

## CONTENTS

|   |          |
|---|----------|
| <b>LEVEL ONE: LISTENING.....</b>              | <b>2</b> |
| Listening without Comprehension.....          | 2        |
| Listening with Unconfirmed Comprehension..... | 2        |
| <b>LEVEL TWO: ACTIVE LISTENING .....</b>      | <b>3</b> |
| Nonverbal active listening Behaviors....      | 4        |
| Verbal Active Listening Behaviors.....        | 4        |
| Reflecting .....                              | 4        |
| Prompting .....                               | 5        |
| <b>LEVEL THREE: EMPATHIC LISTENING.....</b>   | <b>6</b> |
| Emotional Intelligence .....                  | 7        |
| A Singular Activity .....                     | 7        |
| <b>LISTENING EXAMPLE .....</b>                | <b>8</b> |

## THE THREE LEVELS OF LISTENING

Listening is one of the most important and often used interpersonal skills. Listening ensures one has needed information, builds trust, reduces conflict, motivates others, and fosters commitment.

Yet people receive comparatively little listening training. One reason people do not receive more listening training is because many people believe they are already good listeners. After all, they have been listening their entire lives! One study of over 8,000 people across different industries found that nearly all the participants believed their communications skills were equal to or better than their coworkers<sup>1</sup>. Another study showed that the average person only listens at about 25% efficiency<sup>2</sup>. This implies that most people think they are good listeners, but they are not.

The most effective listeners apply the Three Levels of Listening, which are:

1. Listening
2. Active Listening
3. Empathic Listening

This booklet will help you become a better listener as you apply the Three Levels of Listening.

After reading this booklet, you will be able to:

- Apply the 3 Levels of Listening
- Empathize without hijacking the conversation
- Avoid one question you should never ask
- Diffuse conflict even if you do not know what to say
- Identify your listening blind spots

<sup>1</sup> Williams, S. (n.d.). Retrieved April 9, 2020, from <http://www.wright.edu/~scott.williams/LeaderLetter/listening.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

## Level One: Listening

Level One listening is giving attention to sounds. This level of listening is perfect for listening to the radio, the rain, the traffic, etc., but listening to another person requires much more. It requires one to hear, interpret, clarify, validate, and empathize. Listening at Level One is only hearing with some interpretation.

People most often listen at Level One. Level One listening ranges from listening without comprehension to listening with unconfirmed comprehension.

### *Listening Without Comprehension*

Many spouses have been accused of listening without comprehension. One spouse will declare, "You're not listening to me!" The other will defend, "Yes I am." The spouse will counter, "Then what did I just say?" The other will mutter a few of the words the other spoke hoping to piece them together in a string that has some semblance to what the spouse was saying. The spouse then exhales in disgust and declares, "That's not what I said." That is listening without comprehension. Everyone is guilty of this.

Some reasons one may listen without comprehending include:

- *Disinterest* – The topic does not directly affect the listener, so the listener is disinterested.
- *Distraction* – The listener is focused on an unrelated topic while the speaker attempts to capture the listener's attention.
- *Overload* – ambient noise, multiple people talking at once, lack of subject knowledge, excessive jargon or acronyms, etc.
- *Emotions* - As emotions increase, the listener's ability to actively listen

decreases. The listener may have an emotional reaction to a single point and lock in on that point missing the overall message.

- *Values and Beliefs* - Values and beliefs can be a significant roadblock to listening. If one feels their values or beliefs are threatened, emotions increase and they may tune out the speaker as they evaluate the threat.
- *Nonverbal Messages* - Many communication experts believe that people communicate about 55 percent through nonverbal cues and body language. If nonverbal and verbal messages conflict, people are inclined to believe the nonverbal cues. Attention to nonverbal cues increases the quality of the listening, but incongruent nonverbal cues can distract the listener as they attempt to reconcile the body language with the words and tone.
- *Human Factors* – Hearing impairment, speech impediments, strong accents, fatigue, or poor communication skills may make it difficult for the listener to comprehend what the speaker is saying.

