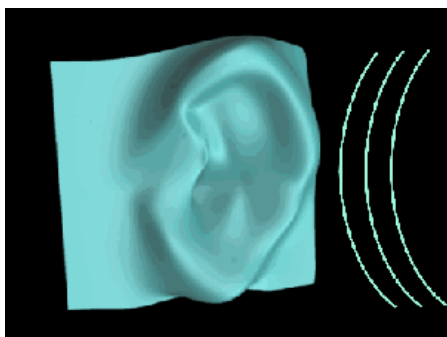


Challenge One: Deep Listening

EMPATHY IN ACTION -- LISTENING MORE CAREFULLY AND RESPONSIVELY

SUMMARY(repeated from Introduction) Listen first and acknowledge what you hear, even if you don't agree with it, before expressing your experience or point of view. In order to get more of your conversation partner's attention in tense situations, pay attention first: listen and give a brief restatement of what you have heard (especially feelings) before you express your own needs or position. The kind of listening recommended here separates **acknowledging** from **approving** or **agreeing**.⁶ Acknowledging another person's thoughts and feelings **does not have to mean** that you **approve of** or **agree with** that person's actions or way of experiencing, or that you will do whatever someone asks.



Challenge One -- Listening

By listening and then repeating back in your own words the essence and feeling of what you have just heard, from the speaker's point of view, you allow the speaker to feel the satisfaction of being understood, (a major human need). Listening responsively is always worthwhile as a way of letting people know that you care about them. Our conversation partners do not automatically know how well we have understood

⁶ While at least some people have probably been listening in this compassionate way over the centuries, it was the late psychologist Carl Rogers who, perhaps more than any other person, advocated and championed this accepting way of being with another person. For a summary of his work see, *On Becoming a Person: A Therapist's View of Psychotherapy*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin. 1995.

them, and they may not be very good at asking for confirmation. When a conversation is tense or difficult it is even more important to listen first and acknowledge what you hear. Otherwise, your chances of being heard by the other person may be very poor.

Listening to others helps others to listen. In learning to better coordinate our life activities with the life activities of others, we would do well to resist two very popular (but terrible) models of communication: arguing a case in court and debating.⁷ In courts and debates, each side tries to make its own points and listens to the other side only to tear down the other side's points. Since the debaters and attorneys rarely have to reach agreement or get anything done together, it doesn't seem to matter how much ill will their conversational style generates. But most of us are in a very different situation. We probably spend most of our lives trying to arrange agreement and cooperative action, so we need to be concerned about engaging people, not defeating them. *In business (and in family life, too) the person we defeat today will probably be the person whose cooperation we need tomorrow!*⁸

When people are upset about something and want to talk about it, their capacity to listen is greatly diminished. Trying to get your point across to a person who is trying to express a strong feeling will usually cause the other person to try even harder to get that emotion recognized. On the other hand, once people feel that their messages and feelings have been heard, they start to relax and they have more attention available for listening. As Marshall Rosenberg reports in his book, *Nonviolent Communication*, "Studies in

⁷ For a sobering and inspiring book on this issue, see Deborah Tannen, *The Argument Culture: Moving From Debate to Dialogue*. New York: Random House. 1998.

⁸ The now classic work on cooperative negotiation, that includes a strong emphasis on empathic listening, is *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In* (2nd ed.) by Roger Fisher, William Ury and Bruce Patton. New York: Penguin Books. 1991.

labor-management negotiations demonstrate that the time required to reach conflict resolution **is cut in half** when each negotiator agrees, before responding, to repeat what the previous speaker had said.”⁹ (my emphasis)

For example, in a hospital a nurse might say, after listening to a patient:

“I hear that you are very uncomfortable right now, Susan, and you would really like to get out of that bed and move around. But your doctor says your bones won’t heal unless you stay put for another week.”

The patient in this example is much more likely to listen to the nurse than if the nurse simply said:

“I’m really sorry, Susan, but you have to stay in bed. Your doctor says your bones won’t heal unless you stay put for another week.”

What is missing in this second version is any acknowledgment of the patient’s present experience.

The power of simple acknowledging. The practice of responsive listening described here separates **acknowledging** the thoughts and feelings that a person expresses from **approving, agreeing, advising, or persuading**. Acknowledging another person’s thoughts and feelings...

- still leaves you the option of agreeing or disagreeing with that person’s point of view, actions or way of experiencing.
- still leaves you with the option of saying yes or no to a request.
- still leaves you with the option of saying more about the matter being discussed.

