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How To LISTEN Out Loud

Ridiculously Powerful Skills for
Leading, Relating, & Happifying

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CHAPTER 2

It's You

“People, if you pay attention, change the direction of one another’s conversation constantly. It’s like having a passenger in your car who suddenly grabs the steering wheel and turns you down a side street.”

-Garth Stein (American author of *The Art of Racing in the Rain*, 1964–present)

Peace would surely reign across the land if people figured out how to listen to each other. However, one of humanity’s amusing quirks is blaming others first. Recently, I had a participant from my class ask me, “How do you tell someone they stink at listening?”

When I say, “I want you to listen to me,” what do I mean? Just what does an ideal listener do? Fortunately, because our species has wanted other people to be better listeners for so long, we’ve had time to pull together a list. Below, you’ll find the ideal inventory of positive attributes for how to listen well. How does it stack up with what you feel makes a good or bad listener?

- Focuses on the speaker / Not distracted
- Open-minded / Not judgmental
- Curious / Asks good questions
- Includes Feelings & Non-verbals
- Accepts different perspectives / Can manage own opinions

The challenge with ideal inventories like this is that they make it look easy. Just do this—how hard could it be? But these are the be-all, end-all behaviors that are perfection achieved. It’s like watching a professional athlete and thinking, “Oh, yeah, I could do that.”

I took a gymnastics class in Junior High so when I watch the Olympics, I'm full of, "I remember this. Oh, I was good at the balance beam, I could totally be on this year's team." No, I really could not. Similarly, when you see the Ideal Listener list you might think, "I already do this." No, you really do not.

This Ideal Listener list only tells you what the external look of listening is. What about how to enact behaviors that will have this impact? Let's begin by rewinding the process of listening all the way back to you and your inner world.

The Me Channel

Dear reader, I appreciate you. You are here attempting to improve your listening. But we have to begin with sobering news. You are completely self-involved. So am I. This is our embodied structure at work; our survival strategy is hooked up to me, me, me. Thus, I have an automatic conversation running in my head all the time. Where my attention is on myself, the spotlight is on me. My focus is on my thoughts, my feelings, my conclusions about myself and others. The Me Channel.

Here's what mine is saying right now:

- I wish I had some chocolate chip ice cream.
- Why isn't Sandy returning my texts. She's a bad friend.
- An Olympic medal is completely doable.
- Did that guy just cut in front of me?
- TACOS! No. Yes. No. Salad.

My brain and body are, necessarily, interested in my survival and my self-interest. As are your brain and body where your awareness / your spotlight is on you. Each of us is listening to our own inner soundtrack of opinions, ideas, judgments, wants, needs, and insecurities. I've got my own Me Channel; you've got yours.

This reminds me of a parody I once saw, of a tarot card. The original card is The Sun which is glorious. Huge, gorgeous, golden sun with rays shining in all directions. An ecstatic cherub rides an angelic horse everywhere surrounded by blooming flowers. It symbolizes new

beginnings, joy, the blossoming of the earth, growth, possibility. The joke card has the same gorgeous sun but written in the middle of it in big black letters is “ME.” There are small moons circulating around the sun and they are labeled, “my stuff” and “my friends.” An entire solar system that has ME at the center of it.

This is how most of us listen, most of the time. Me to myself, you to yourself. It could be fun to have you tune in to your own internal voice right now. What’s it saying? Maybe something like, we’re really in a golden age of TV, just look at the size of my gut, where’s the dog, this book is genius....

For simplicity’s sake, let’s call this Me Channel, Level 1 Listening. This is the internal monologue, the voice that you can hear inside your head all the time. I am making fun of Level 1, a little bit, but elements of it are incredibly important. We humans are wired to make sense of what’s happening around us. What does this mean to me? What do I think about this? What’s in it for me? What should I do next? This quick-wittedness of ours is a superpower.

Level 1 is how we navigate the world. It’s where we interpret language and meaning, to figure things out for ourselves. If your officemate says, “There is smoke coming out of our trashcan” you’d immediately realize the rejection letter you were burning earlier was still smoldering. Then based on that understanding, Level 1 helps you figure out what to do next. If this had ever happened to me, which it hasn’t, I would silently pour my coffee over the smoking remains and go outside for a scream.

However, when it comes to listening to a compatriot, elements of Level 1 are terribly limiting. Our conversation partner is trying to express her experience, her thoughts to us. But Level 1 means we are listening to ourselves, our interpretation, our opinions about what she’s saying. Not what she is truly trying to communicate to us.

