

From:
"Messages: The Communication
Skills Book"
by McKay, Davis, & Fanning
(2009)



Listening

You're at a dinner party. Someone is telling anecdotes; someone is complaining; someone is bragging about his promotion. Everyone there is eager to talk, to tell his or her story. Suddenly you get the feeling that no one is listening. While the talk goes on, you notice that people's eyes wander. They are perhaps rehearsing their own remarks. It's as if they have secretly agreed, "I'll be an audience for you if you'll be an audience for me." The party may be a success, but people go home without really hearing or knowing each other.

Listening is an essential skill for making and keeping relationships. If you are a good listener, you'll notice that others are drawn to you. Friends confide in you and your friendships deepen. Success comes a little easier because you hear and understand people; you know what they want and what hurts or irritates them. You get "lucky" breaks because people appreciate you and want you around.

People who don't listen are bores. They don't seem interested in anyone but themselves. They turn off potential friends and lovers by giving the message "What you have to say doesn't matter much to me." As a result, they often feel lonely and isolated. The tragedy is that people who don't listen rarely figure out what's wrong. They change their perfume or cologne, they get new clothes, they work at being funny, and they talk about "interesting" things. But the underlying problem remains. They aren't fun to talk to because the other person never feels satisfied that he or she has been heard.

It's dangerous not to listen! You miss important information and you don't see problems coming. When you try to understand why people

do things, you have to mind-read and guess to fill in the gaps in your listening skills.

Listening is a commitment and a compliment. It's a commitment to understanding how other people feel, how they see their world. It means putting aside your own prejudices and beliefs, your anxieties and self-interest, so that you can step behind the other person's eyes. You try to look at things from the other person's perspective. Listening is a compliment because it says to the other person, "I care about what's happening to you; your life and your experience are important." People usually respond to the compliment of listening by liking and appreciating you.

REAL VS. PSEUDO LISTENING

Being quiet while someone else talks does not constitute real listening. Real listening is based on the intention to do one of four things:

1. Understand someone.
2. Enjoy someone.
3. Learn something.
4. Give help or solace.

If you want to understand someone, you can't help but really listen to him or her. When you're enjoying a conversation or you intend to learn something, listening comes quite naturally. When you want to help someone express his or her feelings, you are involved, listening. The key to real listening is wanting and intending to do so. Unfortunately, a lot of pseudo listening masquerades as the real thing. The intention is not to listen but to meet some other need. Some of the typical needs met by pseudo listening are as follows:

- Making people think you're interested so they will like you.
- Being alert to see if you are in danger of getting rejected.
- Listening for one specific piece of information and ignoring everything else.

- Buying time to prepare your next comment.
- Half listening so someone will listen to you.
- Listening to find someone's vulnerabilities or to take advantage of him or her.
- Looking for the weak points in an argument so you can always be right; listening to get ammunition for attack.
- Checking to see how people are reacting, making sure you produce the desired effect.
- Half listening because a good, kind, or nice person would.
- Half listening because you don't know how to get away without hurting or offending someone.

EXERCISE. Everyone is a pseudo listener at times. Problems develop when real listening (the intention to understand, enjoy, learn, help) is happening a lot less than pseudo listening. In general, the more real listening you do, the better your relationships feel. Use the following chart to assess the real versus the pseudo listening you do with significant people in your life. Estimate the percentage of your listening that is *real* for each of the following:

WORK		HOME	
Boss _____	_____ %	Mate _____	_____ %
Coworkers _____	_____ %	Children _____	_____ %
_____	_____ %	_____	_____ %
_____	_____ %	_____	_____ %
_____	_____ %	_____	_____ %
Subordinates _____	_____ %	Roommate _____	_____ %
_____	_____ %	FRIENDS	
_____	_____ %	Best friend _____	_____ %
_____	_____ %	Same-sex friends _____	_____ %

RELATIVES		_____	_____	%
Mother	_____	_____	_____	%
Father	_____	_____	_____	%
Siblings		Opposite-sex		
	_____	friends	_____	%
	_____		_____	%
Others	_____		_____	%
	_____		_____	%
	_____		_____	%

To use the information on your chart, ask yourself these questions:

- ☛ Who are the people you listen to best?
- ☛ Who are the people with whom you do more pseudo listening?
- ☛ What is it about these people that makes it easier or harder to listen to them?
- ☛ Are there any people on the chart with whom you want to do more real listening?

