

LISTENING— A WAY OF LIFE

Most people think that listening is what we do when someone else talks. Actually, we can expand the meaning of the word *listen*. Listening in a larger sense means receiving everything at all times.

Listening can be a way of life, an attitude toward all things, an open posture to the world. We can listen fully to the joy and pain of other people, to our thoughts and emotions, to our bodies, to nature, to music, to circumstances, to the lessons of the past, to our dreams of the future, and much more.

The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines the word *listen* this way: "To make a conscious effort to hear; to pay attention; to heed..." Listening fully means paying exquisite, close attention.

When you pay attention, your world gets bigger. You can see this for yourself. Just put this book down for two minutes. Close your eyes and notice everything you hear at this moment. Next, open your eyes and notice all the colors you see.

Congratulations. You've just entered a new world, larger and far richer in sights and sounds than the world you inhabited two minutes ago. Of course, you didn't physically go anywhere—you just opened up your field of awareness. The difference between

your former and your present state might be as sharp as the difference between waking and sleeping.

Listening means receiving whatever the world is "sending." And at any given moment,

the world is sending plenty—thousands of tastes, sights, aromas, sounds, textures, ideas, and bits of information just waiting to be noticed. There's the shaft of sunlight streaming in the bedroom window, the sight of a full moon on a clear summer night, the fresh scent of the earth after a rainstorm, the sound of a sleeping baby's breathing, the wave of pleasure that spreads through your body when you bite into your favorite food. If we're not careful and conscious, we might tune out this symphony of sights, sounds, and sensations.

Then there's listening to our intuition—a way of knowing that goes beyond logic and evidence. Using our intuition means tuning in to the still, small voice inside us as we make choices. Often we call that voice a hunch, lucky guess, inspiration, discovery, or *aha!* When people who face a major decision talk about "sleeping on it," they're allowing time for their intuition to speak.

We can also listen for guidance from deeper inside us or beyond us. For many people, spirituality means listening to God, Nature, the Creator, a Higher Power—whatever you wish to call the force that helps you see the sacred in the everyday and moves you to care about others.

When we adopt listening as a way of life, we create an invitation for the world to "speak" to us. When people sense that we're receptive to their ideas and feelings, they feel safe to open up. Of course, we can always offer a literal invitation. We can ask them to speak about anything from their last vacation to their most intimate concerns. And we can deepen that invitation through listening with full attention and full acceptance—that is, full love.

When we understand that listening means receiving everything, we discover that there's a lot to hear.



STRATEGIES FOR FULL LISTENING

Full listening springs from a mind that says *I don't know it all* and *There is more for me to learn*. Listening in this way can be an adventure.

Full listening can also be scary. Listening fully means putting all our opinions on the line and asking if they are accurate or useful. Listening fully means opening up to the ideas of others and being willing to change. When we listen fully, we let go of the way we think things are supposed to be. For the moment, we let go of everything we think we know.

It's no wonder that full listening is so rare. Many people are so comfortable with and committed to their opinions that they simply shut down and stop listening.

By refusing to risk full listening, these people miss the potential rewards. Most of us want satisfying relationships. And the quality of our relationships is directly tied to the quality of our listening. People feel acknowledged, appreciated, and affirmed when we listen fully to them. Listening also gives us access to countless new ideas and options for solving problems. Listening well is one of the best ways to get what we want.

The strategies that follow can help us break through to the dimension of full listening.

Remember—communication at best is challenging

Few people devote serious energy to improving their communication skills. Unless there's an obvious barrier—a hearing impairment, a language barrier—people often take communication for granted.

Consider a simple word like *chair*. Upon hearing this word, some of us immediately think of the standard four-legged object sitting next to a kitchen table. Others think of a large stuffed recliner. Then there are rocking chairs, folding chairs, swivel chairs, highchairs, antique wooden chairs, leather chairs, poolside aluminum chairs, and electric chairs. Let's not forget the person leading a club meeting or taking charge of the board of directors. She's a *chair*, too. The deluxe second edition of *Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary* gives us yet another definition of *chair*: "an iron block used to support and secure the rails of a railway track."

If simple words like *chair* can be misunderstood, it's easy to see how more complex concepts—such as happiness, health, wealth, love, justice, and freedom—can wreak havoc.

Given the frequency of misunderstanding, it is best *not* to assume that listeners and speakers automatically share the same message. Remembering this can help us pay closer attention and raise the quality of our listening.

Commit to full listening

Walk up to the self-help shelf at almost any bookstore, and you'll find a row of titles about how to listen better. Many of these books are full of techniques, and many of the techniques are useful.



