

How To Be a Success at Everything

Mastering The Fine Art of Not Talking

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[Photo: Symphonie/Getty Images]

A strategist and playwright explains the power of clearing listening—which is not to tune out, but rather, lean into what the other person is saying.

If you're seeking to become a better version of yourself, there are plenty of people and organizations willing to offer (or sell) a helping hand. Don't get me wrong, I appreciate that there are helpers. We need their lived experiences and expertise to help guide and direct us and their frameworks help make sense of our complex lives.

And yet, despite this readily available information, the rising tide of resignations, quiet quitting, and burnout across every sector shows few signs of slowing down. In the wake of all of this, I started to wonder if the industry of help was missing something more fundamental.

In addition to my "day job" as a strategist, I'm also a produced playwright. My work in the theater increasingly informs the way I function in the world and at my workplace in ways I couldn't have predicted.

One way involves a method of helping people be present in the room, known as clearing listening. At the start of a conversation, meeting, or rehearsal, each member of the group

shares what is on their mind. For example, perhaps they are thinking about the grocery shopping they must do, the unsent email they need to send, their shoulder injury, or something as simple as wanting a cup of coffee. The other members of the group simply listen without any verbal interjections. When the person stops talking, the others say “thank you” and the next person starts.

The first time I did this exercise, I admit I was itching to say something. Itching to acknowledge someone else’s trouble, to share something from my own experience that might help, to offer to pitch in, to participate in their storytelling. However, the more I grew the muscle of clearing listening—which is not to tune out, but rather, to lean into what the person is saying—the more I understood its power.

Then I thought to myself, if I could do this well for a few minutes, what about 15, 30, or even a full hour? I enlisted the help of a friend, and the two of us began a monthly listening session. We’d meet in a coffee shop and one of us would speak for a length of time (we started with 15 minutes), while the other listened. Then we’d swap the next time we met. The effects were truly unexpected, granting us four valuable things.

PRESENCE

When I truly focused on my friend’s story, I started to notice how engaged I was in the conversation. I remembered details. I could picture certain circumstances. I noticed her speech patterns and her tone with remarkable clarity. For someone I had known for such a long time, this was an eye-opening experience. Where had I been in the past conversations? Had I really been present or simply just there?

CALM

As I listened without the expectation of offering anything other than holding space, I started to feel a calm wash over me. I didn’t have to think of a piece of advice, pull out some wisdom from my own experience, or even conjure up the energy to react. I, too, was somehow being listened to, simply by not saying a word.

PERSPECTIVE

When it was my turn to speak, I was amazed to discover what came out of my mouth. It wasn’t always the most stressful or pressing thing in my life, but sometimes something more hidden, more important, but deprioritized because it didn’t seem as interesting as the others.

VISIBILITY

The power of being seen without distraction was remarkable in a world that has grown increasingly connected, yet also more isolated and remote due in part to the use of screens in every aspect of our daily lives. I got over the initial trepidation of not being interesting enough. I stopped thinking about how I was delivering and thought instead about what I was saying. Eventually, I stopped “performing” altogether.

I recently shared this practice with another friend, who took it upon herself to start her own session with another person. She reported back similar feelings. I wasn't surprised to learn she had had a valuable experience also, because this exercise is one of the most inclusive activities I have ever taken part in.

An added benefit of not evaluating what the person is saying is to take their experience at face value—to believe them. I am not trained in this practice, I'm just the beneficiary of it. I am still learning how to become a better listener every day while I incorporate it into my daily interactions.

But the strategist in me sees the benefits in both the short and long term.

What if an entire company galvanized itself around listening?

What would that feel like?

Would it help us alleviate some burnout and stress that many modern workplaces create?

Would it bring quieter people to the table more often, allowing them to demonstrate their deep power of presence and observation?

Would it create better environments for more candid conversations?

Would we be more productive, more purposeful?

The possibilities are endless, but for now, I'll simply advocate for listening as its own thing, worthy of our time, relationships, and energy.