# LEARN HOW TO SHUT UP AND LISTEN!

*Master the Art of Hearing Others with Understanding*

*Experience the power of listening*

Acknowledgements

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## Preamble

I had traveled from Washington, D.C. to some small town in Missouri to conduct a two day seminar on the subject of listening for a group of employees in the Department of Agriculture. At the end of the second day I drove to the nearby airport for a commuter flight that would take me to St. Louis where I would catch my flight back home. In the small airport I ran into a man who had been a student in my class, so as we both had some time to wait for our respective flights, we sat down and had a beer together.

As it usually happens when two people don’t really know each other, we began to talk about family. In the course of conversation he told me that his partner and he had a 20 years difference in age. I reckoned he was around 45 so a quick calculation told me that his partner would be in her mid- twenties.

“Wow, what’s it like to be living with a twenty something old young woman?”

“No” he replied, “she’s 60.”

I just about fell off my seat. It wouldn’t have been so bad had the circumstances been normal, but I had just finished a two day seminar on listening and here I was committing one of the unpardonable sins; I had jumped to a conclusion without listening! All I needed to do was to ask him,  “Is she 20 years older or younger?” But, no, I fell into one of the traps that I had so eloquently talked about in the seminar.

He was a kind gentleman and didn’t confront me with my obvious blunder. I semi-recovered by asking him to tell me about their relationship and he was ready to obliged. Now I was ready to listen. In fact, what he told me caused me to reflect on relationships that were outside of the conventional norm. I learned something.

*If I had a dollar for every time I didn’t listen I’d*…...well, you know. It’s really quite simple to listen and, despite my failings, you will learn to listen from this little book. However, I guarantee that listening is not what we are inclined to do in many situations because we tend to draw on what we know rather than on what we don’t know.

So, why listen? Because listening is the door to understanding and that leads to ability which, in turn, makes you quite powerful. This power cannot be bought nor can it be bestowed upon you.

I was brought up on Sherlock Holmes. Sure, the stories are somewhat exaggerated but that’s part of the fun. To the amazement of Dr. Watson, Holmes comes to understand the crime quickly. His sharp ears and prancing eyes tell him what has happened. The criminal will be sorry that Holmes has his case! Listening gains understanding which enables you to make an informed decision and that is very impressive…..no matter where you are.

You are seated in a job interview for a position you would dearly like to have. Do you sell yourself? Yes, but how? By talking about yourself? Or by listening very carefully to the weary interviewers? You’re the fifth today!

Your spouse wants to leave you. Do you justify what a good partner you’ve been? Or upbraid your spouse for what he/she has done? Of course not; you listen. You might learn something that enables you to, well, do whatever you need to do. Maybe your spouse doesn’t mean what he/she says.

Larry King must have a closet full of suspenders; he had a long run. On two occasions when he was being interviewed he was asked what his secret was, and on each occasion he replied, “I just listen.”

It was such an ordinary reply that neither of the interviewers pressed him any further. Maybe Larry was expected to reply with an earth shattering piece of information. Actually, he did, but they didn’t seem to be listening!

Ready to go?

## Why we don’t listen

We have to start here. Sorry. Who wants to be told there’s something wrong with them? It’s not that there’s something wrong with you, it’s just that all of us have learned how to communicate by default. Nobody sat down with you when you were 4 years old and laid out the whole rigmarole on communicating.

The good news is that no form of communication is natural to us. We learned it bit by bit as we went along and some of our instructors weren’t all that proficient themselves. That’s obvious in my case. Look how I handled that middle-aged, kind man whose partner was 20 years his senior. Man, isn’t experience a hard task master?

So, let’s take a look at why we don’t listen. That way we’ll be conscious of our tendencies and caution ourselves when we see ourselves falling into our old ways.

Imagine! You are the youngest of seven, and if you had sat back and listened you would have died! That’s understandable. You shouted and screamed. Good. Now that you’re still with us, see if you can identify what causes you not to listen now that you’re an adult.

Some blocks to listening:

·        You jump to conclusions.

We might as well start with me. It never entered my mind that his partner was 20 years older. That said something about me which I didn’t like to hear. In Western societies people who marry are usually close in age and if there is a big difference, usually the woman is younger. So, I jumped to a conclusion based on what is usual. I didn’t entertain the unusual and by not doing so, I didn’t listen.

