

ACTIVE LISTENING

PAY CLOSE ATTENTION TO FIND WHAT YOU WEREN'T LOOKING FOR

THE MODEL





“Usually, what we call a ‘good listener’ is someone with skillfully polished indifference.”

– Nassim Nicholas Taleb

“We’re becoming impatient. We don’t want oratory anymore, we want sound-bites. And the art of conversation is being replaced, dangerously I think, by personal broadcasting.”

– Julian Treasure

THE CHALLENGE

YOU EXPECT OTHERS TO LISTEN WHEN YOU TALK. But when it’s their turn to speak, how attentive are you? How open-minded? How thoughtful? Moreover, how does the way you listen appear to them? Do you come across as genuinely interested or as feigning attention while pushing an agenda? Does your listening style encourage others to listen carefully in return?

CAREFUL LISTENING DOESN’T COME NATURALLY. Perception is a filter: very little gets noticed. If that weren’t so, our brains would get overwhelmed by all the noise. Good listeners are mindful of the filtering process. They’re alert. They consider what’s said with empathy. They’re attuned to the subtleties of expression, including their own body language.

UNFORTUNATELY, MOST OF US HAVE BAD HABITS. We hear what we want to hear. We force-fit what’s said into our own theories and mental models. We latch onto a term or phrase and tune out the rest, waiting for a pause in the conversation to have our say. Or we divide our attention between fiddling with gadgets and parsing others’ words for the occasional tidbit.

THE PEOPLE YOU MEET ARE YOUR BEST SOURCES of information and insight. Treat them that way. Be a respectful host, encouraging candor by giving others reason to feel safe and valued. Don’t rush to judgement. Think about what’s said, why it’s said, and what’s tellingly left out. Respond with care. Wise people don’t have all the answers. They have a refined ability to listen and ask good questions.

THIS MODEL OF ACTIVE LISTENING WILL HELP YOU reflect on your own listening style.



PROTECT

Select a comfortable setting. Arrange the furniture to get rid of physical barriers and signs of social status (such as sitting at the head of the table or other indicators of rank). Remove distractions. Most importantly, create a “safe space”; that is to say, a conversational forum in which everyone has a sense of psychological security. How is that accomplished? Offer assurances so that others can speak their minds without fear of adverse consequences, especially if they are worried about revealing too much about themselves (*self-exposure anxiety*). If conversing in a group, agree to some ground rules to ensure everyone gets their fair say. Intervene to prevent speakers from undermining each other or showing intemperance. Don’t impose unnecessary time pressures.



FRAME

Meetings are often “framing contests”. Each person tries to influence the way others make sense of things by setting the *frame*; that is to say, the tone, terminology, points of reference, and interpretive context of the conversation. At times, you will want to give the discussion a focus and impetus by offering your own lens on the world. Every lens has blind spots, however. You will benefit by letting others frame the conversation and then thinking about how that frame affects their world view. Letting others frame matters also gives them a sense of control and an assurance you are not harboring an ulterior agenda. If a truly free-ranging discussion is called for, make those expectations explicit.



There are several dimensions to empathy. One is to see things from the other person’s perspective. Only by doing so can you truly appreciate what’s being said. Another dimension is empathetic concern. You should care about the person and take an interest in what matters to him or her. Of course, there are limits to empathetic reasoning, not to mention dangers with getting too carried away with that mode of thinking. That said, good listeners are also those who have a sensitive regard for others as unique individuals.

The Author. This tool was written and designed by Peter Stoyko. Feel free to contact Peter to share ideas and learn more about dialogue methods and participatory design.

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“Listening looks easy, but it’s not simple. Every head is a world.”

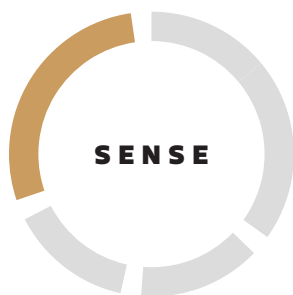
— Proverb

“I remind myself every morning: Nothing I say this day will teach me anything. So if I’m going to learn, I must do it by listening.”

— Larry King

“One friend, one person who is truly understanding, who takes the trouble to listen to us as we consider a problem, can change our whole outlook on the world.”

— E. H. Mayo



HEAR

Concentrate on what’s being said. Take an interest. Don’t let the mind wander, especially if the other person’s train of thought meanders or repeats. Be present in both mind and body, not thinking about other obligations. Don’t divide attention between listening and performing another task. Tune out distractions.