---

### *DO YOU LISTEN OR DO YOU JUST WAIT TO TALK?*

---

### *Listening with Unconfirmed Comprehension*

In the movie *Pulp Fiction*, Mia Wallace (Uma Thurman) asks Vincent Vega (John Travolta), "When in conversation, do you listen, or wait to talk?" "Waiting to talk" is listening with unconfirmed comprehension. One who is "waiting to talk" has thought ahead of the speaker. They have assumed they comprehend

what the speaker is trying to say and are already formulating a response.

---

**PEOPLE THINK 25 TIMES FASTER  
THAN THEY CAN SPEAK**

---

Thinking ahead is natural considering the average person speaks at only about 160 words per minute<sup>3</sup>, while the human brain can think at 4,000 words per minute<sup>4</sup>. That is 25 times faster than the average person can speak! This explains why some think ahead of the speaker then draw erroneous conclusions and, at worst, cut off the speaker to interject ideas that may be unrelated to what the speaker is trying to say.

Another reason some think ahead of the speaker is because the brain takes shortcuts to increase its efficiency<sup>5</sup>. These shortcuts often happen subconsciously and cause the listener to jump to erroneous conclusions. These shortcuts are often apparent when puzzling over riddles. Here is one to consider:

*You see a boat filled with people, yet there isn't a single person on board. How is that possible?*

This brain teaser can be perplexing for some. The brain is picturing a boat filled with people while trying to reconcile the fact that no one is on board.

So, how can one see a boat filled with people without there being a single person on board?

They are all married.

The brain jumped to the erroneous conclusion that "filled with people" relates to "single person." It is this false assumption that makes the riddle challenging.

---

<sup>3</sup> Heingartner, D. (2003, October 2). Now Hear This, Quickly. Retrieved April 9, 2020, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/10/02/technology/now-hear-this-quickly.html>

<sup>4</sup> Beck, J. (2016, November 23). The Running Conversation in Your Head. Retrieved April 9, 2020, from

In the same way, the brain creates erroneous connections that lead to false assumptions when one listens to another person. The listener's brain subconsciously takes shortcuts based on previous experience to draw conclusions about what the speaker is saying, and the listener is completely unaware! Even when the listener is really trying to listen!

For example, a CEO is discussing the company's financial challenges with other senior leaders. At the conclusion of that discussion, the CEO directs the leaders to "trim the fat." Later that week, one of the vice presidents submits a proposal to the CEO that outlines a plan for employee layoffs in her division. She declares, "This is how we will 'trim the fat' in my division." She then learns that the CEO did not intend to lay off employees. The CEO explains that when he said to "trim the fat," he was saying they needed to control discretionary expenses. The VP erroneously assumed he wanted to lay off employees because other companies she had worked for used the phrase "trim the fat" when discussing layoffs. Her brain had created a connection between "trim the fat" and layoffs which caused her to jump to an erroneous conclusion.

Listening at Level One can, at worst, damage relationships and, at best, lead to misunderstandings. If one wants to become a better listener, he must more frequently listen at levels above Level One.

### **Level Two: Active Listening**

The quality of one's listening is not measured by what was heard, but by what the speaker wants the listener to understand. Therefore, listening occurs when the listener truly understands what the speaker is trying to convey, *even when the*

<https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2016/11/figuring-out-how-and-why-we-talk-to-ourselves/508487/1>

<sup>5</sup> National Geographic Society. (2015, March 9). Mental Shortcuts. Retrieved April 9, 2020, from <https://www.nationalgeographic.org/media/mental-shortcuts/>

*speaker struggles to articulate it.* That is listening at Level Two.

---

*THE QUALITY OF ONE'S LISTENING IS NOT MEASURED BY WHAT WAS HEARD, BUT BY WHAT THE SPEAKER WANTS THE LISTENER TO UNDERSTAND*

---

Level Two listening is active listening. Active listening includes nonverbal and verbal behaviors that invite the speaker to continue, encourage the speaker to elaborate, and verify the listener understands what the speaker is saying.