When it comes to listening fully, something important comes *before* technique. That “something” is commitment—an intention to fully receive what others say. Commitment involves a willingness to completely surrender to the person who’s speaking, and this willingness comes into play before we do anything else as listeners.

Be a sender or a receiver

Each of us has an agenda. When we’re talking, *our* personal concerns—what we want, what we need, and what *we’re* interested in—are usually on the front burner. The problem is that during most conversations, other people are giving *their* items top priority.

It’s no wonder, then, that genuine listening is so rare. We want to cover all the items on our agenda, and others want to do the same with theirs. We’re all trying to step up to the podium at the same time. Everyone’s talking; no one is listening. Everybody’s sending; nobody is receiving. Typical result: confusion.

Effective communication is a two-way street. People take turns sending and receiving. When one person is talking, the other just listens. Then they switch roles. This continues until they discover a shared meaning.

Listen only when you are willing to listen. If you realize you are not listening anymore, you have several options. One is to recommit to listening—to focus your awareness and listen. Another option is to tactfully leave the conversation. And still another is to make a direct request to switch roles and become the sender. If you do start sending, ask yourself how you can best use this precious gift—another person’s listening.

In any case, either send *or* receive. Trying to do both at the same time can strain relationships. When you’re listening, be quiet 98 percent of the time. The other 2 percent of the time, you can ask occasional questions for clarification or make comments that encourage the speaker to continue.

Wait before responding

Consider a typical conversation. Moments of silence are rare. As soon as person A takes a breath, person B jumps in. While person A was still speaking, person B was not really listening. Instead, he was preparing his remarks—“listening” with his answer running.

One strategy that can prevent this fate is the almighty pause. Before sending your message, allow a few moments of silence.

This strategy springs from a commitment to listen. When we are truly intent on listening, we usually digest what’s being said and *then* choose what we’ll say. We postpone our response until *after* the sender has come to a complete stop and we’ve taken time to understand her message.

In some cases, you can promote the speaker’s full self-expression by postponing your response for more than a minute or two. If you found the message difficult to receive—or if you sense that the speaker found it difficult to send—then consider waiting several hours or even several days before you respond. The more difficult the message, the longer the optimum waiting time.



Postponing your response slows down a conversation. It helps ensure that conversations include both a sender and a receiver. This can cool tempers and increase understanding.

Ask for more

You might come to points in a conversation at which the sender stops speaking for the moment. But that doesn't always mean she's done sending her message. Perhaps she's just pausing and has more to say.

To promote full listening, make a habit of listening until you're sure you've heard everything the speaker has to say. Then permit even more speaking. Ask, "Is there anything else on your mind?"

Listen actively

One way to promote accurate communication is active listening. When we listen actively, we repeat in our own words what we *thought* the speaker said. At that point, the speaker can make any corrections that seem appropriate: "No that's not quite it. What I really meant to say was...." Or "You got it. Couldn't have said it better myself."

Active listening can be particularly useful in defusing arguments. When emotions run high, be sure to verify that you received the speaker's message. Summarize what you heard without judging it. Then fully allow any correction the speaker might make.

If we pay close attention as we practice active listening, we're likely to notice an almost universal signal of understanding. After we sum up their message, people nod their heads and say, "Yeah."

Listen through a filter

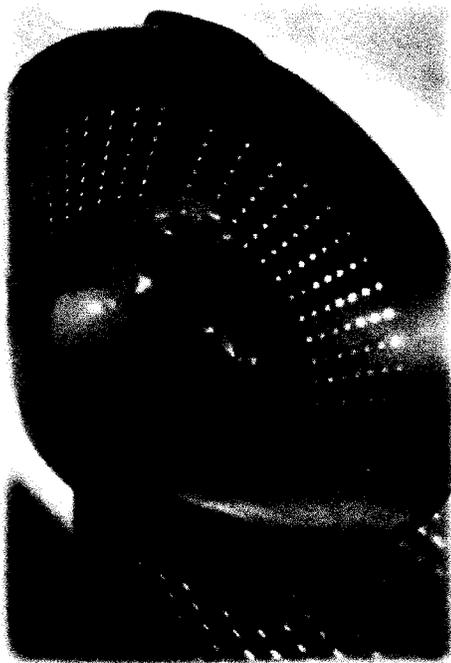
While listening actively, you might find it useful to listen through a filter—that is, to focus on certain aspects of the speaker's message.

For example, instead of focusing on the speaker's problems, you could listen specifically for any solutions he proposes. Instead of focusing on the speaker's past, you could listen for that person's vision of the future—what he wants and how he intends to get it.

