

# Deep Listening

Impact beyond words

A WHITE PAPER BY

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# Listening is a leadership issue

'The most important thing in communication is hearing what isn't said.'

PETER DRUCKER

Over 55%<sup>1</sup> of your day is spent listening; yet only 2% of us have been trained in how to listen. Most of us do not have any understanding of what makes a great listener.

The impact of limited listening is back-to-back meetings that create poor communication, conflict, confusion and chaos. This results in ineffective teams and projects that are consistently late and more costly than originally budgeted.

The cost of not listening is obvious, but we choose not to address it because we haven't been taught how to listen.

For individuals, leaders, teams and organisations the most impactful communication isn't about how eloquently and persuasively you **spea**k, but how consciously, deliberately and skilfully you **listen** to your employees, customers and markets.

Organisations need leaders who will listen to their teams and customers deeply to make a transformational impact.

As a leader, you have more opportunity than anyone else in your organisation to listen. The question your team, organisation and customers are asking is: **Are you a role model for listening?**

To make the impact you need to as a leader, you need to consider how you are role modelling *deep listening*.

By focusing on a small improvement to the skill you spend half your day using, you will create an additional one day per month in your schedule.

Imagine the real impact you could make with an additional day in your schedule.

## Top 3 Costs of Poor Listening

### 1. Destructive meetings

The impact of poor listening is simple to measure. It shows up in meetings that run over time and are dominated by a few people. The dialogue is robotic and progress is stilted during and after the meeting. It shows up in action items not progressing from prior meetings due to miscommunication.

**Destructive meetings create frustration and tension in the workplace.**

Maybe you actioned something that you misunderstood. These organisations bear the high cost of employee turnover or employees who are actively disengaged in their workplace because they feel that they are not being listened to by their managers.<sup>2</sup> There is significant impact to profit, market share and customer satisfaction.

### 2. Random activity

People are busy in your organisation, but they are working on the things they think they heard rather than what your customers actually need from them. Random activity shows up in your results as projects run overtime and over budget. People are very busy but lack effectiveness and impact.

**Random activity creates exhausted people and inconsistent performance.**

Random activity is evidenced by people regularly working late hours and sometimes weekends and holidays. Your people and teams are exhausted because they continue to make errors when they need to recreate additional work to fix issues. It's a spiral of organisational decline and customers choose the competition rather than wait for you and your team to catch up.

### 3. Siloed organisations

As individuals and teams narrow their focus to deliver on their results because they choose not to listen to each other, the efficiency and effectiveness of the organisation is reduced. This is evidenced by duplicated efforts, processes and procedures that are not connected to the purpose of the organisation.

**Siloed organisations create additional costs through duplicated effort.**

Silos create unintended competition between teams, departments and divisions for scarce resources – especially employee time. Limited curiosity to explore extra possibilities and profitability that results from integration add to the high cost of random and duplicated work.

# The 125/400 Rule

'Know how to listen, and you will profit  
even from those who talk badly.'

PLUTARCH

For anyone exploring leadership roles, being a compelling speaker is considered a prerequisite to applying, and the inability to be persuasive in a group a barrier to their career progress. There is an industry of people and organisations training others in how to speak – yet this is often a waste of effort.

The **125/400 Rule** explains why listening deeply and effectively is so difficult, and why you need to reorientate yourself to learn to become a better *listener*, not speaker.

You can speak between 125 and 175 words per minute, but you can listen to 400 words per minute.<sup>3</sup>

The 125/400 Rule is proof that you should be spending three to four times more of your professional development efforts learning to listen rather than speak.

The critical part of listening is the consciousness to understand that there is a gap between what you hear and what the speaker can say. Your mind is constantly racing ahead and is distracted by your self-talk, severely reducing your listening effectiveness.

The reality is no matter how compelling a speaker you are, your audience isn't listening completely.

There is a huge opportunity to redress this imbalance and help you understand how to become a more impactful listener and transformational leader.

