

ARE YOU LISTENING?

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I recall this question popping up a lot in my teenage years. In fact, I recall my parents asking this question many times over throughout my upbringing. Maybe you have similar memories? It's not that I was a "bad" kid, although I certainly had my moments, as I suspect we all did. Still there were many times when I was determined to move forward from my own thoughts, and I didn't *hear* the concern and warnings my parents were offering.

As I got closer to finishing high school I was asked over and over what I was going to do next. I didn't hesitate to answer, "go to college", that was easy. The next question was often about my career path and my major. I didn't dread this question. I was confident in what I planned to study. I also knew that I wasn't going to be studying *listening*. It wasn't a major, a minor, or even a course that was offered. It still isn't to my knowledge.

So where do we learn to listen? Where do we study to improve this necessary life skill? I believe we learn to listen by watching our family listen to each other. We grasp that listening can be done while the television is on or when one person is in another room. We watch while teachers offer us to be quiet while they talk and then expect us to regurgitate what they have said without questioning or augmenting the information in the lecture. And now we are listening while we read email, type text messages, and even talk on the phone!

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Listening is the skill that no one is trained for. Listening is an art that we avoid appreciating. Listening is the most valuable aspect of persuasion. Huh? What was that? Listening is part of persuasion?

There are many good reasons to listen fully to the conversations you are engaged in and likely an equal number of reasons to be multi-tasking and not fully present to the voice talking to you. I am a Coach. First and foremost, whether I'm speaking to an audience or in a client session one-on-one, my expertise begins and ends with listening. And, I was a Coach when I was a Legal Administrator. My training happened in the classroom, and also on the job. In fact, I learned so much more about listening by bringing my classroom training into my law firm. We hear the voices around us, the noise around us, and the various pockets of stimuli that flow through the air during the day. You *hear* the complaints that are delivered to your office in the voices of your employees. Some are easier to listen to, some are noise in your ears, and you know what I'm talking about here.

Listening gives you the ability to expand your leadership, to persuade the talker of a solution that seems obvious to you, and the power of understanding what is said, and what is unsaid. When we really listen, we go deeper than the words being tossed out; we have a greater understanding of the person before us.

THE FIRST LEVEL

In the coaching world we are taught about the three levels of listening. Level 1 listening is what we all do very well. I hear what you are saying while I'm figuring out what I'm going to say in reply. Sometimes I even step on your sentence to put my comments into the conversation. In Level 1 listening, we find ourselves putting



our opinions into the conversation, adding our “two cents”, making statements with judgment and filters from our own experiences. We operate in this level the majority of our lives.

THE SECOND LEVEL

Level 2 listening goes deeper. Level 2 listening is where we remove the judgment, our life experiences, and the desire to have a prepared statement before the other person completes their thoughts. When we are in Level 2, we aren't forming or comparing in our minds during a conversation. We are listening to the words of our colleague without any concern about what we will add to the conversation. And, when we bring forth this level of listening into our lives, we begin to have deeper and more meaningful relationships.

Do you have a friend that you call when you are seeking advice? Do you have a separate friend you call when you only want to be heard, without someone telling you their opinion? Most of us do, when we really think about it. The difference? Likely one friend is a better “listener” — or, in coaching terms, a Level 2 listener.

How does this apply in your workplace? That's easy. When someone comes into your office with a desire to talk, and you open yourself to Level 2 listening, there is an explosion of information available to you — the words not being said appear in your mind as you have the space for them to show up. You'll have more compassion in the conversation and the ability to name what you aren't hearing, which will improve performance, communication, and your relationship.

For example, a partner/shareholder/boss-type comes into your office in a flurry. He/she wants to know about the financial reports for the big meeting next week — are they done, what do they say, why aren't they distributed, you know the questions that you get peppered with. He/she is pacing the floor, and rubbing their forehead. As he/she continues tossing them at you, your mind is racing to have the exact “right” answer. In Level 2 listening, and in a Level 2 response, you simply notice the anxiety of this person. You're listening to their questions with curiosity — wondering about all the things you are seeing and hearing from them. When he/she is done questioning, you might respond with a question — when would you like to have them, or is there something specific that you are looking for — and then a general comment about the specific timing you will distribute them. (In Level 1 listening you would likely chirp in with the status or reasons you aren't done).

THE THIRD LEVEL

The third level of listening is the most remote from our current approach. In Level 3 listening we are noticing what external elements might be adding to the dynamics at hand. For me, and when I'm working with my coaching clients, third level listening might be the sound of a siren outside my window that comes in just as the client is saying something. I hear the client, with the ambulance siren in the background, and third level listening tells me this is urgent, important, or sometimes even life changing. Another example is when a plane is flying overhead. Again, listening to a client in that moment, perhaps there is something bigger wanting to be explored or the client may be jetting past something important.

There is no doubt that deeper listening will build better relationships. Getting to those second and third levels of listening isn't easy, and it isn't hard either. When someone enters your office with “Can I talk with you?” turn off your computer monitor, your phones (yes, cell and landline), and take a deep slow breath as you transition to being fully present. Listen without judgment, preconception, or outcome in mind. You'll be surprised how much faster a problem is resolved and how much easier it is for you as the solution isn't entirely yours to create. You'll also find that you are more persuasive as you help others find their own solutions, simply by asking for clear definitions and directions in curious questions.

For more information and further reading on Communication & Leadership, visit our [online library](#).



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Judy understands teams. And she knows how to help you maximize the potential of yours. For over two decades, Judy has applied her vast knowledge of team dynamics, emotional intelligence, work/life balance, leadership, finance, and legal management to help law firms improve their people, process, performance and, ultimately, profits.

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