Right here, I’d like some dramatic music to play, with the big timpani drums—bom bom BOM! This was huge news to me. My Level 1 is mine alone? Not everyone else thinks the way I do? But I’m so right about what I think. Am I right? I’m right.

Habits that Block Listening

There are predictable ways that we humans do not listen well to each other. They stem from our Level 1 focus; the world is based on how I see it and my certainty that I see it accurately. Internally, in ignorant bliss, I know what's appropriate and I know the way things ought to be done. If someone's not doing them that way, they're doing it wrong.

I should back up a bit: our brains are just trying to keep us alive. Admittedly, an important and necessary foundation for listening, is to be a breathing, living creature. Yet the quality of said life is a nuance the older parts of the brain do not care about. The priority is just, not dead. There's a scene in *The Last of the Mohicans* where Hawkeye is holding tight to his lady love, while a waterfall crashes and booms around them. Just before he jumps off the cliff, Hawkeye shouts to Cora, "Stay alive, no matter what occurs!" That's what our brains are saying to us, without any of that romance or excitement.

Whether I feel joy, fulfillment, or contribution—meh, not so important. Thus, from its primaevial perspective the brain tries to scare me. Frequently. If anything is new, different, or surprising—be suspicious. It might bite. This worried, defensive point of view is an unconscious automatic setting for most humans. And when it comes to listening, this fear-based warning system is what we pay attention to. We listen to the part of the brain that prioritizes our safety. And we listen, take the messages to heart, and repeat them when we try to listen to others.

Our built-in cautiousness is important and useful. But we go overboard with fear, doubt, worry. What if they don't like me? What if I'm not smart enough? What if they see through me? Avoid failure, criticism, disapproval, stupidity, weirdness, weakness. For thousands of years, in many traditions around the world, we have chronicled this fear-based voice. There are different names for it—monkey mind, inner critic, saboteur, devil on the shoulder, gremlin. They tend to run the show without our noticing, whispering threats that we will lose our place, be voted off the island, disappeared. These internal voices sound perfectly sane and accurate. Their job is to keep you where you are because you haven't died yet. And to make sure everyone you care about is similarly cautioned to not change a thing.

There's one particular voice in our heads that I'd like to call out—The Judge. We ask real-life courtroom judges to evaluate evidence, to discern truth from lies, and to make good decisions about difficult topics. This ability to assess and differentiate from a logical point of view is a powerful tool that every one of us needs.

The Judge that I'm talking about, though, is an exceedingly critical and disapproving character. Mean and shaming. We have expectations for how life should go and are often assessing, in our heads, if it is going as it "should." These "should" messages usually grow out of inherited values and standards from parents, culture, school, religion, movies, and social media.

The most common message we receive is some version "You Are Not _____ Enough." Fill in the blank with "smart" or "thin" or "strong" or "educated" or "quiet" or "attractive" or "disciplined." Really just don't get your hopes up.

When I was writing my first book, here's what I said to myself,

You should write faster; what a waste of time.

You should be more interesting; no one will read this.

You should be original; this has already been done.

You should be smarter; this is stupid.

You should stop.

To some of you that might just sound like reasonable advice. That's what I thought at the time, "That's my realistic side." But no, that's the JUDGE trying to scare me away from what I really wanted to do. Better safe than sorry remember? Don't do anything new. You might get killed.

I was used to hearing that voice in my head. I interpreted it as pragmatic counsel. I mistakenly thought that voice was how to get moving, shame myself into action. It did not work. Actually, it's a terrible way to be spoken to.

For our purposes, listening to our own internal Judge voice is the first way that we block our own listening to another person. We hear that Judge and offer up what it says.

My niece says, "I'd like to go to UCLA film school."

And I say, "You'll end up living in a dumpster!!"

I judged her idea as bad and wrong. Then follow up with my superior idea.

“My advice to you is to get into air conditioning. With climate change, that industry’s gonna take off.”

I offer up my Level 1 worries, concerns, and judgements. Thinking I’m being helpful! I am not being helpful. I am not meeting her where she is. I’m trying to make her come to where I am, which is by the way, according to my Judge, the right, correct, appropriate place to be. And, after all, the safe one.

Quite often, the first way that we react to others is with our Judge. I say react because we’re not really listening. Listening Out Loud is quite different. But first, a quick review of the Human Condition and reactive habits.

