, and better informed and more satisfied with their visit. Satisfied patients also have fewer hospitalizations, doctor visits and lab tests.

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Finally, on July 13, 2011, the results of a study commissioned by computer maker Dell, Inc. called “Listening and Engaging in the Digital Marketing Age,”⁷ was released. The accompanying web site⁸ stated:

Companies that launch listening and digital engagement initiatives are rewarded with improved customer satisfaction scores, loyalty and brand metrics, according to a Dell-commissioned research study conducted by Forrester Consulting.

To sum up, if you want to win the war, win friends, be effective, be a good manager, improve communications, reduce errors, be a better team player and provide better customer service, then you’d better listen!

These authors, articles and studies confirm what we already know: listening is important in life. But what makes it so important?

What if I managed to become an absolute dictator—an enlightened, benevolent one, of course. Everyone would have to listen to me. Nobody would interrupt me, ever. My smart and dedicated advisors would help me express my ideas and desires, tactfully correct me on the rare occasions when I’m wrong, and never contradict me in public. It would be great!

My fantasy is simply an expression of a universal need: We all want to be heard. Not only that, it would be wonderful to have wise advisors to help us express our nebulous thoughts, give us feedback without making us lose face, and even comfort us during trying times.

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GOLDEN RULE

As it turns out, the Golden Rule, treat others the way you would like to be treated, also applies to listening. Listen to others and others will listen to you. Don't believe me? Flip things around. Would you listen to someone if they never listened to you? The best way to ensure you will be heard is to become a better listener.

Because listening is so pervasive, even a small improvement brings tremendous benefits. Listening lubricates the engine of communication. Any mechanic will tell you that the time to grease the gears is before it is needed. Without proper listening, the harsh words in an argument grind and grate against one another until the whole communication machine breaks down.

Good listening skills and habits will vastly improve the dynamics of your private and business relationships. They will help you satisfy the great human need to be heard. They will earn you respect and admiration, and others will listen to you.

But what if I were a dictator, except nobody listened to me? I wouldn't be much of a dictator, would I? Without anyone to hear me, I'd be reduced to a crazed lunatic barking orders at the wind. If I pour my heart out in a forest but no one is there to hear me, do my feelings still count?

Philosophical questions aside, if you tell a joke and nobody laughs, then you know how it feels not to be heard. Of course, your joke or perhaps your delivery might not have been perfect. Nevertheless, your sentiment was not acknowledged or shared. If you think you have a great sense of humor, but your spouse never laughs at your jokes, then you know how frustrating it is never to be heard. You feel

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unappreciated. The other person doesn't "get" you. You don't feel validated.

As human beings, we want to share our humor and receive laughter. In addition to humor, we want to share our interests with others and receive their affirmation, whether those interests are bowling, online auctions, knitting, sports, whatever. We also want to share our feelings with others. It might be embarrassing to tell a joke and receive no laughter, but it is downright painful and incredibly lonely when we're sad and no one feels our pain. The only way we can share our humor, our thoughts and feelings, our deepest hopes and fears, is if others listen properly. We want to hear laughter when we tell a joke (yes, even a bad one). When we're upset, we want others to understand how frustrated or unhappy we are. If we say something funny or sad without realizing it, we want others to share that with us too.

Humanistic psychologist Carl R. Rogers had this to say about being truly heard:

When I have been listened to and when I have been heard, I am able to re-perceive my world in a new way and to go on. It is astonishing how elements that seem insoluble become soluble when someone listens, how confusions that seem irremediable turn into relatively clear flowing streams when one is heard. I have deeply appreciated the times that I have experienced this sensitive, empathic, concentrated listening.⁹

When we listen properly, we affirm and validate that which is communicated. A thought or feeling that is shared is no longer the vague musings and imaginations

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of a single person. It becomes confirmed by someone besides ourselves. It becomes larger than ourselves. Philosopher Rene Descartes said, “I think, therefore I am.”¹⁰ But if he had been contemplating listening, perhaps he would have said: “I listen, therefore *you* are.” Listening affirms the speaker’s being—his or her thoughts and feelings. Being heard in effect allows the speaker to say, “Someone else appreciates my situation. I’m not the only one that feels that way.”

That being said, it is important to note that listening and affirming are not the same as agreeing. Even if I had absolute power, I still wouldn’t want to be surrounded by agreeable yes-men, or force my will upon others with fear and cruelty. And as we see from the Arab Spring, you cannot impose your will on the people forever. The best way for your voice and feelings to be heard is to listen and earn the respect of others first.