Those are just two examples. You could also listen for the speaker's values, joys, strengths, confidences, requests, contributions, or anything else you choose to notice.

Listen as if you're the only listener

When you're in a group conversation, imagine that there are only two people in the room: you and the speaker. You're sitting front row, center—an audience of one. Your listening skills could rise to new heights. You'll automatically apply many of the listening techniques explained in this chapter.



Handle distractions

Even when you're fully committed to listening, you can find your thoughts wandering. If possible, write the distraction down. This can be useful when your thoughts involve an errand to run, a call to make, or something else to do later. Then you can return your focus to the conversation.

You might explain what you're doing so that you don't seem rude: "Excuse me just one moment. I'm distracted and need to make a note about something. Then I can pay attention to what you are saying."

Often you can handle distractions simply by noticing them and gently bringing yourself back to full listening.

Listen with two minds

First, listen with a receptive mind. Such a mind is still, calm, and open to fresh ideas. Full listening begins when we dip into this mind, keep our mouths shut, and channel all our effort into understanding another person.

When listening with a receptive mind, we simply assume that what we're hearing is the truth—from the other person's point of view. If we hear an idea that shocks or disturbs us, we ask ourselves *What if that's true?* and explore the possibilities.

There's another kind of mind that comes into play later. This second mind is questioning and critical. When we listen with this mind, we ask ourselves *What does this mean? What's the evidence? Is this idea logical?* We separate ideas that are inaccurate from those that are accurate and useful.

Listening fully calls for both of these minds. One without the other is incomplete. Just separate them in time. First, listen fully without judgment. When you're confident that you've received and understood the message, then you can take time to think critically.

Focus on the message, not the messenger

Most of us find it easy to stop listening when something about a speaker irritates us. If the speaker wears a lime-green leisure suit or has multicolored neon hair, we might become so busy judging his appearance that we stop listening.

One solution is to listen beyond the speaker. We can focus on the content of the message rather than the speaker's style, age, or appearance. When we do this, we might discover that the person who stutters has something important to say, or that the kindergartner who's too young to "know" anything has a fresh and useful outlook.

We can listen for kernels of wisdom from the people we disagree with the most. These might include Democrats, Republicans, lesbians, Christians, atheists, career army officers, pacifists, or anyone else. The person we loathe the most might actually have something useful to say to us.



Remember that understanding is not agreeing

Understanding and agreeing are two different things. As full listeners, our job is to totally understand the other person's point of view. Listening means receiving an accurate version of the message the other person is sending to us. Once we understand that message, we're free to respond in any way we choose. And one possible response is to disagree.

In confrontational situations, when they feel defensive, people often act as if careful listening is a sign of weakness. They fear that taking the time to understand another's viewpoint means giving up their own. That's a mistake.

It is a challenge to put our own ideas on the shelf so that we can listen carefully, showing a genuine intention to understand a new point of view. Yet skilled listeners do this routinely. Successful debaters can argue their opponents' point of view as well as or better than their opponents. This does not mean that they agree with their opponents.

Avoid "piggybacking" and counterpointing

Soon after my mother died, a friend came up to me and asked, "How are you?" I was still very emotional and thought that his question was an indication that he would listen to my response. So I said, "Thanks for asking. My mom died, and it's been hard for me. I was very close to her."

"Oh, I know just how you feel," he said. "When my father died, it was so traumatic. Let me tell you about it...."

That's an example of piggybacking. It happens when a listener suddenly stops listening, jumps on the speaker's topic, and starts talking.

Piggybacking can also happen when you talk about things you enjoy.

One of my daughters tried out for a prestigious dance school and was accepted. "Dancing is the love of her life," I said to another friend of mine, "and I actually didn't think she'd make it. But she did, and when it happened I felt...."

"Wow," my friend said. "You must feel great. I know that when my kids achieve things, I feel so good! In fact, I remember a time when...."

Many people might intend for their piggybacking to be a way to communicate their empathy with the speaker. Too often, however, piggybacking simply interrupts people and discounts their experience. To listen fully, avoid piggybacking.

Also notice counterpointing. This happens when a listener suddenly stops listening to state her disagreement with the speaker. Often this happens in the middle of the speaker's message—before he has had a chance to fully express his point of view.

To avoid piggybacking and counterpointing, simply wait until it's your turn to speak. Pick up on the speaker's topic or state your disagreement only after you've listened fully and you're certain that this is the most important thing you want to say.



Be careful of advice

As we listen to others, we might feel tempted to give advice. Giving advice, however, is not listening.