Less than 2%  
of us have been  
*formally trained*  
in how to listen.<sup>4</sup>  
This is not  
something we  
were *taught* in  
school, home or  
higher education.



## You're a natural listener

You can instantly identify if a person you are speaking to **is not listening to you**.

It is intuitive and natural because you learned to listen before you were born.

The very first skill you learn in your mother's womb at the age of 26 weeks is not the skill of sight, speech or touch – it's the ability to hear. At 30 weeks you can distinguish the sound of your mother from any other sound.

You learned to listen before you learned to breathe or speak.

From the moment you were born kicking and screaming, you have spent your life trying to be noticed by talking rather than listening.

So why are so many of us so bad at **listening to others**?

Your lack of understanding about how to listen is a massive barrier to effective communication. It is only when you are fully aware of your lack of listening skills that you can make the first step in the journey of change.

You are *genetically*  
programmed  
to be a deep and  
powerful *listener*.



# From destructive to impactful

'Knowledge speaks,  
but wisdom listens.'

JIMI HENDRIX

Most of the literature on effective communication and listening places a disproportionate emphasis on the importance of focusing on the speaker during the discussion. This approach is a great first step, but it isn't the last step in listening.

In fact, this approach is fundamentally flawed. What we've learned about listening is wrong.

Why?

It is impossible to focus on  
the speaker, if you have no focus  
in the first place.

Traditional approaches to effective discussions set up a default binary interaction. A ping-pong match between the speaker and the listener. This creates great energy and interaction but it makes little progress or impact.

There is a different perspective. There is an alternative approach that helps make more impact. This approach is bringing both the speaker and the listener to be focused on progressing the dialogue.

Dialogue is a shared experience that involves hearing, watching and exploring the landscape of the conversation.

Done well, there is an easy and effortless interaction between two people. Occasionally, like a poorly formed wave, a conversation can come crashing down around you – messy and wasteful.

So to make an impact, it is critical to explore this third and most powerful perspective – **the dialogue** (Figure 1).

Focus	State	Effect	Additional Productive Hours Per Week
Dialogue	Impactful	Transform	20
	Progressive	Integrate	10
	Curious	Explore	5
Speaker	Aware	Focus	1
	Annoyed	Selfish	-5
Self	Unaware	Rework	-10
	Destructive	Random	-20

Figure 1: The exponential power of dialogue

# The steps to impactful listening

## 1. Destructive

When you are in a destructive and random state of unconsciousness, you are either lost in your own self-talk, or you are interrupting the speaker because you are consistently trying to make your point. You are completely dominating the dialogue and the other person is very frustrated.

This means you are working longer hours than you need to and the work you are finishing usually isn't what the other person wanted in the first place and you will have to start all over again. Your effort and impact is random and draining. You feel like a rat on a wheel generating lots of energy but no progress.

## 2. Unaware

A state of unawareness means you just drift through the discussion. You are unaware that you are lacking focus during the dialogue. You are totally oblivious to your role in this discussion. You don't have the consciousness to understand whether you should be taking notes about what is being said, asking questions. As you drift through the dialogue you have no purpose that you bring in listening to the discussion.

The consequence of being unaware is significant rework as you go back to the person in the discussion and they explain that what you brought back isn't exactly what they asked for. This impacts your relationship with the other person because they can't rely on you to deliver on time. This means working back later than you need to and frequently missing deadlines.

## 3. Annoyed

When you are listening from an annoyed state you are listening with the intention to finish the speaker's sentence for them. You listen to solve the problem before the other person has completely and fully said what they need to say. You are annoyed that they don't say what they need to say faster and more succinctly. If they knew as much about the topic as you did, they would be speaking less and listening to you more. You are annoyed by how little they know and how little they value your time.

The consequence of being annoyed whilst listening is that you tend to do everything yourself because you know more and can do it better than everyone else. Although it takes longer for you, the quality is high. The result is you do create something that is useful for you rather than useful for the team or the organisation. You create more detail and content than people *actually* need because you didn't take the time to completely listen to their requirements.

