

Listening Practices for the Manager

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Take a breath. What’s in your brain right now? Your mile-long to-do list? A conversation from this morning that you are replaying in your head? An assumption of what you think you will find in this book? This question will help center you to listen more fully as you read this chapter.

I’m hoping that as I reflect on my journey to become a better listener, you will be called to commit to your own listening practice. Listening is not just a skill but a practice one has to commit to. As an introvert, I sometimes stop listening as a form of energy protection. I also have a tendency to half-listen as I multitask. These behaviors don’t negate my ability to be a good listener, but I do need to be aware of them.

I have come to understand that one can listen with their head, and one can listen with their heart. Before I unpack what that means, let me share more about my listening journey and practices I’ve engaged in along the way.

LEARNING TO LISTEN

My journey began in 2017 when I started a master’s program in organization development. Originally I joined the program to learn more about how to facilitate and manage strategic planning processes. Instead I encountered a program that helped me critically reflect on and question the effectiveness of workplace strategic planning. I encountered a

program that deeply connected to my heart; to my desire to improve dysfunctional workplaces; to improve communication and connection with one another; to explore how we listen to one another.

I loved that we worked heavily on improving our internal awareness. My program and professors believed that an organization development practitioner is best if they have a firm grasp on their own self-regulation and emotional intelligence. I learned to accept that I can't control others, but as a facilitator, I can listen, dialogue, and affect spaces and relationships in ways that support being heard. When was the last time you felt like you were deeply listened to and heard?

Listening from the heart is another concept I explored. Most of the time we listen with our head: we think, we process, and we analyze. When we open our heart, we access another tool to sense (Scharmer, 2008) and connect. Opening the heart allows us to listen with compassion and value someone other than ourselves (Christopher, 2022).

As a person-centered manager, you must understand that each individual will need a different amount of time to feel listened to. Each individual will also require different spaces to support their sharing. Sometimes people just need a safe place to download. Other times people will not feel like they can safely talk to you. Managers carry positional power, and this power affects a manager's relationship with others. Managers need to be intentional about creating spaces where listening practices can flourish.

BECOMING A BETTER LISTENER

Figure 15.1 provides four exercises that can help you become a better listener. These exercises will enable you to improve your own emotional intelligence, build patience within your listening practice, improve your awareness when someone is not being heard, and center the sharer. Some of the exercises include techniques that can help you navigate uneven power dynamics as a manager. You can help shift and shape an inclusive, person-centered culture by simply listening.

Figure 15.1

Listening Exercises

Exercise 1

Context: Reflecting While Engaging

Use of self, a practice I engaged in during my organization development program, is “defined as the way in which one acts upon one’s observations, values, feelings, and so forth, in order to have an effect on the other” (Nevis, 2001, p. 125). Beyond just awareness, *use of self* feels like dancing a tango, where I am constantly sensing and responding to my partner. *Use of self* requires mastery, practice, and an openness to learn from each interaction in order to become an effective “instrument of change” (Tschudy, 2014, p. 146).

The most frequent *use of self* tool that I employ is the ability to reflect while I am actively speaking, listening, or facilitating. Reflecting in the moment helps me self-regulate my emotions, maintain awareness, and use the parts of me that best support the situation at hand.

Exercise: Next time you have a conversation with someone, reflect in your head about what you are thinking and feeling while you are talking with them. It’s a bit like rubbing your tummy and patting your head simultaneously! Are you able to notice when emotions rise and fall or when something triggers you? Are you able to remember what assumption you jumped to in your head or when you were judging instead of listening? After the conversation, write down everything you can remember. Do this a few times and see if you notice any patterns.

Exercise 2

Context: Listening to the Wisdom of Another

I had the pleasure of participating in We Here’s (n.d.) Community Study: Indigenous Lifeways & Liberation. In one of the books we read, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013) writes:

I suppose that’s the way we humans are, thinking too much and listening too little. Paying attention acknowledges that we have something to learn from intelligences other than our own. Listening, standing witness, creates an openness to the world in which the boundaries between us can dissolve in a raindrop. The drop swells on the tip of a cedar and I catch it on my tongue like a blessing. (p. 300)

I love thinking about listening to nonhuman life, to life I don’t always think I can communicate with. Sure, I have a cat, and we converse all the time, but

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Figure 15.1 (cont.)