#### *Nonverbal Active Listening Behaviors*

As mentioned previously, about 55% of what is communicated is communicated nonverbally. Therefore, people who actively listen are purposeful with their body language. They intentionally do the following as appropriate:

- *Smile* to convey concern, friendship, etc.
- *Nod* to confirm agreement or understanding.
- *Maintain eye contact* to convey interest, connect, and read emotion.
- *Lean in* to convey engagement.
- *Remove distractions* (e.g. cell phone) to give the speaker undivided attention.

Each of these, and other nonverbal behaviors, convey the listener's interest and attentiveness.

#### *Verbal Active Listening Behaviors*

Active listening also includes verbal behaviors such as:

- *Silence* – just listen
- *Verbal affirmations* such as “I see,” “I understand,” “I know,” etc.
- *Reflecting*
- *Prompting*

Active listening is not offering opinions, advising, or sharing experiences. Each are valuable and often expected elements of a conversation, but the listener stops listening once the listener starts talking. The listener should reserve these activities, as helpful as they may be, until the speaker has said all that can be said and the listener understands what the speaker is thinking, feeling, and saying.

Note that the listener should suspend offering their opinion until the speaker has said all that *can* be said. This is very different than waiting until the speaker has said all that *needs* to be said. An ineffective listener assumes they have heard all they *need* to hear to understand what the speaker is thinking, feeling and saying, and interjects their ideas prematurely. An effective listener encourages the speaker to continue until the speaker has said all that *can* be said. Then the listener clarifies and probes until they fully understand what the speaker is thinking, feeling, and saying.

---

*EFFECTIVE LISTENERS ENCOURAGE THE SPEAKER TO CONTINUE UNTIL THE SPEAKER HAS SAID ALL THAT CAN BE SAID*

---

The effective listener achieves that level of understanding by reflecting and prompting. These two skills are imperative for Level Two listening and separate active listening from pseudo active listening. Pseudo active listening is Level One listening disguised as active listening. The listener displays many of the active listening nonverbal behaviors and adds verbal affirmations to convey they are listening, though they are not.

#### *Reflecting*

Reflecting is the most effective tool in the listener's toolbox and differentiates active listeners from pseudo active listeners. Reflecting

is restating, paraphrasing, or summarizing what the speaker says. Reflecting is powerful because it requires the listener to listen intently, remember what the speaker says, interpret what the speaker is trying to convey, and translate it into their own words. The process of listening, remembering, interpreting, and translating is listening at the highest level and the hallmark of active listening.

---

*TO SPEAK AND BE TRULY  
UNDERSTOOD IS ONE OF THE MOST  
GRATIFYING HUMAN EXPERIENCES*

---

To speak and be truly understood is one of the most gratifying human experiences. Reflecting confirms for the speaker that the listener was truly listening, and the speaker feels understood, valued, and validated.

#### *Prompting*

Prompting encourages the speaker to talk more so the listener can listen more. Prompting is the second most effective tool in the listener's toolbox. It is second to reflecting because reflecting requires the listener to listen, while prompting can lead the listener to "wait to talk." Therefore, effective listeners initially restate, and continue to do so, until the listener needs the speaker to clarify, go deeper, or consider solutions. Then the listener may prompt while continuing to restate.

Effective listeners offer three types of prompts into the conversation:

- *Clarifying prompts*
- *Probing prompts*
- *Exploratory prompts*

*Clarifying prompts* encourage the speaker to elaborate to help the listener better understand what the speaker is conveying. Examples of clarifying prompts are:

- Tell me more about...
- Could you give me an example of that?
- What did you mean when you said...?
- Did I hear you say...?
- Could you elaborate on that?
- How did that make you feel?

*Probing prompts* invite the speaker to think beyond preconceived ideas and challenge the speaker to think critically. Examples of probing prompts are:

- What led you to that conclusion?
- What are your assumptions?
- What do you know to be true? How do you know it?
- How does this relate to that?
- What would be the opposing opinion?
- If you were in their position, how would you feel?
- Where could this lead?
- What could be the ramifications?
- What would be the ideal outcome?