As an exercise, choose one person you could relate to better. For one day, commit yourself to real listening. After each encounter, check your intention in listening. Were you trying to understand him or her, enjoy him or her, learn something, or give help or solace? Notice if you were doing any pseudo listening and what needs your pseudo listening satisfied.

Habits form easily. If you continued this exercise for a week, attention to the quality of your listening would begin to be automatic.

BLOCKS TO LISTENING

There are twelve blocks to listening. You will find that some are old favorites that you use over and over. Others are held in reserve for certain types of people or situations. Everyone uses listening blocks, so you shouldn't worry if a lot of blocks are familiar. This is an opportunity for you to become more aware of your blocks at the time you actually use them.

Comparing

Comparing makes it hard to listen because you're always trying to assess who is smarter, more competent, more emotionally healthy—you or the other. Some people focus on who has suffered more, who's a bigger victim. While someone's talking, they have thoughts such as these: "Could I do it that well?" "I've had it harder; he doesn't know what hard is." "I earn more than that." "My kids are so much brighter." They can't let much in because they're too busy seeing if they measure up.

Mind Reading

The mind reader doesn't pay much attention to what people say. In fact, he or she often distrusts it. The mind reader is trying to figure out what the other person is *really* thinking and feeling: "She says she wants to go to the show, but I'll bet she's tired and wants to relax. She might be resentful if I pushed her when she doesn't want to go." The mind reader pays less attention to words than to intonations and subtle cues in an effort to see through to the truth.

If you are a mind reader, you probably make assumptions about how people react to you: "I bet he's looking at my lousy skin." "She thinks I'm stupid." "She's turned off by my shyness." These notions are born of intuition, hunches, and vague misgivings; they have little to do with what the person actually says to you.

Rehearsing

You don't have time to listen when you're rehearsing what to say. Your whole attention is on the preparation and crafting of your next comment. You have to look interested, but your mind is going a mile a minute because you've got a story to tell or a point to make. Some people rehearse whole chains of responses: "I'll say X, then he'll say Y, then I'll say Z," and so on.

Filtering

When you filter, you listen to some things and not to others. You pay only enough attention to see if somebody's angry or unhappy or if you're in emotional danger. Once assured that the communication contains none of those things, you let your mind wander. One woman listens just enough to her son to learn whether he is fighting again at school. Relieved to hear he isn't, she begins thinking about her shopping list. A young man quickly ascertains what kind of mood his girlfriend is in. If she seems happy as she describes her day, his thoughts begin wandering.

Another way people filter is simply to avoid hearing certain things—particularly anything threatening, negative, critical, or unpleasant. It's as if the words were never said: you simply have no memory of them.

Judging

Negative labels have enormous power. If you prejudge someone as stupid or nuts or unqualified, you don't pay much attention to what that person says. You've already written the person off. Hastily judging a statement as immoral, hypocritical, fascist, pinko, or crazy means you've ceased to listen and have begun a knee-jerk reaction. A basic rule of listening is that judgments should only be made after you have heard and evaluated the content of the message.

Dreaming

You're half listening, and something the person says suddenly triggers a chain of private associations. Your neighbor says she's been laid off, and in a flash you're back to the scene where you got fired for playing hearts on those long coffee breaks. Hearts is a great game; there were the great nights of hearts years ago on Sutter Street. And you're gone, only to return a few minutes later as your neighbor says, "I knew you'd understand, but don't tell my husband."

You are more prone to dreaming when you feel bored or anxious. Everybody dreams, and you sometimes need to make herculean efforts to stay tuned in. But if you dream a lot with certain people, it may indicate a lack of commitment to knowing or appreciating them. At the very least, it's a statement that you don't value what they have to say very much.

