

LISTENING WITH UNDERSTANDING AND EMPATHY

By

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“Empathic listening is a deep level of listening. When we are engaged in real dialogue and paying careful attention, we can become aware of a profound shift in the place from which our listening originates. We move from seeing the object world of things, figures and facts to listening to the story of a living and evolving self. When we say “I know how you feel,” it requires an open heart to really feel how another feels. An open heart gives us the capacity to connect directly with another person from within. When that happens, we enter new territory in the relationship; we forget about our own agenda and begin to see how the world appears through someone else’s eyes.”

Otto Scharmer

Ever find yourself saying, “I hear you” when, in fact you are not really listening? Ever wonder whether your friend really is listening to you and understands what you are trying to explain? We all know that good listening can be difficult. We are being asked to lend our mental energies to someone else. Yet, we all know the feeling of wanting to be understood and to understand others. Some psychologists believe that the ability to listen to another person, to empathize with, and to understand their point of view is one of the highest forms of intelligence. Being able to paraphrase another person's ideas, looking for cues of how another is feeling by paying attention to another's body language or movements, accurately expressing another person's concepts, emotions and problems—all are indications of skillful listening. Good listeners are able to see through the lens of many different perspectives. They demonstrate their understanding of and empathy for another's idea or feeling by paraphrasing it accurately, building upon it, clarifying it, or giving an example of it.

When you are listening fully you are paying close attention to what is being said beneath the words. You listen not only to the "music" of the text of what they are saying, but also listen to the subtext or essence of what is being said. You listen not only for what someone knows, but also for what he or she is trying to represent through their facial expressions, body language, voice intonation and eye movements. Ears operate at the speed of sound, which is far slower than the speed of light the eyes take in. When you are listening, you are also learning the art of developing deeper silences in yourself, so you can slow your mind's hearing to your ears' natural speed, and hear beneath the words to their meaning.

We spend 55 percent of our lives listening. Yet we often say we are listening when, in actuality, we are rehearsing in our head what we are going to say next when our partner is finished. Some students ridicule, laugh at, or put down other students' ideas. They interrupt or are unable to build upon, consider the merits of, or operate on another person's ideas. Skillful listeners devote their mental energies to another person and invest themselves in their partner's ideas because they realize that good listening often leads to even better ideas than the ones inside our heads.

Good listeners learn to hold in abeyance their own values, judgments, opinions, and prejudices in order to listen to and entertain another person's thoughts. This is a very complex skill requiring the ability to monitor one's own thoughts while, at the same time, attending to their partner's words. This does not mean that we can't disagree with someone. A good listener tries to understand what the other person is saying before giving her own point of view. This does not suggest that we cannot disagree. Rather, we engage with learning from the other and fine tune our disagreements. When we listen with understanding and empathy, our world expands!