Upon hearing that I was writing a book about listening, a friend of mine admitted that he had never been a good listener. He constantly flipped channels when he watched television. He even had picture-in-picture so he could watch two channels at the same time. I thought for a while and then I asked him if he also changed mental channels when he listened to his clients and his boss. What about you? When someone is speaking to you, does your mind wander?

Exercise—What’s It to You?

What stereotypes and preconceived notions do you have about listening? Is it hard? Is it simple? Do you know how to do it already? Is it mysterious? Is it for sentimental weaklings only?

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Do you prefer to give advice and tell people what to do, or are you more likely to listen and help them find their own answers?

Are you always telling people what they can or can't do, should or shouldn't do?

Do you think you're easy to listen to?

Do you often issue orders to people?

Do you think it is more important to point out people's errors at any cost, or to guide them toward improvement?

What rewards (or punishments) would prompt you to change your listening habits?

What do you hope to gain by listening?

OBJECTIONS TO LISTENING

One objection that is sometimes raised is this: Listening is a soft skill, and soft skills aren't as important.

Athletes know that suppleness and flexibility are vital. It prevents injury and it allows you to use your strength effectively. You might think people have to agree with your superior logic, but you're not always going to win hearts. Soft skills such as listening prevent arguments and help you accomplish more.

Another objection that is sometimes heard is this: Emotional stuff means losing control.

I consider myself physically coordinated, yet the first time I tried bowling, I kept tripping over myself. I had no control over my legs, or the speed and direction of the bowling ball. If you don't have a lot of practice

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listening and responding to emotions, then you might similarly trip over your own words and feel clumsy. You might not know how to comfort and console.

Don't put unrealistic expectations on yourself to excel right from the beginning. Most activities have a learning curve. It gets easier to discuss and respond to emotional topics when you learn more phrases to use in different situations. All you need is more practice.

TRUST ME, I'M LISTENING

Listening builds trust. Here's how. We all know that when we talk to others, we take many risks. Just look at the following responses:

“You can't be serious.”

“I'm sure it's not that bad.”

“I'm sorry, I can't help you.”

“I don't understand what you're saying.”

“Ha! Excuse me. I didn't mean to laugh.”

When we speak to others, our ideas might not be taken seriously. Our concerns might be minimized or dismissed. Others might be unable or unwilling to hear or help us. They may not understand us. Worst of all, they might laugh at us.

You can offhandedly listen to a child ramble about her day, but you can't do that with someone in the midst of a personal crisis. The more personal, painful, and delicate the subject we wish to discuss, the more we need the listener to respond with respect and sensitivity.

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Listen well and you will have proven your trustworthiness.

This also applies to conflicts. If you're able to respect the differences in a conflict and work toward a constructive resolution, you will build trust and goodwill and thus make it easier for others to hear your concerns. By extending a courtesy, you make it much more likely that the favor will be returned.

NOWHERE TO LEARN

If listening is so important, why do we still have so many problems with it? Surveys have shown that therapists overwhelmingly list “communication” as a top problem among couples¹¹. Are we that bad at expressing our wants and desires? Or are we that bad at hearing each other's requests and ideas? Or is it a combination of both?

When we learn about “communication,” the emphasis is on writing and public speaking. How to listen and give appropriate feedback are all but ignored. Consequently, most of us can't talk about listening. We tend to lump various hearing activities together and call them all listening. That's like saying the game of golf is just hitting a ball into a hole. Technically it's accurate, but it glosses over the many nuances of the game. You can't possibly improve your golf game if you hang on to that simple image. You have to, among other things, learn how to drive the ball and read the green. Similarly, we need a better way to talk about different kinds of listening and a better understanding of the techniques we can employ in different situations.

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We tend to think that all feedback is the same. Or we claim that any feedback is better than no feedback. We expect people to be satisfied with our judgments and criticisms. When we do give feedback, we often settle for general observations and fail to be specific.

Also, we typically don't have access to good resources on listening. You can easily turn on the television and watch the best golfers in the world compete against one another. You can easily go to your local driving range or golf course to practice. Lessons to improve your golf game are readily available. On the other hand, there aren't that many courses and seminars available to the public that specifically address listening. Perhaps it doesn't sound cool to say that you want to learn how to listen. That is a perception that must be changed.