One recurring problem in conflict situations is that many people don’t separate acknowledging from agreeing. They are joined together in people’s minds, somewhat like a two-boxes-of-soap “package deal” in a supermarket. The effect

of this is, let us say, that John feels that any acknowledgment of Fred’s experience implies agreement and approval, therefore John will not acknowledge any of Fred’s experience. Fred tries harder to be heard and John tries harder not to hear. Of course, this is a recipe for stalemate (if not disaster).

People want both: to be understood and acknowledged on the one hand, and to be approved and agreed with, on the other. With practice, you can learn to respond first with a simple acknowledgment. As you do this, you may find that, figuratively speaking, you can give your conversation partners half of what they want, even if you can’t give them all of what they want. In many conflict situations that will be a giant step forward. Your conversation partners will also be more likely to acknowledge your position and experience, even if they don’t sympathize with you. This mutual acknowledgment can create an emotional atmosphere in which it is easier to work toward agreement or more gracefully accommodate disagreements. Here are three examples of acknowledgments that do not imply agreement:

Counselor to a drug abuse client: ***“I hear that you are feeling terrible right now and that you really want some drugs. And I want you to know that I’m still concerned this stuff you’re taking is going to kill you.”***

Mother to seven-year-old: ***“I know that you want some more cake and ice cream, Jimmy, because it tastes so good, but you’ve already had three pieces and I’m really worried that you’ll get an upset tummy. That’s why I don’t want you to have any more.”***

Union representative to company owner’s representative: ***“I understand from your presentation that you see XYZ Company as short of cash, threatened by foreign competition, and not in a position to agree to any***

⁹ Marshall B. Rosenberg, *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Compassion*. Del Mar, CA: PuddleDancer Press. 1999.

wage increases. Now I would like us to explore contract arrangements that would allow my union members to get a wage increase and XYZ Company to advance its organizational goals.”

In each case a person’s listening to and acknowledgment of his or her conversation partner’s experience or position increases the chance that the conversation partner will be willing to listen in turn. The examples given above are all a bit



long and include a declaration of the listener’s position or decision. In many conversations you may simply want to reassure your conversation partner with a word or two that you have heard and understood whatever they are

experiencing. For example, saying, “You sound really happy [or sad] about that,” etc.

As you listen to the important people in your life, give very brief summaries of the experiences they are talking about and name the want or feeling that appears to be at the heart of the experience. For example:

“So you were really happy about that...”

“So you drove all the way over there and they didn’t have the part they promised you on the phone. What a let-down...”

“Sounds like you wanted a big change in that situation...”

“Oh, no! Your dog got run over. You must be feeling really terrible...”

The point here is to empathize, not to advise. If you added to that last statement, “**That total SLOB!!! You should sue that person who ran over your dog. People need to pay for their mistakes, etc., etc., etc.**”, you would be taking over the conversation and also leading the person

away from her or his feelings and toward your own.

Other suggestions about listening more responsively:

As a general rule, do not just repeat another person’s exact words. Summarize their experience in your own words. But in cases where people actually scream or shout something, sometimes you may want to repeat a few of their exact words in a quiet tone of voice to let them know that you have heard it just as they said it.

If the emotion is unclear, make a tentative guess, as in “**So it sounds like maybe you were a little unhappy about all that...**” The speaker will usually correct your guess if it needs correcting.

Listening is an art and there are very few fixed rules. Pay attention to whether the person speaking accepts your summary by saying things such as “yeah!”, “you got it,” “that’s right,” and similar responses.

If you can identify with what the other person is experiencing, then in your tone of voice (as you summarize what another person is going through), express a little of the feeling that your conversation partner is expressing. (Emotionally flat summaries can feel strange and distant.)

Such compassionate listening is a powerful resource for navigating through life, and it also makes significant demands on us as listeners. We may need to learn how to hold our own ground while we restate someone else’s position. That takes practice. We also have to be able to listen to people’s criticisms or complaints without becoming disoriented or totally losing our sense of self worth. That requires cultivating a deeper sense of self worth, which is no small project. In spite of these difficulties, the results of compassion-ate, responsive listening have been so rewarding in my life that I have found it to be worth all the effort required.

Real life examples. Here are two brief, true stories about listening. The first is about listening going well and the second is about the heavy price people sometimes pay for not listening in an empathic way.

