CENTRE FOR COACHING
IN ORGANISATIONS

White Paper
August 2020

Learning to Listen

Deep and attentive listening is a rarity in organizations, having been replaced with a type of listening that is more connected with coercion and manipulation

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Though most people think they are good at listening, the evidence suggests otherwise. Low levels of employee engagement can be traced back to the inability of leaders to meet others' needs to be understood. The capacity of an organization to successfully navigate complexity depends first and foremost on people's capacity to be curious. As organisations continue to work out how to respond to COVID, we hear more and more from how important it is for leaders to be empathic, humble and vulnerable, all traits that talk to our propensity to listen. In this White Paper we will consider the business case for listening and how we can help organisations become better at listening.

Complexity and change

In previous White Papers we described five different ways in which we can think about systems. How we think about systems determines how we think about change. The **first order** systems thinker is by nature a problem solver; the problems of the world around us are like a Rubik's Cube; complicated and hard to understand, but ultimately solvable. The challenges lie in working out a logical solution; five steps to success. These leaders may not show up as being particularly curious, especially if they believe they have it within themselves to unpick the problem alone. The **second order** thinker recognizes that some problems are so complex that no one person can hope to solve the problem by themself. A multiplicity of perspectives is required if the problem is to be successfully framed. These leaders are more curious; they seek to understand the views of significant others. The **complexity** thinker knows that change is constant, dynamic and complex. Change emerges from interactions between people at the local level, as they seek to make their own meaning of events, and their leaders' interpretations of events. These leaders are even more curious. They want to know what everyone in the organization thinks. Finally, the leader

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looking at the world through a **meta-systemic** lens recognises the limitations of thinking about the organisation as a system. Change emerges from interactions between people, and we all interact with lots of people, including people outside our organisation. These leaders want to know what *everyone* thinks, including people outside their organisations. Our capacity to navigate complexity therefore, is connected to the extent to which we are curious. Great leaders are able to adapt to complexity, and great leaders are very curious.

Great leaders know how to listen

There exists a substantial body of evidence to support the idea that listening is a critical ability for leaders[ii]. The evidence suggests that good listening correlates with the capacity to engender in others:

- Enhanced wellbeing
- Creativity and innovation
- Self-awareness
- The capacity to speak clearly
- Job satisfaction
- Commitment and engagement
- A propensity to work collaboratively

The evidence also suggests a direct connection between the leader's capacity to listen and team performance.

Most leaders don't know how to listen

Though most people think they are good at listening the evidence suggests otherwise. Indeed, poor listening has been identified as the number one derailer in corporate Australia[iii]. Part of the reason for this is the way we talk about listening in organisations and in particular the narrative around 'active listening'. The term 'active listening' was coined by Carl Rogers, a therapist who also did work with organisations. He used the adjective 'active' alongside creative, sensitive, accurate, empathic and non-judgmental, to describe a form of listening in which the listener fully understands and appreciates the emotions of the speaker, is able to set aside their own perspective, is open and transparent about their own thoughts and feelings, is able to accept the speaker for who they are and enter the other person's world 'without prejudice'. This is complex and difficult, but that complexity has been lost in subsequent articulations of what it means to listen actively.

Jo Tyler searched the term 'active listening' on Google and found most definitions to be transactional, having been much simplified from Rogers original intention[iv]. For example, one definition said:

… when the listener is focussed mainly on their own behaviour; their body language and their own silence, then it is unlikely they are focussed on what the speaker is saying.

"… active listening is certainly not complex. Listeners need only restate, in their own language, their impression of the expression of the sender."

Simplifying listening in this way is to reduce listening to a skill or competency. Listening through this lens is to practice being quiet, to repeat back to people what they said, to nod and lean forwards etc … These behaviours may or may not indicate that the listener is listening. In some cases these behaviours may indeed be an unwitting outcome of the expression of real curiosity. The problem is that when the listener is focussed mainly on their own behaviour; their body language and their own silence, then it is unlikely they are focussed on what the speaker is saying.

