

Listening – Sorry, what did you say?

How often do we feel we have been fully listened to and understood? How often do we experience the full attention of another person? It isn't often, is it? The time we are most likely to receive this undivided attention is in the chat up phase of a new relationship!

And when we do experience being understood? What happens to our feeling toward the person who has listened? We usually experience a liking, a warmth and in the case of the chat up – affection and more!

I would hazard a guess that the vital element needed to forge a productive relationship – be it in the boardroom or the back office – hangs on our ability to listen and demonstrate understanding and empathy – even when we may not even be in agreement. And this is not an easy task.

The Nature of the Problem

The problem is – we all think we listen. This is partly true – we do - but in varying degrees of accuracy. In my experience we don't do it sufficiently or effectively. Either we listen and don't know how to respond in a helpful way, or we just don't listen beyond the first few words the other speaks. We then become filled with our own thoughts, hypotheses, interpretations, judgements, arguments etc and while we do this – we can't give full attention to the other. We unconsciously start to give *ourselves* the attention and at best we develop selective hearing.

It becomes increasingly harder to listen the greater the tension in the situation. For example, if I listen to someone in conflict with me, these might be some of my 'inner thoughts' whilst the other person is speaking:

- *I might lose ground or lose the argument*
- *I might not like what I hear*
- *They'll think I'm agreeing*
- *I might be influenced and then lose face*

If I listen to someone experiencing difficulty, these might be my thoughts:

- *I'll have to get involved*
- *I won't know what to say*
- *I might make things worse*
- *I'll feel obliged to fix their difficulty*
- *It's not my business so I shouldn't pry*
- *I don't have time*
- *I don't have the skill*

We are born with the inherent ability to listen. We learned a language in three years through listening and watching. Children will listen intently to stories and are naturally inquisitive.

So what prevents us from listening? The following combination of factors seems to be the main causes:

- Social conditioning
- Skills
- Attitude

Social conditioning

We are brought up in a culture which rewards the best, quickest, cleverest, and most attractive. While striving to attain these rewards it becomes necessary to focus primarily on our own survival in this pecking order. Consequently we prevent ourselves from being able to focus our attention on others and their needs, for fear of losing ground and not meeting our own needs. This is particularly the case for boys. When are boys rewarded for collaboration? Only in team sports when they are facing the enemy – who they have to beat!

Skills

Listening requires us to do several things that on the surface seem easy, but are extremely difficult. We need to be able to:

- Notice our thinking processes that go on inside as we are 'listening'
- Acknowledge and park this thinking, diagnosing, interpreting on one side
- Decide to put our attention on to the other person
- Put our attention completely in the present – this means not thinking about the future 'What's my response or next question?' or the past 'Did I feed the cat?!'
- Realise this is the toughest challenge.
- Decide to stay engaged with what the person is saying and resisting the pull to answer, suggest, argue or resolve

The skill is also in knowing how to respond when listening that enables the other person to fully express their thoughts or feelings. Often there is the panic thought – how do I respond to that if giving my opinion is not an option? – What can I say? Even when we ask ourselves these questions we have stopped being fully present.

Here's what we can do - reflect back either...

- our understanding of what is said ...or
- the implications of what is said...or
- the concerns or feelings we imagine they are having...or
- our guesses about what is important to the other person

...then we are indeed listening. When we do this we don't need to worry about how to respond - the next question, reflection or implication will flow in the dialogue.

Attitude

I have been involved in the training and development arena for over 20 years and in all that time the skill that most people, particularly men, find the hardest to do is listen to another person's perspective, concern or position. They have the inbuilt urge to 'fix it' quickly. Less of the understanding and more of the action!! 'Cut to the chase' is a cliché we often hear.

This can often lead to misunderstandings, decisions being made without understanding the whole picture, compliance rather than commitment from others who did not 'feel heard', erroneous decisions and all this eventually impacting on the bottom line. Whereas making the decision to listen and understand the issues, problems, differences and perspectives as others see them, enables creative and quality decision-making.

Clients and customers who experience being understood by their suppliers are more likely to place orders. Employees and team members who experience being understood are more likely to cooperate.

Potential Solution

So how do we enable others to listen beyond this first 5 seconds? This is not a quick fix! There are many training sessions that cover the elements of active listening followed by some skill practise. Why then do training managers tell me their people still can't do it? *'We cover listening skills in several of our courses and it's still the skill that is sadly lacking'* bemoaned one HR executive recently.

Listening can require a paradigm shift. It may require us to examine some of our core beliefs about how the world is and how we operate in it. If we see it as harsh, competitive, everyone out for themselves – where is there space for understanding another? If listening and understanding is seen as 'soft' or 'feely touchy' – where is there room for empathy and collaboration?

We had the privilege 20 years ago of working with men and women using an approach that enabled them to experience the power of listening from three angles:

- from having to listen and not being allowed to 'fix'
- from experiencing being listened to and
- from observing this process.

This took place over a minimum period of 3 days. Yes – 3 days! And then they got it!! The result – they were much better able to understand and so build better relationships with their customers, the quality of what they delivered improved, their staff experienced them managing in a way that enabled them to do their jobs more effectively and the culture of the organisation changed to one where there was better internal collaboration and the business grew.

A proposal nowadays to focus on listening for 3 days is likely to get short shrift. However our work of 20 years ago indicates the extent of effort and commitment required to begin to re-learn this inherent skill. An investment of three days that enables people to communicate with more clarity and understanding will prevent mistakes or wrong decisions being made based on misunderstandings or miscommunications – which ultimately costs the organisation.

We offer both an intensive listening and communication learning experience, and also endeavour to achieve that quality of skill using a combination of shorter, creative and reinforcing activities. These include role play, coaching and action learning activities.