John Gottman describes his discovery that listening really works: “I remember the day I first discovered how Emotion Coaching [the author’s approach to empathic listening] might work with my own daughter, Moriah. She was two at the time and we were on a cross-country flight home after visiting with relatives. Bored, tired, and cranky, Moriah asked me for Zebra, her favorite stuffed animal and comfort object. Unfortunately, we had absentmindedly packed the well-worn critter in a suitcase that was checked at the baggage counter.

“I’m sorry, honey, but we can’t get Zebra right now. He’s in the big suitcase in another part of the airplane,” I explained. “I want Zebra,” she whined pitifully.

“I know, sweetheart. But Zebra isn’t here. He’s in the baggage compartment underneath the plane and Daddy can’t get him until we get off the plane. I’m sorry.”

“I want Zebra! I want Zebra!” she moaned again. Then she started to cry, twisting in her safety seat and reaching futilely toward a bag on the floor where she’d seen me go for snacks.

“I know you want Zebra,” I said, feeling my blood pressure rise. “But he’s not in that bag. He’s not here and I can’t do anything about it. Look, why don’t we read about Ernie,” I said, fumbling for one of her favorite picture books.

“Not Ernie!” she wailed, angry now. “I want Zebra. I want him NOW!”

By now, I was getting “do something” looks from the passengers, from the airline attendants, from my wife, seated across the aisle. I looked at Moriah’s face, red with anger, and imagined how frustrated she must feel. After all, wasn’t I the guy who could whip up a peanut butter sandwich on demand? Make huge purple dinosaurs appear with the flip of a TV switch? Why was I withholding her favorite toy from her? Didn’t I understand how much she wanted it?

I felt bad. Then it dawned on me: I couldn’t get Zebra, but I could offer her the next best thing -- a father’s comfort. “You wish you had Zebra now,” I said to her. “Yeah,” she said sadly.

“And you’re angry because we can’t get him for you.”

“Yeah.”

“You wish you could have Zebra right now,” I repeated, as she stared at me, looking rather curious, almost surprised. “Yeah,” she muttered. “I want him now.”

“You’re tired now, and smelling Zebra and cuddling with him would feel real good. I wish we had Zebra here so you could hold him. Even better, I wish we could get out of these seats and find a big, soft bed full of all your animals and pillows where we could just lie down.” “Yeah,” she agreed.

“We can’t get Zebra because he’s in another part of the airplane,” I said. “That makes you feel frustrated.” “Yeah,” she said with a sigh.

“I’m so sorry,” I said, watching the tension leave her face. She rested her head against the back of her safety seat. She continued to complain softly a few more times, but she was growing calmer. Within a few minutes, she was asleep.

Although Moriah was just two years old, she clearly knew what she wanted -- her Zebra. Once she began to realize that getting it wasn’t possible, she wasn’t interested in my excuses, my arguments, or my diversions. My validation, however, was another matter. Finding out that I understood how she felt seemed to make her feel better. For me, it was a memorable testament to the power of empathy.”¹⁰

Sam Keen describes a friend’s lament about the consequences of not listening deeply: “Long ago and far away, I expected love to be light and easy and without failure.

“Before we moved in together, we negotiated a prenuptial agreement. Neither of us had been married before, and we were both involved in our separate careers. So our agreement not to have children suited us both. Until... on the night she announced that her period was late and she was probably pregnant, we both treated the matter as an embarrassing accident with which we would

¹⁰ From *The Heart of Parenting - How to Raise an Emotionally Intelligent Child*, by John M. Gottman with Joan DeClaire. New York: Simon & Schuster. 1997. Pages 69 & 70.

have to deal. Why us? Why now? Without much discussion, we assumed we would do the rational thing -- get an abortion. As the time approached, she began to play with hypothetical alternatives, to ask in a plaintive voice with half misty eyes: 'Maybe we should keep the baby. Maybe we could get a live-in helper, and it wouldn't interrupt our lives too much. Maybe I could even quit my job and be a full-time mother for a few years.'

'Maybe . . .' To each maybe I answered: 'Be realistic. Neither of us is willing to make the sacrifices to raise a child.' She allowed herself to be convinced, silenced the voice of her irrational hopes and dreams, and terminated the pregnancy.

