

BY Micki McMillan, MCC and Patricia A. Barlow, MCC

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

**WHAT'S WRONG WITH
THIS SCENE?**

Gary flips through the latest sales reports. *This is bad. Our flagship product is falling apart.* Sam, one of the designers on his team, knocks on his door. Gary glances up then dives back into his reports. "What do you need?"

"Product Development was late getting us the specs, and then they changed them after approval," Sam says. "We didn't find out for three days. We've been scrambling to catch up, but we're not going to make the deadline. There's no way—"

"Why am I just finding out about this now?" Gary stares at him, flabbergasted. *How am I going to explain this to my boss? I already asked for one extension.* "How far along are we?"

"We have the layout, but they dropped the main feature. We had to scrap a lot of our work..."

"Ugh!" *How does Product Development expect us to do our job if they keep changing everything?* Gary turns the page on his report to see the pre-orders for next month. *More bad news. How am I going to get out of this jam?*

**INTERNAL
LISTENING**

Great leaders listen. Not just to what's said, but to what's unsaid, too. Not just to facts, but to feelings, implications and possibilities. Great leaders do this because they understand that listening is about building trust and respect as much as it's about solving problems. Listening is the first step to developing team synergy, which in the long run can solve many more problems than a leader can alone.

Gary, our poor listener in the opening scenario, clearly doesn't understand this. He is listening internally, as Laura Whitworth, author of *Co-Active Coaching*, has written.¹ When you listen internally, you pay more attention to your thought processes than to the words of the person with whom you're talking. Internal listening is defensive listening: you want to know how this conversation will affect you. *Why is this important to me? What do I need to do?* You want information, preferably without extraneous detail, because you need to decide how to respond. When the other person is done speaking, you're ready to jump in—if you haven't already—and add your two cents.

ANATOMY OF A WORD



What does it mean to listen? The Chinese symbol for “listen” contains a great lesson.

The symbol on the left stands for “ear.” The symbol on the right represents you, the listener. To listen, you need your ears. But your eyes, your undivided attention and your heart are just as important. Listening isn’t a type of triage; it’s a full-body, fully-present activity.

How often do you give a speaker your undivided attention? When was the last time you listened to someone with your heart as well as your eyes and ears? When you speak, how would you like people to listen to you?

FOCUSED LISTENING

In *Co-Active Coaching*, Laura Whitworth outlines two higher levels of listening above internal listening. The first is focused listening. When you’re comfortable enough with the other person or the situation or yourself, you can let go of your agenda and take a moment to consider the person with whom you’re talking. *What does she want? How does she feel?* You can listen with your eyes as well as your ears. What does her body language behavior, pitch, and word choice tell you?

When it’s your turn to speak, you have the presence to repeat what you have understood. This helps clarify what the other person said, and it validates their contribution to the conversation. Often, this level of listening is called *Active Listening*.

What would focused listening look like in practice?

A Bigger Worldview

Gary flips through the latest sales reports. *This is bad. Our flagship product is falling apart.* Sam, one of the designers on his team, knocks on his door. Gary glances up. *Sam is clearly nervous. He seems ashamed and frustrated.* “What do you need?”

“Product Development was late getting us the specs, and then they changed them after approval,” Sam says. “We didn’t find out for three days. We’ve been scrambling to catch up, but we’re not going to make the deadline. There’s no way we can finish on time.”

“I understand they changed the specs and didn’t tell you. The sooner you tell me these things, the sooner I can help.” *Sam has only looked me in the eye once. Now he’s looking at his shoes. I wonder if he is afraid that I’m going to punish him for something that wasn’t his fault.* “How far along are we?”

“We have the layout, but they dropped the main feature. We had to scrap a lot of our work. Their testing on the new prototype went really well. That’s why they decided to change everything. The changes are good. It’s just that it happened at the last minute.”

How can we solve this problem? “I’m going to talk to Product Development to make sure they notify us right away next time this happens. In the meantime,

If you spend more

time ASKING APPROPRIATE
QUESTIONS RATHER THAN GIVING
ANSWERS OR OPINIONS, YOUR
LISTENING SKILLS WILL INCREASE.

- BRIAN KOSLOW

Sam, this deadline is very important. Let's consider some alternatives to see if we can make this work."

How to Become a Focused Listener

One of the best ways to get out of your own head and pay more attention to the speaker is to paraphrase what was just said. This improves your concentration and lets the speaker know you've been listening. If you don't fully understand what was said, ask for clarification. Or bring the speaker's attention to his word choice or how you perceive his tone.

By focusing on what people say, not on what you want to say, you'll find that people say more than you ever realized.