In searching for material for this book, I thought perhaps I might find some examples of good listening in novels or movies. But nothing jumped out at me. Perhaps I need to read more books and watch more movies (all in the name of research, of course). But there could be another reason. Dialogues in movies and books are not meant to serve as good examples of listening. They are typically used to advance the plot and to reveal information about the characters. Patient, attentive listening is seldom depicted. Instead dialogue is about the pithy statements characters make to get a laugh or to tell us how they've grown and gained insight or changed. The other problem is that in fiction, obstacles by and large get resolved by the end. Life, of course, is not usually this tidy. The story behind a real person's suffering doesn't unfold that neatly.

I discovered that television also yielded few examples of good listening. Talk-show hosts are

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typically charismatic and entertaining, but they are not necessarily good practitioners of selfless listening. A radio or television show has a style, format, and a target audience. A talk show host is primarily interested in ratings. Usually, a talk show will only agree to interview a guest if the guest appeals to the audience in some way. After the host introduces the guest, the guest is given an opportunity to talk. A host wants to get the scoop and make sure there is no dead air or awkward moments during the interview. The guest may be there to comment on something, advocate for a position or policy, reveal something personal or to promote a recently released product.

While the host might want the guest to confess unresolved feelings about her latest career move or messy divorce, he's not there to listen deeply and help her come to terms with those feelings. When the time is up, the host breaks for commercial and then moves on to the next story. Bottom line: popular media and novels are not good places to learn how to listen.

With the advent of social networks such as Facebook and Twitter, sharing thoughts and updates about our daily activities has become as simple as clicking a button. Online news articles and blogs invite feedback, with popular articles collecting hundreds of comments. But has anyone actually become a better listener as a result of all this sharing, updating, and commenting?

Virtual conversations—yes, even emails—have many similarities to verbal conversations in their give-and-take. They also have several advantages over auditory listening. You can re-read previous comments, take time to compose your responses and edit yourself before you hit “Send”.

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I have participated in a number of online conversations, and I usually don't comment unless I feel I have something useful to say. I try to acknowledge the interesting comments others have made before making my own points. In other words, I put aside my need to be heard and take time to make my presence positive.

REWARDS AND BENEFITS

Getting people to benefit from talking to you is a primary goal of listening. Here's a list of things people might say to you if you listened well. I call these the Listening Rewards. It is reformatted in the appendix of this book as a table. You will use it to track what you learn as you read this book, and also to track feedback as you practice listening.

- I really enjoyed our chat.
- You gave me your undivided attention.
- You asked good questions. You didn't make me feel 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.
- You allowed me to talk through my different ideas and choices.
- Your feedback was very helpful.
- You heard my concerns.
- I really appreciate your support and encouragement.

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Exercise—Motivated for listening

Find someone to read the previous statements out loud to you, as if you had just delivered the best listening to them. How does it feel to receive this positive feedback? Imagine the sense of satisfaction you'll experience when you earn this feedback in real life.

Let's turn things around for a moment. What would have to happen for *you* to use these statements to describe a conversation you just had with someone else?

Run through the entire list of positive comments. Wouldn't it be great if you could make some or even all of these comments in the following scenarios:

- performance review with your manager.
- asking co-workers for feedback on a project.

Imagine you were talking to a friend, a doctor, or a sales person. Wouldn't it be wonderful if you could make these comments about those conversations?

These statements are just the immediate words of gratitude someone might give you for listening well. When you hear these, it means you have made a positive impact on someone. It means you have helped someone.

Now imagine the long term results. When you honestly and consistently receive this kind of feedback, people will begin to actively and humbly seek your

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opinion. You establish trust and earn respect. You gain influence!

SUMMARY

Allow me to use a buzz word here. Listening is a tremendous “enabler.” At the minimum, we need to coexist with others. Listening allows us to resolve the differences that inevitably occur in human interactions. We are social animals. We need to share our ups and downs with others. We need others to hear us. We accomplish much more when we pool our talent and resources and work toward common goals. Listening makes it possible for us to coordinate those common efforts.

Finally, we achieve meaning when we help others by listening. We build credibility and goodwill when we allow others to talk through their problems, when we help others think through their situations, when we provide valuable feedback and encouragement. We earn respect and gain influence.

Now, let us begin our journey to become better listeners by taking a look at several important listening skills.