

Consciousness, Courage and Communications (Part II)

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“Nothing feels so good as being understood, not evaluated or judged. When I try to share some feeling aspect of myself and my communication is met with evaluation, reassurance, distortion of my meaning, I know what it is to be alone.”

—Carl Rogers

Receiving Messages

Every presentation on effective interpersonal communications (and I've sat through a lot of them) makes reference to a process called “active listening,”¹ so I assume this must be pretty important. When I am on the receiving end of messages I am to listen carefully, make eye contact, and occasionally repeat back what the other person is saying, e.g., “*what I hear you saying is...*” This over-simplified description of the method attributed to American psychologist Carl Rogers is intended to let the speaker know that I am attentive, concerned and that I understand. This seems generally good advice, although I sometimes get the feeling that this is merely a technique being used on me to give the *illusion* of concern, in which case it has the opposite of the desired effect and I become annoyed, suspicious and cautious.

It seems like listening would be a pretty straight forward thing, and most people think they are good listeners, but it isn't always the case. Like beauty, listening is in the eye of the beholder, or should I say “ear of the behearer.” The way we listen sends a message to others about how we feel about them. To clarify how this works we can use a model of the Levels of Listening² similar to Will Schutz's Levels of Openness³ to become more aware of how we listen (or do not listen) on parallel levels.

Levels of Listening

Level -1: Unaware: Did you ever try to have an important conversation with someone while they were watching TV, writing an e-mail, or texting on their Blackberry? Have you ever noticed that glazed look in someone's eyes and realized they are not listening to a word you are saying? Have you ever tried to express sincere feelings or deep convictions only to have them ignored, deflected or worse yet, brushed aside with a flippant response? If so, you have experienced the unaware listener, so preoccupied with their own thoughts or activities they are simply not available to listen to what you have to say.

Level 0: Avoiding: Conversely, the avoiding listener is acutely aware of the messenger, but does not want to hear what he or she has to say. They may go to great lengths



Consciousness, Courage and Communications (Part II)

to avoid walking by a co-worker's office, meeting them in the hall, or attending the same meeting. If cornered, they try to control the conversation by quickly changing the subject away from the uncomfortable topic they do not want to discuss.

Levels of Listening³

| Level | Looks Like | Example |
|-------|--|--|
| -1 | Unaware | I don't notice you. |
| 0 | Avoiding | I don't want to notice you. |
| 1 | "No, you are..." | "the problem" or "wrong" |
| 2 | "You shouldn't feel that way." | angry |
| 3 | "Let me tell you..." | "how it really is" or "You think you've got problems..." |
| 4 | "Tell me more" | "Help me understand your point of view." |
| 5 | "What I hear you saying (and feeling) is..." | "You are upset because I turn my work in late." |

Level 1: "No, You are...": When confronted, the Level 1 listener deflects the focus back onto the speaker. *"I'm not the problem! You are the problem! Things would be fine if only you would..."* It is doubtful that any one person is ever solely responsible for any problem. In virtually all conflicts, each person has contributed to the problem in some way. Immediately deflecting the focus in this manner only serves to escalate emotions and limits the possibility of genuine dialogue, understanding or successful resolution.

Level 2: "You shouldn't feel that way.": At Level 2 the listener is quick to correct any "inappropriate" feelings being expressed (meaning any feelings that make the listener uncomfortable). If the speaker expresses anger, sadness or disappointment, the listener may feel awkward or threatened and try to get the speaker to block their feelings, or at least keep quiet about them. This strategy takes one of two forms; the self-righteous "professional" (*"The office is no place for those feelings. Leave them at home."*) or the sympathetic "helper" (*"There, there, everything will be all right. Cheer up. So you lost your job, you have cancer, your wife left you—don't worry, be happy!"*). Either way this level of "listening" tends to stop further communication so neither party understands the other very well.