If we entertain the possibility of the unusual we will need to listen and think how effective that might be. Let’s say you work in a company that is conventional and not doing too well. Your curiosity for the unusual might just enable you to become noticed….and save the company at the same time. Creative companies like Google want and even expect employees to come up with new ideas. They look for those who have an ear for the abnormal.

My question to myself and to you, then is, “Are we thinking inside the box and not listening for the extraordinary?”

·        You have your mind made up

I had a heavy dose of this growing up. There were some things that were good and some things that were bad. Coca cola was good and beer was bad. Scots were better people than the English. Black people belong in Africa. Husbands work and wives stay at home. The list is endless and clearly tells me that I should be slow to make up my mind.

To be open to what challenges my thinking, in other words, to be open-minded, is scary. It reflects static thinking. It’s the old story of “If I should discover my world is round and not flat, what will happen to me?”

The answer is, I will be enlightened, but that’s not what I’m looking for. Rather, I’m so preoccupied with my image, I’m likely to dig my heels in and argue for my position even though minute by minute it is becoming evident that my position is untenable.

Something else; I confuse being right with being secure. If I have firm belief systems it means I’m not wishy-washy but definite, and resolute, and strong. Everyone will know where I stand!

But you can still be open to listening, even with a strong position!

Father: Honey, sex before marriage is wrong.

Daughter: But I’m 17 and I think I’m old enough to make up my own mind.

Father: Well, tell me more. Let’s talk about it.

My question to myself and to you is, “Do we block out others because we have closed the door on what might make us uncomfortable?”

·        I don’t like him/her

Molly: What did you think of Allen’s idea in the meeting?

Alex: I guess it was O.K.

Molly: C’mon, Alex, you’re not willing to listen to Allen because you don’t get along with him.

Alex: Well, he’s not the most pleasant person in the world, is he?

Personal feelings of resentment or even hatred will cause me to block out what would be accepted if it had come from someone else. In other words, I don’t separate the person from the idea he/she is presenting.

I have to confess that when a politician, who will remain nameless, gets up to speak, I have to consciously tune into what he is saying because it might be different from before. Close to 100% it’s the same old same old. His concept on how the nation should be is 180 degrees different from mine so as soon as I see his face on T.V. I tune him out. However, recently I listened to his comments on immigration and found them interesting, so I give him credit for that since it’s not his party’s line.

The person you see (and therefore don’t want to listen to) is not the whole person. I’m not a singular “I”. I’m many “I”s. Therefore, Allen might be a jack ass in the eyes of a lot of people but he is a creative thinker and presents lots of good ideas. Allen is multiple just as we all are. Think about it, we aren’t full of inconsistencies, just full of different parts.

O.K., you don’t like Allen and I don’t much like the congressman and that’s fine, but bear in mind that your or my concept of a person doesn’t tell the whole story of who that person is, so listen to the other part like it’s another side of that person, which, indeed, it really is.

Question: Like me, have you ever said to someone in as many words, “I can’t hear what you *say*  for who you *are.*” ??? Think that one through again.

·        What can he/she possibly know?

The straight forward answer to this question is “a lot”.

I heard it the other day and I can’t remember who said it but it goes like, “Looking at the past is like looking at a foreign country.” I never thought of it that way, but it’s true. As I look back on the two major countries in which I lived, Scotland and the U.S., they are both like different countries, especially the U.S. Each time I visit America I think of 1969 when I arrived in Louisville. This country has significantly changed but I have equally changed, so, when you put the two changes together, it’s like a foreign country.

What’s this got to do with knowing? I think it goes something like this; I’m an old guy now and I have accumulated a body of knowledge over the years and I think I know a thing or two. I turn on the T.V. and I listen to some young whippersnapper talking about something of which he has no earthly idea like, “How to get along on your first date with someone you like.” Boring. I could write a book on it. Until I realize that he comes from another planet. As I listen to the conversation about dating that follows his spiel, I realize that the language and thought forms are, well, almost foreign to me. I could write the book for my generation, but not for his.

I don’t understand 20 year olds. If I want to understand them I have to listen to them. What can I learn from them? A foreign language. Come to think of it, my parents didn’t understand me when I was 20. Isn’t that odd? They were 20 year olds at a stage in their lives somewhere back in the Stone Age, so why didn’t they understand me?

