

LISTENING AS A FEELING



Good listening is an essential skill of groups that achieve outstanding performance. It has very little to do with the mental gymnastics of trying to concentrate on the words, and a lot to do with a kind of feeling.

Have you ever had goose bumps when someone was speaking and wondered why? Well, it could be that you were hearing truth. Goose bumps, or feeling the hair stand up on the back of your neck, is Nature's way of letting you know you're hearing something special. They are the physical manifestation of certainty.

So, what does this have to do with our world of finance and accounting? Simply that effective listening is essential for anyone who wants to perform at his or her best, work easily and gracefully, and learn effectively. This is something everyone already knows, even my fifth grader.

But what very few people know is that the art of listening has everything to do with a kind of feeling and very little to do with the mental gymnastics of trying to concentrate on the words themselves.

Every business guru would agree that good listening is an essential skill of groups that achieve outstanding performance. These experts can describe every possible behavior that marks a good listener - traits that do, in fact, describe someone who listens well to what others have to say. And some of them even prescribe all kinds of mental exercises to improve our listening - each of which has someone who can attest to its effectiveness.

But if their techniques are so good, then why do we waste so much time repeating ourselves?

Feelings are to the quality of hearing as our sense of smell is to the enjoyment of a great meal or our sense of touch is to the expression of love. You are listening deeply whenever you become "lost in the words" and find yourself experiencing deep feelings of joy, gratitude, surprise, curiosity, warmth, closeness, wonder, beauty, or appreciation.

In other words, whenever you are being touched by what someone else is saying, you are hearing him or her at a more profound level. The stronger the feeling, the more profound the understanding. And the more profound the understanding, the clearer the subsequent course of action.

Watching children listen is a great way to see that what I am describing is the "default" setting for human interaction. Children "drink in" the words of the person they are talking with. Sometimes the language may even be incomprehensible - they have not yet mastered the vocabulary - but it is entirely clear that they can understand the meaning intuitively.

If this seems as simple as riding a bicycle, then I'm telling you something you've already discovered. But speaking for myself, I found it hard to grasp the notion that I would understand what people were saying a lot better by listening for the feeling. It made little sense. For me, it was content that mattered - to the point that I often took notes while others were talking rather than simply listening. I'd find myself asking others to repeat themselves or even wishing they'd slow down so that my writing could keep pace.

I also wanted to be seen as someone who had important things to say. Often I'd simply be waiting for the other person to stop talking so that I could take over the conversation. And my true blind spot was that I wanted to be right! Most of the time, I would listen only for those statements that agreed with my point of view or I'd use someone else's words as ammunition to make my points. Distracted as I was with my own thinking, it's not surprising that I came across as distracted, slow-witted, arrogant, or even argumentative. Meaning might unfold during a meeting, but more often other people just wished they could leave. From my perspective it seemed as though these other people "just didn't get it" - otherwise why would I have to repeat myself so much? It's a wonder that we accomplished as much as we did.

But when I began to see listening as an art and conversation as something that creates beauty, then I began to notice how my own thoughts interfered with the experience. What became clear was the more I thought - the greater my own mental activity - the less insight and understanding I gained and the harder it was to remember what had been said!

Talk about a counter-intuitive notion. Whereas I used to have difficulty reconstructing a meeting from my notes, I suddenly discovered that I could recall details with crystal clarity from meetings that took place months earlier, without ever having written anything down. Even more important, I was able to act in ways that were true to the intent of the conversation without developing an action plan or relying on any kind of checklist. Also, I found that for weeks afterward I was able to reflect on the substance of the discussion and keep finding new meanings and ideas.

Before you say, "Well maybe this works for you, but it would never work for me", I ask you to try an experiment over the next couple of days. First of all, when you meet with someone, take the time to build rapport before conducting any "business." What this means is to simply make a connection with the other person as a fellow human being before getting down to work. I know when I am in rapport with other people because I have feelings towards them - for example, something they say touches me, I become curious about what they have to say, or I suddenly recognize that we have begun a substantive conversation without ever having formally started!

One reason children can be such good listeners is that they have not lost their natural ability to be in rapport with others. They can approach another kid on the playground, one they've never met, and in five minutes be playing as if they were next door neighbors. Well, all of us are sojourners - alive on Earth for the briefest moment in time. So why not communicate by first acknowledging our spiritual connectedness even if we have never laid eyes on each other before or even if we think the other person has nothing to say or is out to get us?

Next, try turning your back on your own thoughts. We can't stop thinking any more than we can stop breathing. But we can stop paying attention to what we're thinking. In other words, we can stop taking our thoughts so seriously. How can we really listen to another person when we are mentally talking so loudly to ourselves?

This is definitely not a suggestion to deny your thoughts, for that would be tantamount to asking that you deny your own existence. But since our minds continually produce thoughts, then why get attached to any one particular notion?

I liken it to the experience of letting go. When I have the courage to do this, I often find myself fascinated by what others are saying. Sometimes the sense of being "drawn into their world" overtakes me with a sudden rush of feeling, or I become awestruck by their inner beauty or their unique creativity.

Finally, notice your own feelings. When your mind is conducive to deeper listening, you are likely to be filled with a sense of peace and quiet. The emotions will tend to be the deep ones - enthusiasm rather than excitement, joy rather than giddiness, gratitude rather than relief.

The feeling of groups will become more self-evident. For example, if the conversation feels stilted, then this tells you that people are probably paying attention to their own thoughts and not really listening to what others are saying. People in groups tend to accelerate the speed of their words. You can get the feeling of rushing headlong down a steep mountain trail. They can go off track and begin repeating themselves. This feels like walking through mud. Or they can get really excited, and you can feel as though you're jumping out of your skin. But being present does not require that you join in. This is what I mean by not acting on a thought just because you had it. Listen for the deeper feeling that comes from a more mindful and spiritual place and then act on that thought. Sometimes the effect will be stunning.

Everyone seeks answers to their most urgent questions. People who understand that it is a positive feeling that opens the door to their own inner wisdom will start to see that the solutions are abundant.

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