

The Five Myths of Listening

"Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak; courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen." — Winston Churchill

You see in colour, but you listen in black and white. Without any training, you know when someone isn't listening.

Yet while you are listening, you don't know what it means to be a great listener. You have been taught how to speak and do maths – yet only 2% of people have been trained in how to listen.

More people are colour blind than know what it takes to be a good listener. You spend a minimum of 55% of your time listening so a small amount of investment in listening will create an impact beyond words.

The impact of limited listening creates poor communication, conflict, confusion and chaos. This results in ineffective teams. Projects are consistently late and take more time than expected. The cost of not listening is obvious, but we choose not to address it because we haven't been taught how to listen.

These are the Five Myths of Listening:

- 1. Listening is natural and easy**
- 2. Focus on the speaker**
- 3. Listen carefully to what they are saying**
- 4. Summarise what they said**
- 5. Ask questions about what they said**





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

Today, organisations need leaders who will listen to their teams and customers to make an impact beyond words. 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 – or are our words being ignored?"*

By focusing on a 1% improvement to the skill you spend half your day using, you will create an additional one day per month in your schedule. Imagine the impact you could make with an extra 12 days in your year.

Improving your listening is a daily ritual – a commitment to make progress in every discussion, phone call and meeting. Making an improvement to your listening takes a moment to decide and a lifetime of practice to master.

1. Listening is natural and easy

"Learn how to listen and you will prosper even from those who talk badly"

Plutarch

You can instantly identify if a person you are speaking to **is not listening to you**. It is instinctive 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 and at 34 weeks you can distinguish Beethoven from Bon Jovi. Yet the moment you are born, you come into the world kicking and screaming using your voice to be noticed and stay the centre of attention.

As you moved into school, you had a maths and language teacher at school. You probably remember the best teacher was the one who heard you and deeply listened to what you had to say.

Yet you can't remember your listening teacher – despite listening being 55% of your day, you received no training in how to listen.

Hearing is your birth rite – yet you will spend a lifetime learning to listen



With no training, it's little wonder why so many of us are poor listeners.

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.

Over 81%¹ of people rate themselves as safe drivers. The same is true about listening – 73% think they are above average listeners.

Listening is a simultaneous intersection of dialogue between two or more people. To be effective, it needs to be sustained for a length of time, requiring limited distractions and continuous focus.

Your mind is designed in a way that makes sustained and deep listening impossible. The person talking is speaking at between 125 and 150 words per minute, yet you can listen to 400 words per minute. This is the 125/400 Rule – if you understand this, listening become easier.



Your brain is wired for distraction.

The speaker can never speak as fast as you can listen, so you drift away in the dialogue, no matter how good a speaker they are – You will get bored or tempted to interrupt them or basic noises in your surroundings may disturb your ability to stay focused. There are so many environmental, linguistic, relational barriers to effective listening it's little wonder we all struggle despite how we rate ourselves as listeners.

Tip #1 – Listening is difficult when you don't know how. Being aware of how hard it is to listen is the first step in the journey to becoming a Deep Listener.

¹ Ola Severson 1980, [Are we all less risky and more skilful than our fellow drivers?](#)

2. Focus on the speaker

"You cannot truly listen to anyone and do anything else at the same time."

M. Scott Peck



The most popular belief because of active listening literature is that listening is about focusing exclusively on the speaker. This is interesting, yet it's not practical, powerful or productive.

If you have attended a musical performance whether your children playing in a school band, a rock concert or a classical orchestra – you need to get yourself in a state of mind to listen before you can hear.

The first person you need to listen to is yourself.

When you are listening to the conversation in your mind, you aren't available to listen. When you are in front of someone else, there is no room for the conversation to land in your mind if you are in a complex debate with yourself.

Make room in your mind for the conversation. Empty or move the conversation in your head prior to the conversation.

Poor listeners and great listeners will always be distracted – great listeners notice when they're distracted quicker.

It is crucial that you have a solid **foundation**. Notice your state of mind before you start any conversation. Without having space in your mind for the conversation to land, you are set up to fail before you start.

Deep listening starts when 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.

Tip #2 – The deeper you breathe – the deeper you listen. Your breathing is a leading indicator of your listening. Notice your breathing when you get distracted and then focus your eyes back on the speaker in a triangle across their eyes and down to their chin.

Listen to how foreign language interpreter [Christina Rostworowski da Costa focused on her breathing prior to a highly complex](#) multi-language interpretation.

3. Listen carefully to what they are saying

*"Man's inability to communicate is a result of his failure to listen effectively."
— Carl Rogers*

If you listen in black and white, listen with your eyes and ears. If you want to listen in colour, explore the Chinese Character – Ting.

Ting means “To Listen”. Ting has 6 dimensions and only two are physical – hear and see.



There are 4 other dimensions to listening; focus, feeling, presence and respect. You need to listen to much more than words and body language. You need to notice the other persons' energy and the connection between their words and how they are speaking.