Identifying

Here you take everything someone tells you and refer it back to your own experience. Someone wants to tell you about a toothache, but that reminds you of the time you had oral surgery for receding gums. You launch into your story before the other person can finish his or hers. Everything you hear reminds you of something that you've felt, done, or suffered. You're so busy with these exciting tales of your life that there's no time to really hear or get to know the other person.

Advising

You are the great problem solver, ready with help and suggestions. You don't have to hear more than a few sentences before you begin searching for the right advice. However, while you are cooking up suggestions and convincing someone to "just try it," you may miss what's most important. You didn't hear the feelings, and you didn't acknowledge the person's pain. He or she still feels basically alone because you couldn't listen and just be there.

Sparring

This listening block has you arguing and debating with people. The other person never feels heard because you're so quick to disagree. In fact, a lot of your focus is on finding things to disagree with. You take strong stands and are very clear about your beliefs and preferences. The way to avoid sparring is to repeat back and acknowledge what you've heard. Look for one thing you might agree with.

One subtype of sparring is the put-down. You use acerbic or sarcastic remarks to dismiss the other person's point of view. For example, Helen starts telling Arthur about her problems in a biology class. Arthur says, "When are you going to have brains enough to drop that class?" Al is feeling overwhelmed with the noise from the TV. When he tells Rebecca, she says, "Oh god, not the TV routine again." The put-down is the standard block to listening in many marriages. It quickly pushes the communication into stereotyped patterns where each person repeats a familiar hostile litany.

A second type of sparring is *discounting*. Discounting is for people who can't stand compliments: "Oh, I didn't do anything." "What do you mean? I was totally lame." "It's nice of you to say, but it's really a very poor attempt." The basic technique of discounting is to run yourself down when you get a compliment. Others never feel satisfied that you really heard their appreciation. And they're right—you didn't.

Being Right

Being right means you will go to any lengths (twist the facts, start shouting, make excuses or accusations, call up past sins) to avoid being wrong. You can't listen to criticism, you can't be corrected, and you can't take suggestions to change. Your convictions are unshakable. And since you won't acknowledge that your mistakes are mistakes, you just keep making them.

Derailing

This listening block is accomplished by suddenly changing the subject. You derail the train of conversation when you get bored or

uncomfortable with a topic. Another way of derailing is with humor. You respond to whatever is said with a joke or quip in order to avoid the discomfort or anxiety in seriously listening to the other person.

Placating

"Right... Right... Absolutely... I know... Of course you are... Incredible... Yes... Really?" You want to be nice, pleasant, supportive. You want people to like you, so you agree with everything. You want to avoid conflict. You may half listen, just enough to get the drift, but you're not really involved. You are placating rather than tuning in and examining what's being said.

ASSESSING YOUR LISTENING BLOCKS

Now that you've read about the listening blocks, you probably have an idea of which ones apply to you. Make a note of each listening block that seems typical of how you avoid listening. Having identified your blocks, you can begin to explore whom you are blocking out. You can also find out which people or types of people typically elicit certain blocks. For example, you may spar with your mother but derail your best friend, or you may placate and rehearse with your boss but do a lot of advising with your children.

In the following exercises, you will explore the listening blocks you typically use, which blocks you tend to use with which people, and how often and in which situations you resort to listening blocks. After you've assessed your listening patterns, the final exercise will help you make small changes that will enable you become a better listener in the future.

EXERCISE. For significant people in your life, write down which listening blocks you typically use. Note that for many people, you may use more than one block.

Person	Blocks
WORK	
Boss _____	_____
Coworkers _____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
Subordinates	
_____	_____
_____	_____
RELATIVES	
Mother _____	_____
Father _____	_____
Siblings	
_____	_____
_____	_____
Others	
_____	_____
_____	_____
HOME	
Mate _____	_____
Children	
_____	_____
_____	_____
Roommate	
_____	_____

FRIENDS

Best friend _____	_____
Same-sex friends	
_____	_____
_____	_____
Opposite-sex friends	
_____	_____
_____	_____

Look at your pattern of blocking. Are you blocking more at home or at work, with same-sex or opposite-sex friends? Do certain people or situations trigger blocking? Do you rely mostly on one kind of blocking, or do you use different blocks with different people and situations?