I'm not a plant person. I'm really not even an outdoorsy person. But I love the ocean. I can hear the waves now. What about the ground? The Earth? The cedars?

Exercise: Find something from the natural world that you feel a connection to—grass, river, a plant, birds, a vegetable garden, a willow tree. Ask permission to sit in community with this other intelligence. Strike up a conversation. Listen to the energy between you. Maybe read something about the other. Go back and do it again. Over time, you will find a practice that feels natural and healing to you. Maybe this includes a walk, an offering, an action. Take your time. Don't rush. Reflect on the experience. Write down what you feel and hear. Do you notice any patterns over time?

Exercise 3

Context: Listening to the Unheard

I have observed when someone does not feel like they have been listened to. Sometimes I've been in the same room, and other times I've seen examples of this while watching an interview on television. I've observed individuals talking past each other, or not connecting how they respond with what their conversational partner has just said.

One way to describe this disconnect is to observe the type of listening. Scharmer (2008) identified four types of listening:

1. **Downloading:** what you hear is what you already know.
2. **Factual:** what you hear is novel information that increases your curiosity.
3. **Empathic:** you hear and feel from the viewpoint of another.
4. **Generative:** your being shifts to allow you to access your "open will" (p. 54) and emergent future possibilities.

Exercise: Observe a conversation, either one you are a part of within a group or through the media. If you think someone is not being listened to, ask yourself, "Why do I feel that this person is not being heard?" Is there something in the speaker's body language or in the body language of the listener? How does the listener respond? Are questions being asked? Is the speaker opening up or closing down? Write down what you can in the moment. Afterward reflect on the experience. Can you identify the type of listening that was happening using Scharmer's (2008) four types of listening? Engage in this practice a few times to notice any patterns. If you are able, reflect on this experience with the speaker whom you observed. Were your observations in line with their experience?

Figure 15.1 (cont.)**Exercise 4****Context: Appreciative Listening**

I am training to be an Rx Racial Healing Circle (RHC) facilitator. Appreciation and affirmation are key to the experience of circle participants. Dr. Gail Christopher (2022), the founder of the RHC framework, noted how research shows that feeling appreciated lowers stress and contributes to healthy relationships (p. 37). RHCs are always cofacilitated so that we can demonstrate appreciative listening to participants. We ensure that the sharing of stories, the key activity in RHCs, is “affirming and positive for each person” (Christopher, 2022, p. 100). We also help guide participants in the “art of identifying and expressing appreciation for the common humanity” (Christopher, 2022, pp. 100–101), which RHCs seek to create in order to promote racial healing.

Exercise: When you are in conversation with someone (anyone!), take the time to thank them. Thank them for sharing, and tell them what you appreciated about what they said. Do not jump in with an idea you thought of while listening. Reframe what they said and ask if you understood their words, their story.

Create space for them to share, to continue to share, and to share in different ways. Ask, “Can we explore more about what you said together?” Ask them what they need. “Do you want comfort or solutions?” Be curious. Listen to them more. Help guide the conversation path to lead where it needs to go. End the conversation with gratitude. Reflect on the experience, and if it makes sense, with your conversation partner.

CONCLUSION: LISTENING WITH CONTEXT

As a manager I want to acknowledge some of the challenges that I face when committing to my listening practice. First, this is a *practice*. Sometimes I fail. I am thankful for those failures, appreciate the opportunity to learn from them, and hope that I have not caused irrevocable harm. I try to ensure that those around me know I am open to feedback. I hope that my apologies lead to repair and growth.

Libraries operate within a neoliberal and capitalistic structure rooted in white supremacist culture. Our society is rife with interlocking systems that challenge my listening practice. Scarcity of time is one huge

threat. I constantly feel the pressure of time and sometimes end up moving too quickly, which leads to mistakes. If you decide to commit to the exercises presented in this chapter, think about how you can create the abundance needed to support your listening practice.

We have many threats to creating psychologically safe spaces, and as a manager you will not have the power to ensure each and every space is appropriately supportive. If you are able to create this space with your team, then you can expand and create space with other collaborators. One stepping stone at a time, we can effect practices that will improve each individual's experience in the workplace. We just have to slow down, open our hearts, and listen.

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