When probing, one question the listener should normally avoid is why/you questions. Questions that begin with "Why did you...?", "Why do you...?", "Why would you...?", etc. feel accusatory and put the other person on the defensive. Switch "why" questions to "what" questions. For example, instead of asking, "Why did you believe that?" ask "What led you to believe that?"

*Exploratory prompts* invite the speaker to formulate and consider solutions. Exploratory prompts are not solutions or intended to steer the speaker to the listener's solutions. Exploratory prompts encourage the speaker to verbalize and criticize ideas as the listener acts as a sounding board. Here are some examples of exploratory prompts:

- What solutions have you considered?
- What are the pros and cons of that idea?
- What might be the result if you...?
- What else might work...?
- Who could help you?

- What resources do you have?

Exploratory prompts will help the speaker problem-solve if the speaker has sufficient knowledge, experience, skills, confidence, and motivation to solve the problem. If the speaker does not, the listener may switch from listening to advising. It is best for the listener to ask the speaker if he would like advice before offering advice or the advice may seem presumptuous.

Active Listening is truly listening and includes verbal and nonverbal behaviors that invite the speaker to continue, encourage the speaker to elaborate, and verify the listener understands what the speaker is trying to convey. But active listening is insufficient in highly emotional conversations. When emotions are high or there is interpersonal conflict, the listener should move to Level Three: Empathic Listening.

### **Level Three: Empathic Listening**

Empathic listening is listening with empathy and is a powerful listening method when the speaker's emotions are high. Empathic listening is not the listener saying, "I know how you feel," or sharing personal experiences to illustrate the listener can relate. In fact, the listener should refrain from such comments because they hijack the conversation and turn the focus of the conversation from the speaker to the listener. The speaker then perceives the listener to be self-interested instead of interested which inhibits the conversation and jeopardizes the connection.

Stephen R. Covey, author of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, explained, "Empathic listening gets inside another person's frame of reference. You look out through it, you see the world the way they see the world, you understand their paradigm, you understand how they feel...The essence of empathic listening is...that you fully, deeply, understand

that person...In empathic listening, you listen with your ears, but you also, and more importantly, listen with your eyes and with your heart. You listen for feeling..."<sup>6</sup>

---

*EMPATHIC LISTENING IS LISTENING WITH  
THE HEART TO FULLY, DEEPLY,  
UNDERSTAND THE OTHER PERSON.*

---

Empathic listening is similar to active listening with one significant difference. Active listening is, in part, reflecting what the speaker is *saying*; empathic listening is reflecting what the speaker is *feeling*.

### *Emotional Intelligence*

Empathic listening is emotional intelligence in action. Emotional intelligence (EQ) is recognizing and valuing one's own and others' emotions and choosing an appropriate response. EQ may sound simple, but it is contrary to how the human brain functions.

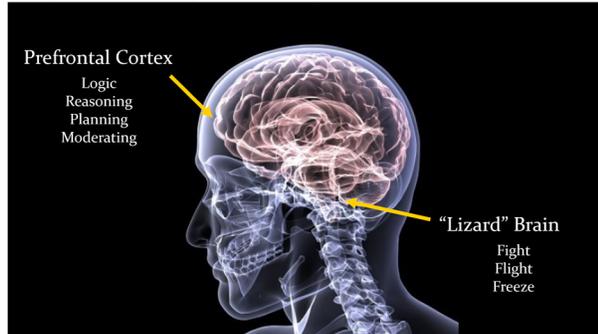
There is a primitive part of the brain, sometimes called the reptilian or "lizard brain," located at the base of the brain near the brain stem. This part of the brain is designed to protect life when threatened. When one perceives a threat, the lizard brain engages. It triggers a fight, flight, or freeze response to mitigate the threat. It is very efficient, but not very logical. The lizard brain will likely engage if an assailant holds a knife to one's throat and it will also likely engage if an employee has a heated argument with their boss. The threat levels in these examples are significantly different, yet the lizard brain responds as if both are life threatening.