EXERCISE. To help systematize your exploration of blocking, reserve a day to do take the following five steps. Note that the goal of this exercise isn't to eliminate listening blocks but to increase your awareness of how and when you engage in blocking.

1. Select your most commonly used block.
2. Keep a tally sheet: How many times did you use the block in one day?
3. With whom did you use the block most?
4. What subjects or situations usually triggered the block?
5. When you started to block, how were you feeling? (Circle everything that applies.)

bored anxious irritated hurt jealous
frustrated rushed down criticized
excited preoccupied attacked tired
Other _____

This awareness exercise can be repeated with as many blocks as you care to explore. Keep track of only one block in any given day.

EXERCISE. After gaining more awareness, you may want to change some of your blocking behavior. Reserve another two days to do the following:

1. Select one significant person you'd like to stop blocking.
2. Keep a tally sheet: How many times did you block the person on day one?
3. What blocks did you use?
4. What subjects or situations usually triggered the blocks?
5. On day two, consciously avoid using your blocking gambits with the target person. Try paraphrasing instead (see the next section). Make a real commitment to listening. Notice and write down how you feel and what happens when you resist blocking. (Note: Don't expect miracles. If you have a 50 percent reduction in blocking, that's success.)

Initially, you may feel anxious, bored, or irritated. You may find yourself avoiding one blocking gambit only to cook up another. The conversation may take uncomfortable turns. You may suddenly share and reveal things you previously kept to yourself. Be a scientist. Objectively observe what happens. Evaluate it. Does this feel better than the usual way you operate with the target person? If it doesn't, extend the exercise for a week. Notice how you gradually form the habit of checking how well you are listening.

FOUR STEPS TO EFFECTIVE LISTENING

There are four steps to effective listening: listening actively, listening with empathy, listening with openness, and listening with awareness.

Active Listening

Listening doesn't mean sitting still with your mouth shut. A corpse can do that. Listening is an active process that requires your participation. To fully understand the meaning of a communication, you usually have to ask questions and give feedback. Then, in the give-and-take that follows, you get a fuller appreciation of what's being said. You have gone beyond passively absorbing; you are a collaborator in the communication process. Listening actively involves paraphrasing, clarifying, and giving feedback.

Paraphrasing

To paraphrase means to state in your own words what you think someone just said. Paraphrasing is absolutely necessary to good listening. It keeps you busy trying to understand and know what the other person means, rather than blocking. You can paraphrase by using such lead-ins as the following: "What I hear you saying is..." "In other words..." "So basically how you felt was..." "Let me understand, what was going on for you was..." "What happened was..." "Do you mean...?" You should paraphrase every time someone says something of any importance to you. Try it and you will reap five big dividends:

1. People deeply appreciate feeling heard.
2. Paraphrasing stops escalating anger and cools down crisis.
3. Paraphrasing stops miscommunication. False assumptions, errors, and misinterpretations are corrected on the spot.
4. Paraphrasing helps you remember what was said.
5. When you paraphrase, you'll find it much harder to compare, judge, rehearse, spar, advise, derail, dream, and so on. In fact, paraphrasing is the antidote to most listening blocks.

If it's so great and solves so many listening ills, why doesn't everybody do it? Everybody should. But schools rarely teach basic life skills, and most people learn how to listen by example. There are a lot of bad examples.

To get practice paraphrasing, do the following exercise. Choose a friend who likes to try new things. Explain that you want to improve your listening skills. The friend's job is to tell you a story of something important that happened in his or her life. Basically, all your friend has to do is talk. Your job, at intervals, is to paraphrase what's just been said. Say in your own way what you've heard so far and find out if you're getting it right. Every time you paraphrase, your friend gets to decide if you've really understood. The friend makes corrections in what you said, and you incorporate those corrections in a new attempt at paraphrasing. You keep at it, paraphrasing and correcting, until your friend is satisfied that he or she has been heard.