More Automatic Reactions (That Are Not Listening)

From the point of view of being a human animal, life is terrifying. Most days we’re just hoping not to be kicked out of the campground and eaten by the lurking hyenas. Given this motivational backdrop, we have predictable ways that we respond to other people. We try to look good, be cool, act smart. All in an attempt to prove to ourselves, and to others, that we are worthy of something, anything. Most humans engage in a version of these tactics; see which ones fit for you.

Got This Under Control

This kind of looking good is not joyful self-assurance. The fear instinct, which wants to avoid looking bad, is in charge. So, I’m going to pretend confidence, I got it figured out, I understand, I’m the decider, I’ll explain, I’m in control. Even if I’m just acting that way in order not to be seen through. How I am coming across is more important than listening.

Please Be Pleased

Agreeable people are just lovely. My husband is one of these amiable types and often wonders aloud, “Can’t we all just get along?” I love that—his warm heart wishing for peace. (It saddens me, just a little, to tell him it’ll never happen.)

Strangely, it is possible to be too agreeable. There’s this odd version of people-pleasing that doesn’t work for listening. From this place, whatever the topic, I’m going to agree, say “yes, you’re so right,” smooth over feelings—don’t want to disturb anything. Mostly I want my conversation partner not to dislike me, so I’ll apologize for lots of stuff, blame myself and others, and hope she sees what a nice, inoffensive person I am.

Already Knowing

When the movie *Titanic* was released in 1997, I asked my mom if she wanted to go see it. “I don’t think so,” she said. “I know how it turns out.” Is it bad I thought that was hilarious?

Being in the know is considered a sign of intelligence and status. To prove myself, show I’m good enough, I need to not be surprised, not be ignorant. Because I already know. You can see how this closes me off to listening.

As my colleague is talking, I’m thinking: “I’ve been there, I’ve done that, I’m way ahead of you. I don’t need to hear your words because, really, I already know what you’re going to say. You can stop talking now. It’s my turn. Your mind is so simple! I can read it without you even speaking.”

(There’s also “I’ve Done Everything You’ve Done, Only Better” Listening.

You tell me, “I went to Italy last summer.”

And I respond, “I bought a whole town in Italy. For a dollar.”

You tell me, “I’ve got to get my knee worked on.”

I respond, “My entire leg is pretty much bionic now.”)

Winning

This is a big one; probably the enormous umbrella under which all these habits live. Current neuroscience research is finding that “being right” is an emotional state. We like that winning feeling. In the sense of winning an argument, a point, a trivia contest. I’m right and you’re not.

My brother-in-law, Jay, is a lawyer. I once asked him what he thought about mediation. I wondered if all kinds of people should learn mediation strategies so lawsuits would be less frequent.

His wife, Dee said, “There aren’t enough lawyers to help people anyway!”

Jay jumped in, “You gotta be kidding; there are way too many lawyers!”

Dee says, “Oh yeah? How many?”

Jay says, “That have passed the bar? Or not passed bar? In California? Or in the nation?”

Off they went looking up on their phones, as fast as their fingers would take them, to find these numbers and continue the contest. Meanwhile, I poured another margarita wondering about mediation.

In this information overload age, it can be seductive to fact-check instead of remaining in a conversation; to win by proving wrong.

These are common ways that we react to each other in conversation. They should not be mistaken for listening. Rather, these reactions, habits, default settings result in our colleague, friend, or sibling not

feeling heard. When the Me Channel is in the director's chair these are the scenes we produce.

From a hero's point of view, on the journey toward championship listening, this list of habits is a little confronting. There's a classic saying about admitting you have a problem is the beginning of a solution. That's where we are right now. I hope you see that this is a necessary pain-in-the-ass learning moment for progress to be made. Isn't self-awareness fun?



Play Date

A couple of observational exercises for you, where you get points for telling on yourself.

- For a week, observe, gently (but not too gently), how your Judge, Pleaser, or Know-it-All jumps into conversations. Check in on how often you reacted rather than listened.
- Choose two people in your life that you'd like to improve your listening with. (I request that at least one of them NOT be the most, vile intractable person you know. There needs to be some chance that you might actually be able to practice with this specimen, so pick on the nicer end of the scale.) For now, simply mull over how you usually interact with these two—see what patterns you might notice. Your patterns, to be precise, not theirs.