When the lizard brain engages, the logical part of the brain, the prefrontal cortex, disengages. In this state, it is difficult for the speaker to

---

<sup>6</sup> Institute of Management Foundation. (1998). *Stephen R. Covey: the seven habits of highly effective people*. Corby.

articulate what they need to say or effectively respond to prompting from the listener.



The lizard brain limits thinking to three decisions: fly, flee, or freeze. Those are the only choices the lizard brain offers so the individual may say or do something they will later regret (e.g. yell at their boss, say something hurtful to their spouse, throw something, shut down, walk out, etc.). In this circumstance, the listener's primary objective is to disengage the speaker's lizard brain and reengage the logical brain.

Empathic listening disengages the lizard brain. The emotions one feels when threatened are the alarm system that trigger the lizard brain. The listener may be in direct conflict with the speaker or the speaker may simply believe the listener will not understand what the speaker is feeling. Either opinion causes the speaker to label the listener as a threat and sets off the alarm. Reflecting the emotions through empathic listening disarms the alarm system in the brain just like punching a code in a keypad disarms an alarm in a home. When the listener reflects the feelings and validates the emotions, the speaker no longer sees the listener as the threat, but sees the listener as the reassuring police officer who is searching the home to neutralize the threat or verify there is no threat.

Empathic listening enables the listener to diffuse conflict even if the listener does not know how to resolve the issue. The listener simply reflects the speaker's feelings and validates the emotions until the emotions subside; then the listener can switch from empathic listening to active listening.

### A Singular Activity

Empathic listening is often a singular activity; the listener will likely need to suspend all other listening activities until the emotions subside. This may require the listener to limit comments and questions to empathic phrases. Here are some examples of empathic phrases that validate the emotions and disengage the lizard brain. Note that each labels a feeling (underlined).

- So, you're concerned about...
- You felt cheated.
- You feel I'm being unsympathetic.
- You are afraid of how that may impact your team.
- That angered you.
- I can see you're hurting.
- You felt that was unfair.
- That's very sad.
- You feel betrayed.
- That must be frustrating for you.

Certain activities will sabotage active listening. Here are a few examples:

- *Advising* – You should...
- *Consoling* – It'll be okay.
- *Discounting* – You shouldn't feel that way.
- *Sharing Experiences* – I was once in a similar situation...
- *Defending* – But I didn't...
- *Correcting* – I don't think that's what was intended.
- *Probing* – What led you to think that?
- *Topping* – Oh, that's nothing! I once...
- *Judging* – You're not being reasonable.

Each of these may be helpful in some conversations but are incompatible with empathic listening. Empathic listening is reflecting the speaker's feelings and nothing more. Empathic listening requires the listener to be disciplined. The listener must repress the urge to fix the speaker's problem, defend a point

of view, minimize the speaker's feelings, correct the speaker's misconceptions, or hijack the conversation with personal experiences.

If emotions are high or the speaker is in conflict with the listener, empathic listening can validate the speakers' feelings, help the speaker feel

---

**EMPATHIC LISTENING IS REFLECTING  
THE SPEAKER'S FEELINGS AND  
NOTHING MORE.**

---

heard and understood, and diffuse conflict. Once the emotions have subsided, the listener can switch to active listening.

### **Listening Example**

Consider this example and observe how the supervisor uses active and empathic listening.

Project Lead: Hi. Would you have a few minutes to talk about the Lansing project?

Supervisor: Sure. Come in.

*The supervisor stands up from her desk as she motions for the employee to sit in one of the two chairs on the other side of her desk. The supervisor sits next to her in the other chair so she is not behind the barrier of her desk and is removed from distractions (e.g. computer screen, phone, etc.).* (nonverbal active listening behavior)

Project Lead: Uh, I don't think we will finish the Lansing project by the deadline.

*The supervisor nods and maintains eye contact.* (nonverbal active listening behavior)

Supervisor: Tell me more. (verbal active listening behavior)

Project Lead: Well, Lansing is pushing to expand the scope, some of the materials we ordered are backordered, and IT hasn't been able to resolve the compatibility issues.

