

What's Your Listening Style?

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A good manager knows that listening is important, but too few people know how to listen well. Even common techniques, like “active listening” can be counterproductive. After all, merely sharing the amount of speaking time, or parroting back what a speaker said, does not achieve understanding.

Consider three common conversations:

Employee: “I’m worried about my presentation for the board meeting.”

Supervisor: “Oh, you’re doing great. It took me years before I could present without being nervous.”

Colleague A: “I really need a vacation.”

Colleague B: “You should go to this rustic resort in the mountains. I just came back from there and it was the best vacation I’ve had in years. I’ll send you the info.”

Patient: “I’m scared about this procedure.”

Clinician: “Your surgeon has done hundreds of these. The complication rate is low.”

The well-intentioned responses above are not egregious, but they don’t meet the speakers’ needs or address their concerns. The employee worried about the board meeting may want

critical feedback rather than premature reassurance, Colleague A's flippant statement about needing a vacation may portend deeper unstated problems not addressed by an itinerary, and the patient may have had relevant concerns underlying their emotions which are missed through attempted reassurance.

These examples serve to illustrate an important aspect of leadership: Most of us miss opportunities in interactions through the default ways we listen. Like other critical communication skills, listening well depends on awareness of the goals, our own habits, and choosing how to respond. The good news is, with practice, we can all be more effective listeners.

Styles of Listening

Learning to listen well begins with understanding what type of listener you are. In our work as both health care clinicians in critical care and debriefing experts who teach how to optimize learning conversations, we have observed four distinct listening styles:

- An **analytical listener** aims to analyze a problem from a neutral starting point.
- A **relational listener** aims to build connection and understand the emotions underlying a message.
- A **critical listener** aims to judge both the content of the conversation and the reliability of the speaker themselves.
- A **task-focused listener** shapes a conversation towards efficient transfer of important information.

Developing the ability to shift dynamically between these styles can lead to impactful conversations by matching the speaker's needs with the most appropriate listening technique. This is the first step to improving your listening.

5 Ways to Improve Your Listening

Becoming a better listener doesn't only mean understanding how you listen, it requires taking certain actions, too. We outline the five most important things listeners can do to improve.

1. Establish why you are listening.

There are myriad reasons why we listen the way we do: to be efficient, to avoid conflict, to gain attention, to support, or simply to entertain. When those reasons are repeatedly (and perhaps unconsciously) prioritized, we shortchange other listening goals.

When entering a conversation, consider reflecting briefly on what the goals of the conversation are, and how best you can listen in that moment. Might the speaker be seeking honest critique, an analytical reflection or an emotional connection? We may not have the bandwidth to fully listen— i.e., we're surface listening— and should share that with the other person who may be looking for more than we can give in that moment.

2. Recognize how you usually listen.

Our “usual” listening style may be sabotaging our goals. We may have received positive feedback for being consistently efficient, funny, articulate, or supportive, but the default style being used may preclude applying different listening styles to achieve other goals. For example, time-pressured environments often require task-oriented or critical listening styles in order to make rapid decisions. While that may be consistently effective at work, it may backfire when applied frequently at home to family and friends who may need something more than rapid decision support.

Child: “I’m not going to school today. I have no friends.”

Parent: “Of course you have friends! You were just invited to Sally’s birthday party. At recess today, say hello to three new kids.”

When expressions of emotion are met with task-oriented or critical listening styles, as in the above example, we may miss valuable opportunities to better understand underlying values and concerns or even gain actionable information by exploring or offering empathy through validation. In these situations, providing coaching, or false reassurance such as a friendly “you’ll be fine,” can make people feel unheard and discouraged from sharing.

3. Be aware of who is the focus of attention.

Beyond listening styles, the way we insert ourselves into the speaker’s narrative shifts the focus of conversational attention. We often assume that interjecting with our own personal stories is an empathic and relationship-building move, but it precludes hearing the other’s whole message. While it can be fun to interject, and is sometimes helpful to promote connection, when done without awareness it runs the risk of steering the conversation away from the speaker without redirecting back. For example, when doctors interject a personal comment in an empathic attempt to connect, research shows the conversation rarely returns to the patient’s concern.

When a listener is aware of the impact of interjecting and maintains curiosity about the speaker’s message, it is possible to share the focus without losing the speaker’s message through redirecting back to the speaker. This might be done through sharing a personal thought and then returning the focus:

Colleague A: “I really need a vacation.”

Colleague B: “I just came back from a rustic resort in the mountains, and it was so restorative. I’m curious what’s going on with you. Feel like talking?”

4. Adapt the listening style to achieve conversational goals.

With increasing stressors, our executive functioning and cognitive flexibility are taxed, making it harder to adjust from our default listening style. That’s okay. Staying focused on the speaker and the goals will help you adapt to the needs of the situation. In a patient expressing fear, responding with validation and curiosity may allow the clinician to capture valuable information and more effectively address the patient’s needs:

Patient: "I'm scared about this procedure."

Clinician: "Even though the complication rate is very low it's normal to be scared. It's a big procedure. [Pause.] What's scaring you the most?"

The clinician's first impulse is to respond with reassurance, providing data on outcomes. It may feel unnatural to drop that entirely. By also acknowledging and exploring the emotion expressed, there's a better chance the patient will feel heard and validated. The clinician may learn that in this patient's last procedure she developed a dangerous heart rhythm, or that her brother recently had a procedure that led to a stroke. Beyond helping the patient feel heard, learning of complications would radically change how the clinician approached the patient's care before and during the procedure.

5. Ask: Am I missing something?

It may be hard to ascertain the conversational goals if the speaker who initiates the conversation does not know what they are hoping to get out of it. Ambiguity about goals, uncertainty about sharing vulnerability, unexamined emotions, and logistical pressures may be part of the discovery process. Because we profoundly shape this process through the ways in which we listen, we should consider whether the conversation at hand seems to be productive and what we may be missing.

Taking a couple of seconds to pause and think before an automatic response may help reveal a subtler, important opportunity. If that problem-solving and busy parent has a longer-term goal of connecting and understanding what their child is going through, they may have better success starting off with a more relational listening style:

Child: "I am not going to school today. I have no friends."

Parent: "That's a tough feeling to have. [Pause] Do you feel like talking about it?"

Resisting the urge to reassure or offer solutions and inviting more detail to better understand what's behind a fraught statement is a useful analytical listening technique that can be incorporated into a conversation to help direct your listening style when urgent decision-making is not necessary.

The Impact of Better Listening

Consider, again, the nervous employee preparing for a presentation. What would happen if the supervisor instead responded with something like this:

Employee: "I'm worried about my presentation for the board meeting."

Supervisor: "I was nervous when I started presenting, too. What's worrying you?"

This response, so different from the original comment ("Oh, you're doing great. It took me years before I could present without being nervous") shows the employee that the manager has heard the worry behind the concern.

Experimenting with how we listen solidifies our active partnership in conversations. It expands the space for others to reveal what really matters to them and can actually be more efficient if

we can get to the heart of the matter more deliberately. Through intentionally applying new ways to listen, we build relationships, understand others, and collaborate and problem-solve more effectively.