Trust people to arrive at their own solutions without your guidance as a listener. Consider offering advice only when people specifically request it, and then present your ideas as possibilities, not prescriptions.

Be careful of questions

Questions are often useful. For people committed to full listening, questions also have serious potential drawbacks.

Questions can be used to guide conversations and pull them in a certain direction—a direction that the speaker might not want to take. When listening fully, we ask questions rarely—only to clarify a speaker's message. When questions steer a conversation or smuggle advice into a conversation, they hinder listening.

Listen without obligation to act

When people talk about what they desire, they're not automatically asking for a response on your part. If your partner says that she'd like to vacation in Hawaii sometime, that doesn't mean you have to book tickets tomorrow. She might just want to speak her desires, sort them out, and explore possibilities.

When we listen to people's desires, we don't *have* to do anything about them. Knowing this frees us to listen fully. If we feel obligated to leap into action every time people open their mouths, we could feel overwhelmed and actually avoid listening.

Often people don't *want* us to do anything in response to their speaking. They just want to think out loud, or they simply want to be heard. We can grant them the gift of full listening.

Once in a while, people do want us to respond by moving into action. When that's true, they'll usually say so.

If you're not sure, you can always check it out: "You've told me something that you want. Can I do anything to help you get it?"

Listen with your body

People gather a great deal of information by observing our facial expressions, gestures, and posture. Remembering this can open a new dimension in our listening.

We can use body language that invites other people to speak. When we make eye contact and face the other speaker directly, we're usually saying, "I'm awake, I'm here, and I'm interested in what you have to say."

Eyes, in particular, have been referred to as windows to the soul. Often we gain insight into what other people really mean by noticing their eyes. Eyes that meet ours squarely and directly usually mean one thing; eyes cast downward or to the side can mean quite another.



To get the most from this suggestion, temper it with some cultural sensitivity. Many of us find intense prolonged eye contact uncomfortable. And in some cultures, direct eye contact is sometimes considered offensive or a sign of disrespect. While paying attention to people with our eyes, we can act appropriately.

Allow and encourage emotion

Some listeners are uncomfortable when the person speaking expresses strong emotion.

A person might be talking about his sadness and start to sob uncontrollably. Someone listening with an intention to comfort him, might say, "Please don't cry. It will all turn out OK."

Another speaker might be so enthusiastic that she celebrates her feelings with total abandon. She might laugh loudly, sing, or even break into a dance. Her friends might become embarrassed by this level of celebration and ask her to control herself.

Full listening means allowing and even encouraging others to express whatever they feel. We can tell them that it's fine if they laugh, shake, sing, sob, or express any other emotion, no matter how intense. When we grant this permission, we allow people to celebrate pleasant emotions and move beyond unpleasant ones. Both can be healing experiences.

Say your thanks

One effective way to follow up on full listening is to say, "Thanks for telling me. Now I know what you think and how you feel." This affirms the speaker and grants him permission to speak even more.

We can speak our thanks even when we disagree with people or feel threatened by what they say. By saying thanks, we put our judgments on hold and step away from antagonism.

The way we send thanks is important. If we say, "Thanks, I'm glad to know how *you* see the world," others might hear that as a subtle put-down.

To be present when people speak their fears, dreams, desires, and commitments is to stand on sacred ground. When people ask us to listen, they honor us. We can respond with gratitude.



BEFRIEND CRITICISM AND COMPLAINTS

Almost anyone who suggests a new idea, challenges the status quo, or takes action to meet goals will get criticized.

It's a good bet you will face criticism and complaints at some point—and you won't like it. Fortunately, you can work creatively with both types of feedback.

Treat criticism as feedback, not failure

If we keep our egos out of the way, we can accept criticism as an opportunity to evaluate ourselves. When we find truth in the criticism, we can learn ways to improve. We can move from thinking *How dare she say that!* to *How can I use this comment to become more effective?*

Imagine hearing someone say, "You're always late to our club meetings." Instead of taking that comment as an insult, we can hear it as the front end of a suggestion: "If you want to support the group, then be on time." We can use the comment to promote our success.

When we experience criticism in this way, we can actually be thankful for the gift it offers. Leo Tolstoy used to read drafts of his novels to his hired workers, seeking to make sure that his writing was clear. He received so much constructive criticism that he became one of the world's greatest novelists. Advertising executive David Ogilvy used to circulate drafts of his memos to colleagues with the note, "Please improve." His willingness to receive criticism built him a business empire and a fortune.

Put criticism into perspective

Blowing criticism out of proportion is self-defeating. Putting criticism into perspective allows us to hear it with more clarity.