## 4. Aware

When you are an aware listener you are focused on yourself and the speaker. You are aware that prior to the discussion taking place you need to be prepared. You need to focus your mind and clear the space in your head for the discussion that's about to occur. You are aware in preparing for this meeting, phone call or discussion that choosing the ideal time and location has a significant impact on the quality of the outcome.

You are conscious that you need your focus to be on the listener. Equally you are conscious that you need to maintain an awareness of what is going on in your mind.

When you are aware, you listen completely and thoroughly and the speaker is at ease in the discussion. They don't feel rushed and neither do you. You are relaxed and both you and the speaker are clear on what is being discussed and what isn't being discussed.

Aware listeners create results aligned with the speaker's and organisation's requirements. You deliver what's required and you get the job done. You are considered efficient in your workplace.

## 5. Curious

When you are a curious listener you are comfortable exploring the landscape of the dialogue. You are focused on yourself, the speaker and the dialogue. You understand that where you start and how you get there isn't as important as exploring the dialogue together. You are curious enough to understand that your thoughts about the topic aren't the beginning or the solution.

You are curious about noticing what is *unsaid* in the discussion and inquisitive enough to know that a discussion might take a little longer than initially planned because of what emerges in the combined space and the new common understanding.

Although you take a little longer in the discussion, your results and the results of the speaker and associated teams are both efficient and effective. Your productivity and quality of your work is significantly greater than your peers. You have time on your hands and mind to step back and look at the bigger picture as well as the external issues.



## 6. Progressive

Progressive listeners are confident in their ability to listen, hear and understand what matters to whomever they are speaking with. They understand the systems and ecosystems that connect these ideas and they achieve an integrated and cohesive result.

No person, team or organisation exists in isolation. A systematic approach to listening is about creating the connection between fragments of the discussion and how that connection integrates with others, their agenda and their aspirations. Progressive listeners are actively integrating concepts that are discussed and those that are unsaid. Their orientation is balanced between the speaker, listener and the dialogue.

Progressive listeners with systemic orientations understand that there is a natural rhythm to systems – they are self-balancing and integrated. A change in one element of a system impacts the entire system in the short and long term.

Progressive listeners are sought out by others because of their ability to integrate disconnected and fragmented efforts. The results they achieve are significant and sustainable because they are underpinned by the effortlessness of systems that already exist in the organisation. Rather than swimming against the tide, the discussion is moving downstream with little effort because it's aligned to the system the discussion is part of.

## 7. Impactful

When you are listening for impact, you are listening beyond words. You are listening for individual and collective meaning. You are orientating your presence around creating transformational outcome not only for you, the speaker and your organisation but the external ecosystem of which you are a participant. Your time horizon for listening is short, medium and long term. You are looking to integrate agendas inside and outside your organisation. You understand your role is to magnify and multiple the efforts of everyone – you understand that everyone and all systems are connected.

Impactful listeners are considered rare because their impact is aligned to systems. This makes what they do seem effortless. They are aligned to the external systems. Impactful listeners attract disproportionate resources and energy to their projects and the projects they are part of.

Impactful listeners understand that the importance of ensuring you, them, the organisation and its ecosystem are completely heard. Their impact is long term.

# Becoming a master listener

'Nothing strengthens authority  
so much as silence.'

LEONARDO DA VINCI

As you move higher up Figure 1 towards impactful listening, you start observing and exploring your discussion, rather than only being a part of it. You discover the capacity to integrate competing concepts and create transformational outcomes for all involved.

**When you master this, you will start to have an impact on the wider world, and further into the future.**

This orientation teaches you to become aware and apply a technique known as metacognition – thinking about your thinking. It's powerful because you are upgrading the operating system of your thinking and consequentially your listening.