Avraham Kluger and colleagues found that listening is relational[v]. In other words I may be perceived by person A as a good listener at the same time I am perceived by person B as a poor listener. The extent to which I am perceived as a good listener is therefore an aspect of my relationship with you. This implies that I am most likely to be widely perceived as a good listener if I am genuinely interested in what other people have to say. Focussing solely on my own behaviour may or may not persuade others that I am interested – most likely not if I am not genuinely curious.

Purposeful listening

If we like Carol Rogers' definition of active listening, then we must acknowledge that to listen actively is tiring. In a HBR article Adam Waytz suggests that empathy is exhausting and the demand for empathy is relentless[vi]. This may not be true for all of us, but it would seem to be true for most of us. Most of us then must channel our energies and be purposeful about how we intend to listen in any given interaction.

The 'Listening Model' suggests there are four ways in which we can choose to listen[vii]. None of these are right, none are wrong; the model invites us to choose how to listen in any given scenario – to be purposeful. When we listen to **noise**, we are listening to see if others are speaking. We are not listening to what they are saying, we are just listening for whether or not they are speaking, so we can jump in with what we have to say without being seen to interrupt. When we listen for **content**, we are listening to the words and adding our own meaning to those words, wittingly or not. When we listen only for content, we are liable to make assumptions or jump to conclusions, with the accompanying risk of disengagement. When we listen for **intention**, we make a conscious effort to understand what the other person is trying to say. This isn't easy. As Krishnamurti, an Indian philosopher once said:

What all these models have I common is a focus on curiosity. The more curious we are, the more likely we are to tune into the essence of someone.

"If we try to listen we find it extraordinarily difficult, because we are always projecting our opinions and ideas, our prejudices, our background, our inclinations, our impulses; when they dominate we hardly listen at all to what is being said."

When we are listening for intention, we are constantly checking in. Not because we have been taught to paraphrase, but because we are curious; we want to know if we have really understood nwhat the other person is trying to say.

When we listen for **identity**, we are listening for the person. We may have understood what they are trying to say, but where does this perspective come from? What are we learning about this person in terms of their values, motivations and life experiences? By listening for identity we get to know people better. To listen for identity requires energy. We may not have enough energy, or time, to be listening to identity all the time. In which case, we need to be purposeful. When do we choose to listen for intention or identity? When is this useful? When do we regard it as essential?

There exist other, similar, listening models. Jack Zenger and Joseph Folkman, for example, talk about six levels of listening[viii]. Level 1 is about finding the right space to have a conversation, Level 2 is about clearing away distractions and making eye contact. Level 3 is about checking in to see if the listener has understood. Level 4 is about observing non-verbal cues. Level 5 is about understanding and acknowledging other people's emotions. Level 6 is about empathizing with people's emotions in a supportive way. What all these models have in common is a focus on curiosity. The more curious we are, the more likely we are to tune into the essence of someone.

Learning to listen

Many things get in the way of listening. A perceived lack of time. A belief we are responsible for finding solutions to other people's problems. A belief that our job is to give advice. Our own opinions, ideas, prejudices, background, inclinations and impulses - all get in the way. We are unlikely to become a great listener by considering only the tips and techniques being advocated by contemporary proponents of active listening. Remaining quiet, nodding, leaning forward, paraphrasing; none of these behaviours by themselves are likely to lead to greater empathy. We need to regard these behaviours as the outcomes of curiosity, not ends in themselves.

To become a better listener requires becoming more self-aware. To what extent do we understand our chattering inner voices? The voices that tell us we already know what the other person is trying to say. The impatient voices

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that want the other person to hurry up. The judgmental voices that want us to interrupt and challenge. These voices all come from our own values, motivations and experiences and they all get in the way of our listening. The more we understand these voices, their origins and motivations; the more likely we are to be able to suspend judgment and fully appreciate the perspectives of others.

Conclusions

As the world becomes more complex and dynamic, we need to talk more about what we mean by listening. Many definitions are too vague or too transactional. To be an extraordinary listener is to be both self-aware and purposeful, and the journey toward heightened self-awareness and clarity of purpose requires more than learning new skills. It requires an ongoing commitment to learning and reflection; learning about ourselves and the way we are perceived by others. This is an ongoing journey, not a short burst of learning at a webinar or workshop.

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Notes & Acknowledgments

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