Supervisor: You do have a number of things working against you. (reflecting)

Project Lead: Yes, and with all that's going on I don't how we'll finish it by the deadline.

Supervisor: That will certainly be a challenge. (reflecting) Are there other contributing factors? (probing)

Project Lead: Well, yes. We thought we would have completed most of the major milestones by now, but the delays could push us into the holiday season when most of the team members have scheduled vacation.

Supervisor: So, the project is behind schedule and you're going to be shorthanded. (reflecting) It could be difficult to get the project back on track. What else is on your mind? (probing)

Project Lead: Well, I don't think you should have assigned this project to me.

Supervisor: What do you mean by that? (clarifying)

Project Lead: I already had too much on my plate and didn't have the bandwidth to take on this project.

Supervisor: So, you feel it was unfair of me to assign this project to you. (empathic listening)

Project Lead: Yes, with all that I was doing, it should have been assigned to another project lead.

Supervisor: What else is troubling you? (probing)

Project Lead: You always seem to pile more on me than you do the other project leads.

Supervisor: You must feel like I've taken advantage of you. (empathic listening)

Project Lead: Well, no, I don't feel like you've taken advantage of me; I just don't feel appreciated.

Supervisor: I can see how you could feel that way. (empathic listening) I need to be better at recognizing your contribution. What else can I do to make it right? (exploratory prompt)

Project Lead: I...I don't know. I just feel overwhelmed.

Supervisor: You do have a lot on your plate. (reflecting) It's understandable that you would feel stressed. (empathic listening)

Project Lead: Yes, I have been stressed.

Supervisor: Anyone would be if they carried your load and was dealing with the issues you're facing. (empathic listening) Where do we go from here? (exploratory prompt)

Project Lead: I don't know. I guess I could call Lansing and remind them of the scope and explain how some of their requests are outside the scope of the project.

Supervisor: That's a good idea. What else could you do? (exploratory prompt)

Project Lead: We could look for another vendor that could supply the backordered materials. If we get the materials by next week, we could get back on track enough to let everyone take their PTO.

Supervisor: Good! What about the IT issue? (exploratory prompt)

Project Lead: I don't know what to do about that.

Supervisor: Have any of the other project teams dealt with similar compatibility issues? (exploratory prompt)

Project Lead: Now that you mention it, I think Kristen's team had similar issue. I could talk to her to find out how they resolved it.

Supervisor: That sounds like a good plan. What can I do to help you? (exploratory prompt)

Project Lead: In the future, can we meet to discuss my workload before you assign me to a project?

Supervisor: Of course. Thank you for bringing this to my attention. And thank you for all that you're doing to see the project through.

In this scenario, the supervisor initially employed active listening and then switched to empathic listening as the conversation became more emotionally charged. Note that the supervisor did not become defensive as the project lead asserted the supervisor was wrong to have assigned the project to the project lead. The supervisor listened empathically until the emotions subsided and then switched back to active listening.

## Conclusion

Listening is one of the most important interpersonal skills. The best listeners transcend Level One: Listening and employ Level Two: Active Listening and Level Three: Empathic Listening appropriately for the circumstances. They demonstrate interest in the speaker and avoid activities that hijack the conversation or imply self-interest. They are intentional with their verbal and nonverbal behaviors. They prompt to clarify, probe, and explore solutions. And they acknowledge, label and validate feelings to diffuse conflict and disengage the lizard brain. In doing so, they gift the speaker with one of the most gratifying human experiences: to be heard and understood.



**About the Author:** Rico Maranto is a Sr. Consultant for PeopleCore, Inc. He is a learning and development professional with over 25 years' experience who has trained, coached, and mentored thousands of leaders. He is an experienced leader, international speaker, contributing author of the book *Servant Leadership in Action*, and has a master's degree in Organization Leadership. Rico is best known for his energy and enthusiasm and his training's practicality and applicability.