

## Listen with Impact

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Listening is a talent that each of us is given in some measure. But listening is also a skill that can be trained and developed.

Most people do not listen at a very deep level. Their day-to-day occupations and preoccupations don't require more than a minimum level of listening – just as most of us never acquire more than an average level of physical fitness. In everyday listening we listen mostly to the words. The focus is on what you said and what I said. Or we hear the words and then disconnect from the conversation while we process the words internally. We start thinking about what we'll say next. We listen at a superficial level as we evaluate and judge what we're listening to.

Listening can be divided into attention or awareness (the receiving of information through what we hear with our ears, of course, but it is also listening with all the senses and our intuition) and what we do with our listening – the impact of our listening on others.

### The 3 levels of listening

**Level 1** – Our attention is on ourselves. We listen to the words, but the focus is on what it means to us. The spotlight is on my thoughts, my judgments, my feelings, my conclusions about myself and others. At level 1, there is only one question: What does this mean to me? Level 1 is to meet your own needs and your internal mind chatter is at maximum speed here. Level 1 is where we figure it out and understand.

Level 1 listening is appropriate to certain situations – e.g. traveling (thinking about check-in, whether you remembered your ticket, your awareness of the person in the seat besides you). You want answers, explanations, details, data.

However, there are many situations where Level 1 listening can be detrimental (e.g. relationships, mentoring, supervising, coaching). Because Level 1 listening is so obviously focused on the listener, the speaker may perceive a lack of care and concern for what they're saying. They may also feel a disconnection, and ultimately, they may withdraw, pull back and cease providing input. In many situations, this can be counter-productive.

**Level 2** – There is a sharp focus on the other person. It shows up in our posture – probably leaning forward, looking intently at the speaker. There is a great deal of attention on the other person. You listen for their words, their expression, their emotion, everything they bring. You can feel oblivious to the outside world, as though you and the person you're listening to are in a bubble. Level 2 listening is like being a perfect mirror. It is the level of empathy, creativity, clarification, collaboration, innovation. There is a conduit between the speaker and the listener. At this level, the listener is unattached to self, their agenda or their thoughts or opinions. At this level, mind chatter virtually disappears. You notice the impact of your listening on the speaker. You choose what to respond to and how to respond.

The impact of Level 2 listening is powerful. Speakers feel heard, seen, respected and empowered. To be listened to at this level is a striking experience – partly because it is so rare. People get bigger when they're being listened to. They have more presence. They feel safer and more secure and can begin to trust. This is where shifts happen. Where people feel freer to risk. This level of listening presents huge possibilities for developing relationships – personal or professional.

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**Level 3** – You listen in 360 degrees. It includes everything you can observe with your senses: what you see, hear, smell and feel – the tactile sensations as well as the emotional sensations. It takes practice for most people to listen at this level, because they don't often need to make use of this level of complexity. One of the benefits of learning to listen at level 3 is greater access to your intuition. From your intuition, you receive information that is not directly observable and you use that information as you'd use words coming from the speaker's mouth. Something to be reflected back without attachment. It's never a question of whether your intuition is accurate. It is only a question of whether sharing it might be useful to the situation. Performers develop a strong sense of Level 3 listening. Stand-up comedians, musicians, actors, training presenters – all have the ability to instantly read the level 3 in a room and monitor how it changes in response to what they do. We've probably all had the experience of listening to a speaker drone on and on with absolutely no sense of Level 3.

When we listen at level 3, we begin to see all sorts of things we may not have noticed before. At this level, we can read the energy in a group – whether they are engaged or divisive or disinterested or content. We listen between the lines of what people are saying and hear where they may be holding back. We have 'hunches' about why someone may be underperforming. When we listen at this level, all kinds of new things are possible. This is uncharted territory for a lot of people, but for those who are prepared to go here, the benefits are huge. We operate from a more conscious and aware vantage point that informs our choices and actions.

## **Listening self-assessment:**

1) What prevents you from listening at a higher level?

(Make a list of your 'bad' habits)

2) Ultimately, why do you care about improving your listening skills?

(In other words, what's in it for you? If you can't identify a benefit, you're not going to have much motivation to change your habits).

3) What one habit shift could take you up a listening level?