One way we inflate the significance of criticism is to identify with the criticism. We hear the comment "You screwed that up," and translate it to mean "You *are* a screw-up." The difference is subtle but significant. The first comment points out that we *made* a mistake. The second one implies that we *are* a mistake. Remembering this distinction can help us put criticism into perspective.

We can also acknowledge and accept what we do well. Imagine that you give a performance and 100 people evaluate it. Seventy-nine of the reviews are positive, thirteen of them are neutral, and eight of them are negative. Many of us will spend more time remembering the negative evaluations than celebrating those that are positive. We might even lose sleep over those eight negatives.



Putting criticism into perspective means telling the truth. And telling the truth means celebrating what we've done well and acknowledging where we can improve.

The purpose of receiving criticism is to learn and grow. We do not need to use it as a weapon to berate or punish ourselves.

Avoid defending with denial, anger, or humor

Many people react to criticism by denying it, by becoming angry and attacking the person who is criticizing, or by making jokes. These strategies are designed to defend against attack. They compromise our ability to accept criticism as a gift.

There are two main problems with denial, anger, or evasive humor. First, they prevent honest reflection and self-evaluation. We cannot defend ourselves from criticism and engage in honest self-reflection at the same time.

Second, when we react with denial, anger, or jokes, we decrease the chances of receiving useful feedback in the future. After people run into our defenses, they're less likely to speak candidly next time.

Choose your response to criticism

Ultimately, we get to decide what to do with criticism. If we find some value in it, we can choose the next step to take in response. If we find no value in the criticism, we can thank others for their concern and let the comment go. The point is that we always have a choice.

Instead of being critical of criticism, we can develop a new habit of listening fully and absorbing it. We can take what we find useful and leave the rest behind.

Listen for the feeling in a complaint

When a person who is complaining feels that he's fully heard and understood, his upset often decreases. He's more likely to hear other points of view and discuss solutions. As listeners, we can help this happen by heeding the feelings that underlie the content of the complaint.

Consider a woman who says to her husband, "You spend most of your weekends watching sports on TV."

"So you're saying I shouldn't watch any sports?" he responds.

"That's not true," she fires back. "You're missing the whole point."



All the ingredients of an argument are coming together here. She feels ignored. He feels confused and defensive.

The problem can be avoided if he responds to the feeling in her complaint: "I understand that you're upset about me watching sports. You seem hurt."

"Right," she says. "The truth is, I really don't mind you watching sports. I'd also like it if you would spend some time with me and the kids on the weekends. Could you find a way to do both?"

Now the conversation is moving toward a resolution—one in which everyone in the family wins. What made the difference was listening for the feeling in the complaint.

Listen for the request in a complaint

In addition to finding feelings in a complaint, we can discover hidden requests as well.

"We never go out for romantic evenings any more" can be translated into "Can we go out for a romantic evening?"

"We always run out of money at the end of the month" can be heard as "Let's budget our money and find a way to increase our income, reduce our expenses, or both."

Complaints often contain requests. When people forget this, complaints become dead ends that create discomfort and perpetuate discontent.

Hearing the request in a complaint allows us to produce a new result. After extracting the request from a complaint, we might grant the request and promise to fulfill it. Or we might deny it, make a counteroffer, or suggest another way for the speaker to get what he wants. Any of these responses can be far more productive than the usual agreement, judgment, or sympathy that follow complaints.

When we hear a complaint, we might get defensive. If we listen for the request in a complaint, we can pave the way for solutions. One measure of excellence in listening is our ability to move from complaints to requests and then to action. By listening carefully for requests, we can turn even casual complaints into powerful commitments.



ACCEPT COMPLIMENTS

Some of us are just as uncomfortable receiving compliments as we are receiving criticisms. Many believe that they must discount the compliment in order to avoid appearing conceited:

"Oh, it was really nothing."

"It wasn't that good. I goofed up in several places."

"This old thing? It's such a mess."

"If you really knew the truth, you wouldn't think what I did was so great."

"Well, thanks, but I really don't deserve it."

As a result, compliments get shut out, and the person who gave the compliment feels discounted.

Accepting a compliment acknowledges both ourselves and the person who offers it. One of the most simple, effective, and graceful ways to accept a compliment is to say, "Thank you. I appreciate that."

Often we receive a compliment for a result that others helped us achieve. When that's true, we can acknowledge the fact. This does not mean dodging the compliment or suggesting that we're unworthy. It does mean telling the truth about others who helped achieve the goal.

We can accept a compliment and at the same time share the credit with others who deserve it.

