

Listen Better

My 2016 Resolution



Josh Elman

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I started last year with a new resolution “No Fomo”. I’ve found that focusing on one concept instead of a list of resolutions or specific goals (e.g. “read 2 books per month”) has helped me make changes. This year, “No Fomo” has become a new mantra for me. I’ve gotten much better at enjoying the things I am doing and am able to do rather than feeling like I’m missing out on something better happening elsewhere. I’m still far from perfect and have the occasional bout of FOMO when I’m sitting at home on a Saturday night looking at wonderful party and vacation pictures blasted on the various social networks. But in general I’m much more comfortable with my own life so I’ll call this a success. I’m also still working on the prior year’s “Give more attention” — probably a lifelong effort given my general ADD.

This year, I’m going to add a new resolution to focus on:

Listen Better

As I think about all of the things I want to keep improving in myself, it comes down to focusing and being present in the moments I have. But being present isn’t just being in the same room, and being there without picking up your phone. It takes more than that to be present. It takes giving real attention, hearing the words the people are saying, and processing them so you can respond and engage. It’s still too easy to be present and focused and just say “uh huh”, “sounds good” and walk away not remembering much of the conversation.

One of the traits I admire most in other people is great listening. **It’s rare to find someone who doesn’t just hear the words you are saying, but truly listens to them, processes them, and gives you real feedback.** Great listeners ask great questions — not a ton of questions, just the precise ones that move the conversation forward. Great listeners don’t interrupt

and speak to be heard. They often say very few words at just the right time. Great listeners know how to listen and respond in a 1:1 conversation just as well as in a large group. And even better, great listeners often do a great job following up later on what matters.

With my daughter, whenever we read a story and I wonder if she is paying attention, I ask her questions at various stopping points as well as at the end to see if she both understands what is happening and whether she was paying attention. It's very telling to see what she hears and remembers when she enjoys the story vs when she is bored or distracted. This happens to all of us.

So as I think about the conversations I'm going to have in 2016, I'm very excited to practice and improve my skills on listening. I'll test myself after a conversation to make sure I remember the key points. I'll take better notes — generally pen and paper. I'll put the phone down to make sure I'm really listening — because we all know you can't multi-task your way to truly listening.

I'm also going to listen more to the world around me. Sometimes it's great to just sit back and listen to nature and the world going by. Sometimes it's perfect to find a great playlist of songs and listen and let your mind wander.

I think listening applies to more than just live conversations too. The Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat worlds have turned us into a society of a lot of sharing and posting. In some ways it's starting to feel like everyone yelling in the middle of a town square but no one really listening to each other. On Twitter, I sometimes call this "Outrage Twitter" when one small headline flares up and everyone responds without actually reading the real story or "listening" to what's really being said. I feel like this is happening badly in politics as well. I hope as I continue to participate in public conversations I can do better at listening for the real truth and story, and support that.

Listening is a skill that takes time and investment to get really good at. We are born with two ears, but that doesn't mean we hear everything. So if you are with me in a conversation and it looks like I'm not listening, please: quiz me, challenge me, remind me how important it is to be there and listen. If I start listening better, and other people start noticing and doing the same, we'll all be able to be heard a lot more with fewer words.

I wish everyone a healthy, happy, and impactful 2016. I hope this year is better than those before, and we can all listen to the sounds and words around us in a whole new way.

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