Exploring dialogic listening is three-dimensional. You need to simultaneously notice you, the speaker and the dialogue. You need to orientate yourself first in time and space before you move to more advanced perspectives.

This requires the discipline of the basics. In the martial arts, white belts practise by themselves before they ever consider sparring with an opponent.

With deep dialogic listening, the same is true. You need solid foundations – the capability to listen to yourself prior to progressing to listening to others.

It is crucial that you have a solid *foundation*, that is, understanding of yourself prior to *exploring* the speaker and the dialogue.



# Which level do you listen at?



There are five levels of listening that can help you become a deeper listener and move beyond hearing just the words.

## 1. Listening to Yourself

Paradoxically, deep listening to others starts with listening to yourself first. You need time to tune in and recognise what is running through your own mind, then clear away this clutter and create a space to make room to hear others.

## 2. Listening to the Content

The words are the most common way we listen and it is critically important to those who are speaking, yet this only begins to scratch the surface of good listening.

## 3. Listening to the Context

Thoughtful and provoking questions can help you clarify your understanding. These questions can help the other person explore a much broader context and landscape in their thinking and consequentially you both discover a richer range of alternatives.

## 4. Listening to the Unsaid

Remember that most people speak at 125 words per minute and our mind can process 400 words per minute. The simplest way to close the gap between the two during a dialogue is by regularly exploring the space or the gap between what they want to say and what they actually said.

## 5. Listening to the Meaning

Meaning can be created for the person speaking, the person listening and collectively meaning is created by the conversation. Listening at the level of meaning helps us to make sense of the discussion and informs a wide range of perspectives and possibilities going forward.

'*Empathetic* people are superb at recognizing and meeting the needs of clients, customers, or subordinates.

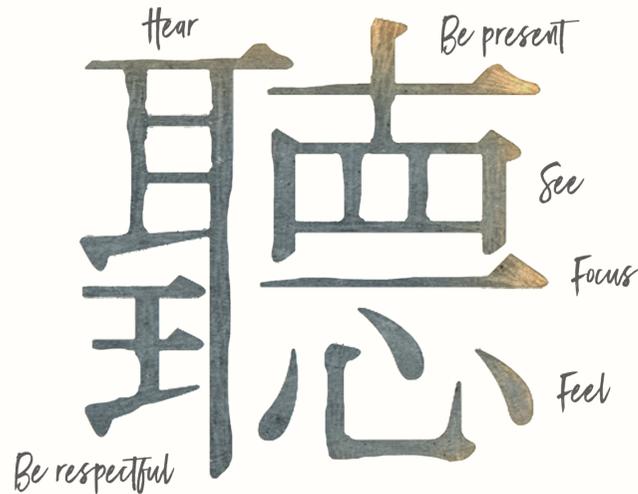
They seem *approachable*, wanting to *hear* what people have to say.

They *listen* carefully, picking up on what people are truly *concerned about*, and respond on the mark.'

DANIEL GOLDMAN



# Put-ting into practice.



Ancient Chinese scholars created the symbol of Ting - To Listen. Ting explains that listening is a full body and mind experience. Ting is balanced, complex and subtle. Each element provides great insight to listen a little deeper, yet true depth is through the combination of all elements in the process of listening to the words and beyond.

## 1. Presence

Clearing space in your mind to hear makes your ears more available to listen.

## 2. Respect

This is the space to fully explore not just the words, but also the silence and the gaps in the conversation.

## 3. Focus

Focus is the speed at which you return to the conversation with your complete attention on the discussion as well as on the speaker.

## 4. Feel

In feeling your way through a conversation, you also bring compassion and care for the person and their situation.

## 5. Hear

As you fully engage your ears, you start to hear the discussion, and not the people or situation outside of the conversation.

## 6. See

If we are operating at a conscious level in our listening, we not only feel, we also notice the incongruence between the spoken word and the visual image that accompanies it.