You may be surprised at how long it sometimes takes to clear up confusion and agree on what's been said. Misconceptions start very easily.

Clarifying

Clarifying often goes along with paraphrasing. It means asking questions until you get more of the picture. Since your intention is to fully understand what's being said, you often have to ask for more information, more background. You have to know the circumstances. Clarifying helps you sharpen your listening focus so that you hear more than vague generalities. You hear events in the context of what someone thought and felt, the relevant history. Clarifying also lets the other person know that you're interested. It gives the message "I'm willing to work at knowing and understanding you."

Giving Feedback

Active listening depends on feedback. You've paraphrased and clarified what was said and hopefully understand it. This is the point at which you can talk about your reactions. In a nonjudgmental way, you can share what you thought, felt, or sensed. This doesn't mean falling back into sparring or identifying as a reaction. It means sharing what happened inside you.

Now is a good time to check your perceptions. You watched the other person's body language and listened to his or her tone of voice. You noticed things that seemed to betray what the person felt. You may have also drawn conclusions about the content of the communication. To check perceptions, you transform what you saw and heard into a tentative description: "I want to understand your feelings—is this [giving a description] the way you feel?" "Listening to what you said, I wonder if [your description] is what's really happening in the situation." All this is done without approval or disapproval, with only a wish to see if your hunch is correct.

Feedback also helps the other person understand the effect of his or her communication. It's another chance to correct errors and misconceptions. It's also a chance for him or her to get a fresh and valuable point of view—yours.

There are three important rules for giving feedback: it has to be immediate, it has to be honest, and it has to be supportive. *Immediate* means giving feedback as soon as you fully understand the communication (after paraphrasing and clarifying). Putting off your feedback, even for a few hours, makes it much less valuable. *Honest* means giving your real reaction—not something out of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*. You don't have to tear into somebody to give your reaction. In fact, brutality is rarely honest. Your feedback should be honest and supportive. You can be gentle, saying what you need to say without causing damage or defensiveness. For example, "I get the feeling that there's something you're not telling me" is more supportive than "You're holding out on me." "I think there's a real possibility that you've made a mistake" is more supportive than "You've been a fool."

Listening with Empathy

There is only one requirement for listening with empathy: simply know that everyone is trying to survive. You don't have to like everyone or agree with everyone, but recognize that you do share the same struggles. Every second of the day, you are trying to survive both physically and psychologically. Every thought, every choice, every movement is designed to preserve your existence.

The outrageous, the inconsiderate, the false, and the violent acts are all strategies to minimize pain (death) and hold on to life. Some people have better survival strategies than others. And some are plainly incompetent, making a mess of everything they touch. They don't live as long physically, and they die an early psychological death from chronic depression or anxiety.

Listening with empathy means saying to yourself, "This is hard to hear, but it's another human being trying to live." Ask yourself, "How might this belief or this decision, though it may ultimately fail, lower this person's anxiety or get some needs met?"

Your ability to listen naturally goes down when someone is angry, criticizes, or wallows in self-pity. If you find listening with empathy difficult, ask these questions:

- ☛ What need is the (anger, etc.) coming from?
- ☛ What danger is this person experiencing?
- ☛ What is he or she asking for?

Listening with Openness

It's difficult to listen when you're judging and finding fault. All the information gets scrambled coming in, while you build a case to dismiss a person or his or her ideas. You have to listen selectively, filtering out everything that makes sense and pouncing on whatever seems false or silly. You collect and hoard the "stupidities" so you can share them later with a sympathetic audience.

Judgments can be very gratifying, but here's how you pay for them:

- ☛ If your opinions have been proven false, you are the last to know.
- ☛ You don't grow intellectually because you only listen to viewpoints you already hold.
- ☛ You dismiss otherwise worthwhile people because you disagree with their ideas.