GENERATIVE LISTENING

The highest level of listening is generative listening. As you become more mindful, you can expand your attention from the speaker to the situation and environment. You listen to your own intuition and hunches, and you become aware of your body, mind, and emotions. You gain access to a wealth of information and ideas. You not only hear the facts and see the speaker's needs, you see how your conversation affects or could affect others. Generative listening creates new possibilities. *What are the greater implications for this conversation?*

When you listen generatively, you listen completely and with your whole being. Let's see this in practice.

Gestalt Leadership

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"I understand they changed the specs and didn't tell you. The sooner you tell me these things, the sooner I can help." *Sam has only looked me in the eye once. Now he's looking at his shoes. I wonder if he is afraid that I'm going to punish him for something that wasn't his fault. My tension might be adding to his. I need to relax.* "How far along are we?"

"We have the layout, but they dropped the main feature. We had to scrap a lot of our work. Their testing on the new prototype went really well. That's why they decided to change everything. The changes are good. It's just that it happened at the last minute."

This could be the answer we've been looking for! "This is good news. The new prototype could be the shot in the arm this company needs. I'm going to talk to Product Development to make sure they notify us right away next time this

TO LISTEN WELL IS AS POWERFUL A MEANS OF INFLUENCE AS TO TALK WELL AND IS AS ESSENTIAL TO ALL TRUE CONVERSATION.

- CHINESE PROVERB

LISTENING LOOKS EASY, BUT IT'S NOT SIMPLE. EVERY HEAD IS A WORLD.

- CUBAN PROVERB

IF SPEAKING IS SILVER, THEN LISTENING IS GOLD.

- TURKISH PROVERB

WHO SPEAKS, SOWS. WHO LISTENS, REAPS.

- ARGENTINE PROVERB

LISTEN OR THY TONGUE WILL KEEP THEE DEAF.

- NATIVE AMERICAN PROVERB

FROM LISTENING COMES WISDOM, AND FROM SPEAKING REPENTANCE.

- ITALIAN PROVERB

A FOOL FINDS NO PLEASURE IN UNDERSTANDING, BUT DELIGHTS IN HIS OWN OPINIONS.

- JEWISH PROVERB

happens. And I'll talk to the executive team about another extension. We don't want to rush this roll-out. In the meantime, let's consider some alternatives to see if we can make the most of this opportunity."

How to Become a Generative Listener

Generative listeners hear the forest for the trees. To develop this skill, practice paying attention not only to yourself and the speaker, but also to your surroundings. Are there other people listening in? How are they reacting to the conversation? Also, challenge yourself to remain open. Learn to identify your emotions and when you make snap assumptions or judgments. Generative listening requires the listener to be fully present in this moment and every moment. It is a discipline that requires concentration, respect for the speaker, and consistently suspending judgment until the speaker has spoken. The underlying belief is that new insights and solutions can be created. By remaining unattached to a specific outcome, you'll encourage everyone involved to participate fully. Generative listening takes the most time and effort, but if the listener can see it as an investment of time rather than a cost of time, the dividends pay well

So when you are

listening TO SOMEBODY

COMPLETELY, ATTENTIVELY, THEN YOU ARE LISTENING NOT ONLY TO THE WORDS, BUT ALSO TO THE FEELING OF WHAT IS BEING CONVEYED, TO THE WHOLE OF IT, NOT PART OF IT.

- JIDDU KRISHNAMURTI

LISTENING IS A BUSINESS STRATEGY

Dictators talk. Leaders listen.

Barking out orders might seem faster, especially when you're overwhelmed and in a pinch, but at what cost? Dictated subjects don't go the extra mile. They don't put their heart and soul into their work. They save their creativity and energy for other outlets. Dictators might win a battle or two, but they never win the war. And when the tides turn, they always wonder why no one listened to them?

Leaders listen because truly listening to people is the fastest and strongest way to build effective, enthusiastic support. Listening is one of the highest forms of respect you can pay someone else, and one of the greatest gifts to both give and receive. But it's more than a courtesy; it's also a business strategy. And in our talk-oriented society, it can be a competitive advantage.

How well do you listen?

ADDITIONAL READING

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Steil, Lyman K. and Richard K. Bommelje. *Listening Leaders: The Ten Golden Rules to Listen, Lead & Succeed*. Minneapolis, MN: Beaver's Pond Press, 2004.

Whitworth, Laura. *Co---Active Coaching*. Boston, MA: Davies---Black Publishing, 1998.

NOTES

ⁱ Whitworth, Laura. *Co---Active Coaching*. Boston, MA: Davies---Black Publishing, 1998.