# Amplify your impact

To truly create an impact, leaders must take their thinking further and learn to amplify their listening on three dimensions as shown in Figure 2.

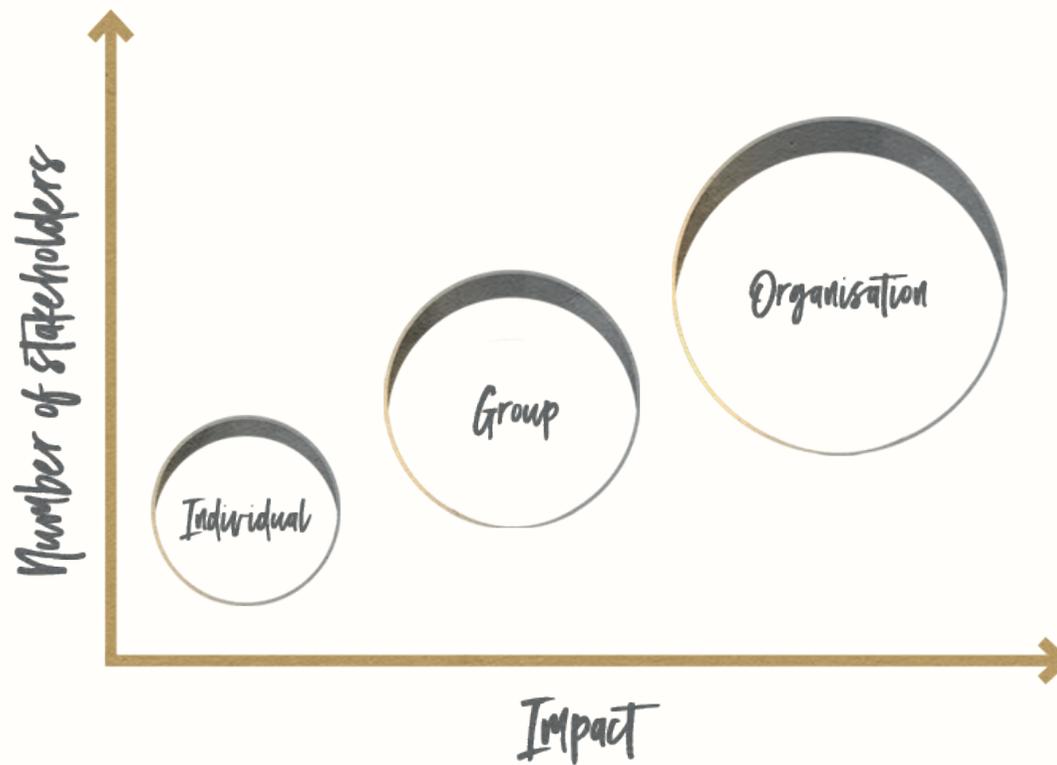


Figure 2: Amplifying the impact of your listening

# Deep Listening programs

'One hour of compassionate deep listening can bring about transformation and healing.'

THICH NHAT HANH

## Individual Listening

The skills and impact at this level involve moving from focusing on the speaker to progressing the dialogue.

Each is equipped with skills to understand the role of breathing, focus and discipline in the process of listening. This is the foundation to all listening.

## Group Listening

Exponentially amplifies the impact of the individuals in a group. At this level, listening to content and context moves the whole group into a higher and more sustained performance.

Trust increases as communication is more deliberate and complete. There is less confusion and conflict as teams listen to each other on a deeper level.

## Organisation Listening

Explores what is unsaid and the meaning in the communication rather than just the content and the context. Organisations that listen at this level are anticipating what their employees, customers, marketplace and stakeholders are wanting, rather than what they say that they want.

This makes a transformational impact. Organisations at this level realise that they are listening to what is unsaid and this is more important than what is said.

