



Listening

Listening is probably the most valuable skill a person can bring to an interpersonal relationship. It is also possibly the most rare. Listening, according to Scott Peck in *The Road Less Traveled*, is the primary element in loving another person, and it is also the hardest work in a loving relationship. When we listen, we let another person know he is important.

In ordinary social discourse, the highest form of compliment is paid by carefully listening to the one who is speaking. Listening to what a person is saying helps that person's self-esteem and is therapeutic in itself.

Sympathetic listening helps others grow even when the conversation does not include decisions. Many of us know a careful listener. People visit and come away saying "What a fine person she is. She is so interesting that I could talk to her all day."

Such persons are not necessarily spinning out a fascinating stream of conversation. They are usually sensitive, somewhat shy, and talk about 10 percent of the time. Ninety percent of the time is spent listening and making others feel important.

Skilled, careful listening is not acquired by accident. Until the habit is firmly learned, the only way to listen with understanding is to make a *conscious effort*. Most of our daily chit-chat is hardly attended to at all. Most don't expect our hearers to remember it. The conversation is not intended to carry information or express feelings. We engage in it mostly to amuse and enhance ourselves. Thus two people at a party appear to be engaged in a conversation. In fact they are taking turns at self-

enhancement.

A good conversationalist waits patiently for the other to finish before resuming her own story. Some of the following principles have been identified as important in learning careful listening skills.

Shared Meaning

Shared meaning is a listening procedure that completes the cycle involved in listening. It is used when one person has a serious concern or when there is a problem. It is not meant to apply to day-by-day chit-chat. Here is the three-part process involved in shared meaning:

1. The person with a concern expresses a desire to talk about something important. He expresses the concern as clearly as possible, speaking only for himself. Then he asks the listener to report back what has been heard.

For example, Jim says to his wife, Mary, "I want to talk about our arrangements for when the baby comes. I don't think we ought to have either of our mothers this time. I don't get along with my mother very well, and it would cause conflict to have only yours. So I've talked to a temporary housekeeper. Okay, what do you hear me saying?"

2. The listener responds by reporting back in her own words what has just been heard.

Mary answers, "Since you and your mother don't get along well, and since it may cause a conflict to have only my mother, you are suggesting that we have a temporary housekeeper instead."

3. The original speaker then acknowledges that the listener has the message as it

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was intended or corrects the listener's response without changing the original message.

Jim says, "That is exactly what I have in mind."

If Mary feels differently about the arrangements to be made for the baby's arrival, she will go through the shared meaning process. When Jim and Mary both understand each other's feelings and desires, they can reach some conclusion. But this conclusion depends upon careful listening.

Be sure to note that shared meaning does not mean there is an agreement. When shared meaning is used, any disagreement will be a clear one.

Guidelines for the Shared Meaning

If you are the sender of the original message:

1. Make sure you use this process only with important matters; overuse can kill its effectiveness.
2. Try to be certain of the message you wish to send.
3. Keep your statement brief, and speak only for yourself.
4. Try to remember what you say and how you say it.
5. Confirm your listener's accurate response or clarify an inaccurate one. But do not change or add to the original message at this point.

If you are receiving the message:

1. Report back in your own words what you see and hear.
2. Do not reply to the message at this point.
3. Keep reporting back, including clarifications, until the sender agrees that you are accurate.

Persons in a serious conversation must go through as many shared meanings as necessary. After the shared meaning process, the listener can then respond to the message and the conversation may move on toward understanding and decision-making.

Helpful Listening

Helping family and friends requires effective communication skills. The first step in becoming a better communicator and enhancing your relationships is learning to be a good listener.

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Good listening skills are important if we want to be helpful to family and friends. A two-part process will assist us in helpful listening.

The first step is attending. This means concentrating physical and psychological attention on the person *sharing* the problem. Physically, it may mean touching or offering to have a cup of coffee together. The listener faces the one in need and may even lean forward a bit. He observes all cues that tell how the person feels. In short, his whole manner communicates his interest in the welfare of the person sharing a problem.

This listener suspends his own judgement, waits for the sharer to express herself, and takes time to reflect on what has been said.

Responding is the second part of helpful listening. The skillful listener learns to respond to behavior, feelings, and meaning. If a person hangs her head slightly or says she hates her parents, the helper might respond with a feeling word like "sad," "angry," or "discouraged." Then the listener responds to the meaning—the reason for the feelings.

For example, one might say, "It sounds as if you feel humiliated, because your father criticized you in front of your friends."

When the person sharing the problem is ready to move on to consider what she wants to do, the listener may be asked for suggestions. A decision-making process may be helpful. Rather than give advice, the listener might offer several alternatives that can be considered in coming to a decision.

Summary

Communication is at the core of relationships. Relationships are only as good as the communications in them.