It takes a deeper sense of listening to connect completely with what the speaker is saying as well as how they are saying it.

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

Tip #3 – Listen to how people are speaking as well as what they are saying. Notice their breathing, notice whether they speak in short or long sentences. Notice when what they say doesn't make sense with how they are explaining it.

4. Summarise what they said

"There's a big difference between showing interest and really taking interest."

— Michael P. Nichols



Some people may have been taught to summarise what they heard. This is to help them confirm what they heard. This is useful, yet it doesn't make an impact.

They speak at 125 words per minute, you can listen at 400 words per minute and they can think at 900 words per minute.

When you summarise what they have said, you are summarising 11% of what they are thinking. Deep Listeners ask the speaker to explore what they haven't said – the other 750 words in their head.

When you say **"What I heard you say was"** this will limit the conversation to the first thoughts out of their mouth. Unless they are a very articulate and skilful speaker, the first thing they say isn't usually what they are thinking. For most

people, their mind is like a washing machine. Initially, their mind is in a wash cycle where their ideas are dirty and filled with dark and soapy water. Every time they speak is like their rinse cycle, they clear their mind when they say it to someone else.

The speaker is frustrated as they can think at 900 words per minute and yet can only speak at 125-150 words per minute.

They have more to think and say than what they say the first time. Rather than summarise what you heard, explore what else they haven't said so far with some simple questions:

1. *How long have you been thinking about this?*
2. *What else are you thinking about this issue?*
3. *I'm curious about what you haven't said?*

When you summarise the discussion, you are narrowing the possibilities for you and the speaker. Summaries reduce the number of options in a conversation, explorational questions simultaneously expand the possibilities for the speaker and the listener. Conversations have more impact and are typically shorter than expected.

Rather than summarise what you heard, explore what else they haven't said so far with questions.

Tip #4 – Listen what is Unsaid. The speaker will use phrases like *"What I really mean is..."* or *"What's most important about this topic is..."* or *"What I should have said sooner is..."* These phrases liberate the speakers understanding and help both of you listen much more impactfully.

5. Ask questions about what they said

"To say that a person feels listened to means a lot more than just their ideas get heard. It's a sign of respect. It makes people feel valued." — Deborah Tannen

When you ask questions about what they have said, this helps you know more. Your questions need to help the speaker and the listener learn more. Asking questions about the context rather than the content will make an immediate impact for you, for them and the topic.

When you notice the context of the conversation together, new insights emerge rapidly.

Asking questions about the context explores the back story to the discussion as well as the patterns in the discussion. Sometimes the most potent thing we need to explore is the back story, yet we are too embarrassed to ask or think that it will slow down the conversation.

Do you know that feeling when you tune into a TV show, a movie or a radio interview about a third of the way into the story? You think to yourself, I'm pretty smart. I can connect the characters in the story together, I can make sense out of this, then at the half way mark you have this nagging voice in your mind saying that this doesn't quite make sense, yet you persist thinking it's all going to make sense at the end.

Do you turn to a friend who might be watching or listening with you and ask them to explain the gaps?

For most of us listening to someone else, our pride gets in the way and the cost is a lot of time listening to a conversation that doesn't make sense. It's like driving in the rain, without using the windshield wipers. The further you go the less you can see.

It takes a little bit of humility to ask the person speaking to go back a little further than where they started. As a result, the characters and content make more sense now you have a longer term or broader context to the topic.

Another way you can get the speaker to understand what they are thinking about and what they aren't thinking about is to help both of you notice the patterns in the discussion.

Is the speaker fixated on the past or future? Problems or solutions? Positive or negative? Internally or externally? Individually or collectively? Details and data or stories and pictures? or you can simply ask them if they notice any patterns in this discussion and how productive these patterns are for progress of conversation.

Tip #5 – Listen for patterns. Noticing the patterns in the way they speak can hold you back or help you leap forward in the conversation. You will notice which way you can move by exploring which patterns they observe in the way they are speaking about the topic.



Summary

Tip #1 – Listening is difficult when you don't know how. Being aware of how hard it is to listen is the first step in the journey to becoming a Deep Listener.

Tip #2 – The deeper you breathe – the deeper you listen. Your breathing is a leading indicator of your listening. Notice your breathing when you get distracted and then focus your eyes back on the speaker in a triangle across their eyes and down to their chin.

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An invitation to explore a different perspective

During the 20th century, the world learned how to speak more effectively. In the 21st century, listening is the skill that will separate conflict, confusion and chaos from the rest.

What do you have to lose?

1. [Listen to the Apple Award Winning - Deep Listening Podcast](#) - Learn from personal and professional listening experts who provide practical listening tips .
2. [Read the Deep Listening Book](#) – A practical guide to improving your listening skills.
3. [Play with the Deep Listening Playing Cards](#) – A hands on way to improve your listening skills over 50 weeks with one card per week.
4. Join the [Deep Listening Facebook Community](#) – Learn from others about how they are moving from unconscious and erratic listening to deep and powerful listeners.