- ☛ Others lose interest in you because you spar and don't listen.
- ☛ You miss important information.

Nearly everyone has trouble listening openly. You don't want to hear your sacred cows reduced to hamburger. You don't want to face certain facts about yourself. Nor do you want to believe that an unlikable person has said something worth thinking about. You naturally want to argue, to shout it down.

The fear of being wrong has vast proportions. That's because your opinions and beliefs are closely tied to your self-esteem. Being wrong can equal being stupid, bad, or worthless. It would be a great step forward if beliefs and opinions could be seen as temporary hypotheses—held until disproved or modified. Rather than building your self-esteem on being right, you might reform your picture of yourself into that of one who, above all, wants to find the truth.

Listening with openness is a skill you can learn. The following exercise, called a *reversal*, should be tried with someone you trust. Select an old disagreement that isn't too explosive. Each of you states your side of the argument. Now reverse sides and argue for the opposite position. Do it convincingly, really pushing the other person's point of view. Try to win the debate from the other side. Don't stop until you feel immersed in the viewpoint you once opposed. At the end, share with each other what you experienced.

Obviously, you can't practice reversals most of the time. What you can do, as an exercise in openness, is think of yourself as an anthropologist. Imagine that the person you're talking to hails from another country with different customs and ways of thinking, and your job is to find out how the other person's point of view makes sense, to see how it fits with his or her worldview, history, and particular social system.

The most important rule for listening with openness is to hear the whole statement, the entire communication, before judging. Premature evaluations don't make sense because you don't have all the information.

Listening with Awareness

There are two components to listening with awareness. One is to compare what's being said to your own knowledge of history, people, and the way things are. You do this without judgment, simply making note of how a communication fits with known facts.

The second way you listen with awareness is to hear and observe congruence. Does the person's tone of voice, emphasis, facial expression, and posture fit with the content of his or her communication? If someone is telling you that his father has just died, but smiles and leans back comfortably with his hands laced behind his head, the message doesn't make sense. There is no congruence. If body, face, voice, and words don't fit, your job as a listener is to clarify and give feedback about the discrepancy. If you ignore it, you're settling for an incomplete or confusing message.

If you want to practice noticing incongruity, watch some TV comedies. Much of the humor is based on the mismatch of expression and content.

TOTAL LISTENING

People want you to listen, so they look for clues to prove that you are listening. Here's how to be a total listener:

- Maintain good eye contact.
- Lean slightly forward.
- Reinforce the speaker by nodding or paraphrasing.
- Clarify by asking questions.
- Actively move away from distractions.
- Be committed to understanding what was said, even if you're angry or upset.

LISTENING FOR COUPLES

Perhaps the most important application for your listening skills is when you communicate with your partner. A process called *reciprocal communication* provides a structure in which you can really hear each other. Here's how it works. When you're discussing a topic that is a conflict area for you, take turns being the speaker and the listener, switching places after five minutes.

When you're the speaker:

- Explain your point of view briefly and succinctly.
- Avoid blaming and name-calling. Don't accuse and don't focus on your partner's failings.
- Talk in terms of yourself and your experience. Focus on what you want and what you feel.

When you're the listener:

- Give your full attention so that you can really understand your partner's feelings, opinions, and needs.
- Don't disagree, argue, or correct anything your partner says.
- You can ask questions to clarify an issue but not to debate and make counterpoints.

After the speaker describes his or her side of the issue for five minutes, the listener summarizes, using the paraphrasing skills discussed earlier. If the listener's summary leaves out something important, or the listener has misunderstood, the speaker can clarify and explain again until he or she feels completely heard.

When the first round of expressing and listening is over, it's time to switch places. The speaker becomes the listener, and vice versa. Follow exactly the same instructions until the second speaker feels thoroughly understood.

Reciprocal communication can be used with practically any problematic issue. Its main virtues are that it slows down communication so that conflicts are less likely to escalate and it promotes clarity about the needs and feelings of each partner.