Consciousness, Courage and Communications (Part II)

Level 3: “Let me tell you...”: Level 3 listening is listening for an opportunity to take charge of the conversation and tell your own story, and it is characterized by interruptions. Several forms are possible. First is the “**competitor**,” an expert in “one-upsmanship” who can always top your story with their own successes or calamities. “*You think you’ve got problems! That’s nothing! Let me tell you...*” or “*When I ran this department I could make my quota in only three days.*” This “listening” has the effect of shifting attention away from the speaker and onto themselves. Next is the “**debater**” who is ever so quick to correct your facts. “*That’s not how it was at all. Let me tell you...*” or “*Let me tell you how it really is around here...*” This often deteriorates into an “*I’m right – you’re wrong*” argument. The debater may listen defensively, expecting to be attacked or criticized, and as such, hear only what they expect to hear, whether it is actually being said or not. As the philosopher, Paul Simon said, “*A man hears what he wants to hear and disregards the rest.*”⁴ Finally there is the “**advisor**,” eagerly waiting for an opportunity to demonstrate their ability to solve problems and give advice. “*Let me tell you what you should do...*” This style of “listening” seems to be more common for men than women.^{5,6} Whereas women more commonly communicate to show support, build relationships and gain intimacy, men communicate to make decisions and demonstrate their competence. The advisor assumes you come to them because you trust them to know what to do. In fact the sooner they diagnose and fix your problem the more proficient they feel (and the more impressed and grateful you will be). The adviser often is so quick with solutions the speaker does not feel understood or listened to. They feel cut off as if the listener is uninterested, impatient or does not want to be bothered. Because the advisor must fix the problem in order to be successful, they invariably diagnose only the kind of problems they know how to solve (a frequent dilemma for consultants as well). Whichever form Level 3 takes, this level of “listening” does not create an environment where the speaker feels comfortable to bring up more difficult or more personal issues. In fact, none of the levels discussed so far are really “listening” at all.

Level 4: “Tell me more.”: This level is a significant departure from the ones above. At Level 4 you invite the speaker to explain their point more fully, give examples, discuss more thoroughly how they feel and why. Only here do others begin to feel you genuinely care and want to understand. So why is this simple phrase so rarely used? It turns out to be a difficult thing to do if you are uncomfortable with the speaker’s emotions (or your own), and especially if the content of the message feels like a personal attack, as in criticisms or accusations. Who in their right mind would say “*Tell me more*” when being yelled at or roundly criticized. Frequently people come on so strong because of their own discomfort. They often expect to be cut off, dismissed, or rejected because of their past experiences in trying to have difficult conversations. Inviting them to say more is both courageous and disarming. “*I can see this is very important to you, and I want to understand fully. Please tell me more about how you feel.*”

No it is not easy, but it is a powerful way to diffuse the emotion in a heated conversation. It changes the tone of the interaction and invariably puts the other person more at ease and, in turn, makes them more likely to eventually listen to what you have to say as well. Notice that inviting them to say more does not imply agreement with what they are saying. You are just letting them have their say first. Stephen Covey⁷ and Roger Fisher⁸ have both written eloquently about the value of listening with the purpose of understanding rather than for finding flaws to attack.



Consciousness, Courage and Communications (Part II)

Roger Fisher^{8,9}, author of *Getting To Yes and Getting Together* tells a moving story of the power of Level 4 listening:

At an international peace conference a hard-line Jewish Rabbi began to publicly and angrily berate Nelson Mandela for maintaining diplomatic ties with Libya's Moammar Kadafi. The tension in the room was palpable. Mandela did not respond back in anger. He did not attempt defend his actions or even try to explain his rationale. Instead he thanked the man for raising the issue and for explaining how passionately he cared about the matter. Mandela went on to say that the things the Rabbi was saying was very important for him to hear, and perhaps if they could have lunch together they could talk more. Instantly the tension melted and a hostile situation transformed into one that held the promise of deeper understanding.¹⁰

Level 5: "What I hear you saying (and feeling) is...": When you paraphrase and reflect back the other person's concerns, especially when you are able to include the quality and quantity of their feelings as well, they know they have been understood. Here again, this does not mean that you agree with what they are saying, just that you understand their point of view. This process of reflecting (active listening) permits you to clear up misunderstandings in ways that Level 3 debating could never do.

Finally, the thing that distinguishes genuine Level 5 listening from mere technique and gimmickry is *intent*. When you listen with the intention of truly understanding, that intent will come through. If your intention is to use reflection as a technique to manipulate, to get your way while appearing to care, that too will be understood. George Burns said it best: "Sincerity is everything. If you can fake that you've got it made." Guess what—it cannot be done.

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10. This account was relayed from Jim Tamm, author of *Radical Collaboration*. Personal Correspondence.