"It has been many years now since our 'decision,' and we are still together and busy with our careers and our relationship. Still no children, even though we have recently been trying to get pregnant. I can't help noticing that she suffers from spells of regret and guilt, and a certain mood of sadness settles over her. At times I know she longs for her missing child and imagines what he or she would be doing now. I reassure her that we did the right thing. But when I see her lingering guilt and pain and her worry that she missed her one chance to become a mother, I feel that I failed an important test of love. Because my mind had been closed to anything that would interrupt my plans for the future, I had listened to her without deep empathy or compassion. I'm no longer sure we made the right decision. I am sure that in refusing to enter into her agony, to share the pain of her ambivalence, I betrayed her.

"I have asked for and, I think, received forgiveness, but there remains a scar that was caused by my insensitivity and self-absorption."¹¹

[Workbook editor's note: I have not included this real life excerpt to make a point for or against abortion. The lesson I draw from this story is that whatever decision this couple made, they would have been able to live with that decision better if the husband had listened in a way that acknowledged all his wife's feelings rather than listening only to argue her out of her feelings. What lesson do you draw from this story?]

Suggestions for reading on the topic of listening.

Free Article: [Tell Me More](#) an essay by Brenda Ueland, explores the transformative power of listening to friends and family members:

"I want to write about the great and powerful thing that listening is. And how we forget it. And how we don't listen to our children, or those we love. And least of all — which is so important too — to those we do not love. But we should. Because listening is a magnetic and strange thing, a creative force. Think how the friends that really listen to us are the ones we move toward, and we want to sit in their radius as though it did us good, like ultraviolet rays."

Free Article: [Positive Deviant](#) is a magazine article about the transformative power of deep listening, as it occurred in a program to reduce child malnutrition in Vietnam. It is one of the clearest examples I have ever read of what is now called "appreciative inquiry," which advocates that helpers pay disciplined and systematic attention to the strengths, capacities and past successes of those people they wish to help.

Free Collection of Articles: [Compassionate Listening: An Exploratory Sourcebook About Conflict Transformation.](#)

[from the editor] The late Gene Knudsen Hoffman (1919 – 2010) was both a Quaker peace activist and a pastoral counselor. She took the practice of compassionate listening out of the quiet environs of the Quaker meeting house, out from behind the closed doors of therapy session, and on to the stage of the world's greatest conflicts. Her many trips to Russia and the Middle East have made her a legend in the peacemaking community. Secondly, she popularized compassionate listening in a generous way that invites and encourages other people to take up this practice, develop it and apply it in new areas.

¹¹ From *To Love and Be Loved*, by Sam Keen. New York: Bantam Books. 1997. Pages 138 & 139.

Suggestions for additional reading on the topic of listening.

Books: The following books can be found around the world, new and used, via the links below provided by the Global Find-A-Book service of Human Development Books, Berkeley, the publisher of this Seven Challenges Workbook. Click on the book titles below to bring up a *Global Find-A-Book* page for each title.

[Are You Really Listening?: Keys to Successful Communication](#)

By Paul J. Donoghue, PhD, and Mary E. Siegel, PhD.

Listening is an essential skill worth every effort to learn and to master. Listening takes us out of our tendency toward self-absorption and self-protection. It opens us to the world around us and to the persons who matter most to us. When we listen, we learn, we grow, and we are nourished.

Why do we often feel cut off when speaking to the people closest to us? What is it that keeps so many of us from really listening? Practicing psychotherapists, Donoghue and Siegel answer these questions and more in this thoughtful, witty, and helpful look at the reasons why people don't listen. Filled with vivid examples that clearly demonstrate easy-to-learn listening techniques, *Are You Really Listening?* is a guide to the secrets and joys of listening and being listened to. [From the publisher, Sorin Books] List price new, appx. \$16. ISBN: 1893732886.

[The Zen of Listening: Mindful Communication in the Age of Distraction](#)

By Rebecca Z. Shafir. What do family members, coworkers, and friends want most but seldom get? Your undivided attention. Poor listening can be a cause of divorce, depression, customer dissatisfaction, low grades, and other ills. This Zen-based, practical guide will help you build relationships, sharpen concentration, create loyal clients, strengthen negotiating skills, hear what others miss, and get them to hear. [From the publisher, Quest Books] List price new, appx. \$16. ISBN: 0835608263.

[The Wisdom of Listening](#)

Edited by Mark Brady. In this thoughtful anthology, eighteen contemporary spiritual teachers explore the transformative effects, and the difficulties, of skillful listening and suggest ways in which becoming a 'listening warrior' — someone who listens mindfully with focused attention — can improve relationships. Free of religious dogma and self-help clichés, the essays are inspiring, intelligent and accessible. [from the back cover] List price new, appx \$17. ISBN: 0861713559.