# Deep Listening programs

## For Individuals

## For Teams

## For Leaders

<p>In-house groups of individuals who want to understand the foundational elements of Deep Listening.</p>	<p>Teams or groups who need to deliver on transformational change or significant projects.</p>	<p>People managers and executives with teams of 4 or more direct reports.</p>
<p>1 hour, 2 hour or half day workshops, including an online assessment of their current listening orientation and a 90-day action plan with accountability tracking and quantifiable progress towards Deep Listening.</p>	<p>1 hour, 2 hour or half day workshops, including an online assessment of their current listening orientation and a 90-day action plan with accountability tracking and quantifiable progress towards Deep Listening.</p> <p>Understand how to explore what is unsaid.</p>	<p>Two ½ half days including:</p> <p>An online assessment of your current listening orientation and a 90-day action plan with accountability tracking and quantifiable progress towards Deep Listening.</p> <p>Tools and techniques to identify listening styles of your direct reports and amplify the effect throughout your organisation.</p>
<p>Number of participants: 6-15</p>	<p>Number of participants: 10-50</p>	<p>Maximum number of participants: 6</p>
<p><b>Outcomes</b>                      Identify your current listening preference                      Understand productive listening orientation                      How to focus on speaker, listener and dialogue.</p>	<p><b>Outcomes</b>                      Identify your current listening preference                      Understand productive listening orientation                      How to focus on the speaker, listener, dialogue and the system                      Create agendas that explore the unsaid.</p>	<p><b>Outcomes</b>                      Identify your current listening preference                      Identify organisational barriers to listening                      Help your teams listen more consciously                      Understand how to create a culture of external listening.</p>

## Key Note speeches

1. Unsaid - Explore untapped potential
2. Deep Listening - Impact beyond words
3. The 125/400 Rule - The art and science of listening

These keynotes are designed to raise the consciousness of the audience and motivate them to understand the impact their listening can have on themselves and others. Delivered to your organisation, annual kick-off events or to your people-manager community.

You'll get simple and actionable steps to become a more impactful listener.



## About the author

**OSCAR TRIMBOLI** is an executive coach, speaker and author of *Deep Listening: Impact beyond words*, and *Breakthroughs: How to confront your assumptions*.

He is passionate about using the gift of listening to bring positive change in homes, workplaces and the world.

Through his work with chairs, boards of directors and executive teams in local, regional and global organisations, Oscar has experienced firsthand the transformational impact leaders and organisations can have when they listen beyond the words.

He believes that leadership teams need to focus their attention and their listening on building organisations that have impact and create powerful legacies for the people they serve - today, and more importantly, for future generations.

Oscar is a marketing and technology industry veteran with over 30 years' experience across general management, sales, marketing and operations for Microsoft, PeopleSoft, Polycom, Professional Advantage and Vodafone.



During his time as a marketing director at Microsoft, he was accountable for the five-year journey to move Microsoft Office from DVDs to the Data Centre.

He consults to organisations including 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, AstraZeneca, BAE Systems, CBRE, Cisco, Commonwealth Bank, Energy Australia, Google, HSBC, IAG, Macquarie University, PayPal, Qantas, Reebok, SAP, TAL, Thomson Reuters, TripAdvisor and Universal Music.

Oscar lives in Sydney with his wife Jennie, where he helps first-time runners and ocean swimmers conquer their fears and contributes to the cure for cancer as part of Can Too, a cancer research charity – [cantoo.org.au](http://cantoo.org.au)

For more about Oscar's Deep Listening programs for individuals, teams and organisations:

+61 410 340 185 [oscartrimboli.com](http://oscartrimboli.com)

'It is a great thing to know the season for *speech*  
and the season for *silence*'.

SENECA THE ELDER



#### NOTES

- 1 US Department of Labor 1991 55% Werner - 1975 55% Bohlken 1999- 53%
- 2 The Value of Conversations With Employees by Jessica Tyler – Gallup
- 3 Factor Analysis of the Ability to Comprehend Time-Compressed Speech Carver, Johnson, & Friedman, 1970
- 4 <http://www.listen.org>

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