



I'm All Ears

Are You Really Listening?

When was the last time you *really* listened to someone? Listened without thinking about what you wanted to say next, without glancing at your phone, finishing the other person's sentence, or jumping in to offer your opinion? When did you last listen so intently in a coaching session that your advisor finished with "Wow! You totally get it!"

The ability to listen to has been replaced by conversational grandstanding — with each party believing that what they have to say is of paramount importance. Have you ever caught yourself doing this? Waiting politely for the other person's lips to stop moving so you can talk. Maybe you nod quickly to move the other person along. Or sneak glances at your phone, lightly tap the table, or take a peek over your shoulder to see if there is someone else you could be talking to. Or, you lose track of what the other person is saying because you are formulating your own commentary or response. And yet, listening is far more important than speaking. It is only by listening that we can truly connect with others. It's fundamental to any successful partnership.

None of us are good listeners all the time. It's human nature to get distracted by what's going on in your own head. Listening takes effort. Listening is a skill that you can develop and improve.

BAD LISTENING BEHAVIOURS

If you're like most people, you get aggravated when people don't listen to you. So, what does it mean to be a good listener? Since most people have experience with what makes them feel ignored or misunderstood, here are some of the most often cited bad listening behaviours:

- Interrupting
- Responding vaguely or illogically
- Looking at a phone or around the room
- Fidgeting

If you do these things, stop. This alone won't make you a good listener, but it's a start.

Next, if you can stop interrupting and listen for a few moments, notice what you are listening for. Are you:

- Listening for opportunities to jump into the conversation?
- Listening for a chance to tell your perspective or viewpoint?
- Listening to your own thoughts?
- Listening to how you can benefit?

What many people tend to notice is that we only *really* listen a small percentage of the time. As leaders, it is our job to listen to truly understand the perspective of our advisors. Without developing this skill, it's likely we'll miss opportunities to help our people grow.

HOW TO DEVELOP GOOD LISTENING SKILLS

The best listeners focus their attention. To listen well is to figure out what's on someone's mind and to demonstrate that you care enough to know. Listening requires curiosity.

In Michael Bungay Stainer's book, *The Coaching Habit*, he encourages coaches to ask better questions, actually listen to the answer, and to stay curious just a little while longer. This may sound simple, but in practise, it can be extremely difficult. The majority of us have no idea what kind of vibe we give off when we're listening — or not listening. Start by being aware of what your body is doing. Facing the speaker, looking into their eyes, nodding your head, and, where appropriate, taking notes are good places to start. And make sure to smile.

Lots of us fall victim to a blank poker face during conversation. What you want to have is a curious expression with what I call a "25% smile." It's just a little smile to remind your advisor that you're listening, you're curious, and interested in hearing more. And don't reserve this expression just for important conversations. Hone your

skills by practising at home over dinner, while making conversation with strangers on the bus, or at your kid's baseball game. Eventually, this will become a habit. You'll notice an immediate impact in those who are speaking with you. They will open up more and you will both get far more from the conversation.

Next comes asking the right questions. Anyone can be interesting if you ask the right questions. If you find someone dull, it may be on you! In *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, Dale Carnegie wrote: "You can make more friends in two months by becoming interested in other people than you can in two years by trying to get people interested in you." You already know about you! You don't know about the other person. Once you've asked the right questions, ask more questions. A trap we all fall into is assuming we know what the person is saying and understand them. We normally don't.

Finally, listen patiently and ask the right follow-up questions. With a deeper understanding of what's on their mind, you'll become more effective at helping them find solutions. Not only will this help you become a better coach, it will also serve to strengthen the professional relationship you have with your advisor.

Listening takes effort. And though it requires you to let people speak, it doesn't mean you remain forever silent. In fact, the depth and quality of your response is the measure of a good listener. And this will only happen if we slow down and take the time to listen.

Stay curious. 🧐

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