COMPREHEND

Make sense: figure out what’s meant, not just what’s said, by thinking about the speaker’s communicative intent and circumstance. Consider what’s implied and implicit. Don’t tune-out complex concepts and jargon. Instead, try to infer the deeper meaning. Focus on retrieving the central messages from desultory speech.



SEE

Look at body language (posture, gestures, facial expressions, etc.) for additional clues about the speaker’s intended meaning. If the speaker changes the physical distance or touches you, think about what that signals about their emotional state and comfort level. Don’t be too confident in your interpretations of body language, however, and don’t rush to conclusions. People’s body language usually can’t be “read” with any accuracy, for much depends on personality, habits, mood, circumstance, and culture. Be mindful of how the other person’s physical appearance influences how you interpret their messages.



PONDER

Temporarily suspend judgement. Don’t attribute motives nor blame. Set aside opinions and gut reactions. Accept what’s said on its own terms. Empathize: try to adopt the other’s train of thought. Wonder about the possibilities and implications. Build on ideas. Be open to new concepts and ways of organizing ideas. Look for nuance.



MONITOR SELF

Be aware of your emotional reactions, preoccupations, and other forms of “internal noise”. Control defensive impulses. Make sure your emotional demeanor is appropriate to the situation. Notice the inadvertent signals and mixed messages you communicate. Be careful not to give the wrong impression. Don’t obsess over your appearance to the point of seeming contrived but be mindful of how others will likely perceive your reactions.



SITUATE

Think about what’s been said within a broader context. Relate the ideas to other things you know. Ask yourself about the political angles. Who benefits from the view being voiced? Who doesn’t? What are the ideological assumptions? Then contemplate similar questions about yourself. Are you reluctant to accept a view because it isn’t in your interest? Or because it threatens your preferred way of seeing things? What other biases prevent you from appreciating a particular point?



MONITOR CONTEXT

Meaning depends on context and context can shift quickly. Note the cultural norms, values, and taboos that are relevant to interpretation. Don’t just take utterances at their face value: even a “yes” can mean “no” under certain circumstances, for example. Ask about what conditions influence the other person’s thinking. Be wary of factors (stated or unstated) that may limit a person’s ability to be completely candid. Is there an elephant in the room? That is to say, an open secret left unsaid? This ability to sense the conversational undercurrents is a skill called *aun no kokyū* (Japanese).



JUDGE

At some point you will scrutinize what has been said. What are the dubious assumptions? Factual errors? Flaws in reasoning? Self-serving omissions and rationalizations? Inconsistencies? Exaggerations? Manipulations? Loaded terms? Good judgement also requires that you scrutinize your own views. What points were voiced that should cause you to change your mind? What have been your blind spots? What larger lessons can you draw?



STORE

Make an effort to remember important points. Consciously draw connections between those lessons and what you already know. Jot down notes if it helps you pay attention but don’t transcribe—think about what’s being said first. Try writing notes after the conversation to help you reflect on the lessons learned.



SAY

Use brief verbal prompts to signal agreement and encourage the speaker onward. If a term, concept, or figure of speech is unclear, ask for clarification. If you suspect the speaker is glossing over an important detail, ask for elaboration. If a crucial topic is being avoided, pick an opportune moment to ask probative questions. Don't make statements disguised as questions. Try not to interrupt the speaker's train of thought. Offer feedback if invited to and you have something worthwhile to contribute but suppress the urge to direct the conversation. If veering radically off course, some gentle nudging can help regain focus.

tip There will be times when you will want to offer a rebuttal. Resist the urge to do so until the other person has finished completely. Don't state your views in an antagonistic and inconsiderate way. Anatol Rapoport developed a method of response that demonstrates deep consideration of another's views. First, restate what the other has said, doing so in a way that is especially clear and fair-minded. Acknowledge points of agreement. Acknowledge any points that you have just learned. It is then (and only then) that you should permit yourself to offer any critical comments or divergent views. Minimize what Madeleine Van Hecke calls the *my-side bias*: holding a firm stance on an issue without fully considering others' views.



SHOW

Use gestures (nods and so forth) and facial expressions to acknowledge that you're following what the speaker is saying. Express emotional reactions that are appropriate to the conversation and show that you empathize, doing so in a way that is natural, not phoney nor manipulative. Adopt a body posture that doesn't signal guardedness or discontent.