So, when I say, “It’s a waste of time listening to Alice; she’s just been here 6 months. How can she possibly understand the complexity of this business?” I’m probably cutting off a fresh perspective that could lead to solving our problems.

She’s too young…..He never finished college…….They are Latinos…….He hasn’t traveled enough…..These people have strange ideas, etc. There are people I listen to and those whom I automatically exclude because they don’t fit into what I think are acceptable or because they are outside of my comfort zone. This means that I end up living in a small world, cut off from the millions of modes of thought, customs, values and ideas. Selective listening impoverishes my life. I keep moving around a circle that keeps bringing me back to the same places when I could be moving along a straight line that keeps running into surprises.

Question: Am I ready to open my ears to all these foreigners (that I don’t care much for) around me?

·        I don’t have time.

If to listen means to understand, and to understand translates into ability, and this makes you powerful, why don’t you have time to listen?

The two primary reasons for not having time to listen are that we talk too much and the second is constant busy activity. When we talk, listening is minimal, like hearing a noise in the background. It’s close to impossible to hear someone and understand what he/she is saying while you’re speaking. So if you are a constant talker you can bet your listening skills are poor.

During busy activity we can hear what’s going on around us but comprehending becomes less the busier we become. We in the U.S. are a people on the move. With exceptions, our lives are characterized by having so much to do. We are the nation of multi- tasking. It appears we can’t help it. Of all the developed nations, we have the fewest public holidays and our allotted vacation time is only half that of most European countries. To make it worse, Americans, on average, use only half of their vacation days! It’s quite astounding. The Protestant work ethic is still alive and well and perhaps being abused. I hope you’re proud of yourself, John Calvin.

“Do you have a minute?”

“Not right now. Put a note on my desk or text me.”

About eighty years ago John Maynard Keynes predicted that with the coming technological wonder gadgets, by now we would be living in a world of ease and plenty, but the Englishman neither knew Americans nor his own countrymen for that matter. Technology has served to ratchet up the ante. The more we engineer, the more we need to engineer. What we are listening to is mainly more of the same. It ends up being noise.

So, talk less and slow your pace. Money is our slave-master, driving us to live frantically to buy what we don’t need (some gurus call this achievement). If we learn to stop and listen to all that’s going on within us and around us, we’ll have a good chance of changing course.

Question: Am I living in time or in the present? “Now” is always the time to listen.

## How to listen

Listening is natural and it’s also an art. To put it another way, the natural is hearing and the art is listening. In listening we understand what we hear and this understanding enables us to solve problems and live a more fruitful life. When we don’t listen we make mistakes, and if we don’t listen to what our mistakes are telling us, we will make more mistakes.

Listening is the key component in relationships. In intimate unions if you don’t listen to what is going on with your partner or friend, intimacy will begin to disappear. In business relationships, if you don’t “read” your customers or boss or employees correctly you will not be effective with them.

So what is listening? A neat and tidy definition is inadequate and hopefully by the time we have considered various aspects of listening we will have a clearer picture, but to get started we can identify important elements

·         Listening begins by sharpening your five senses. You become aware of what is visible, audible, etc. This begins with a conscious decision to notice.

·         Hearing turns into listening when you hear the meaning, the significance, the intent, and often the emotion that is being conveyed. You are hearing the real message and not just taking words at face value. “I’m tired” might mean “I give up.”

·         Consequently, listening involves interpreting. It involves connecting what you hear with other known factors.

·         What we call intuition or gut reaction is important in listening because your subconscious is assisting in understanding.

·         You know you’re not listening when you begin to form judgmental feelings. Listening is non-judgmental and a-moral. In listening - *what is, is.*

## Listening to yourself

If I learned anything worth using in life, it’s this: what we internalize we consequently externalize. If I’m dishonest with myself I will be dishonest with others. If I’m patient with myself, I’ll be patient with others, and so on. There is a real connection between what I do within myself and what I do with others.

Apply this to listening. If I learn to listen to myself I will be better at listening to others. This is a powerful starting place. Most of my life I never listened to myself with some disastrous consequences and my guess is that most people in the world live and die not having listened to themselves.

It’s really quite easy, so let me tell you if you haven’t been engaged in this practice. What you do is that you act as a listener to your thoughts and feelings and actions. Imagine that you are two people, you and your companion, who is also you. You observe yourself. It’s like, “Jim, when that guy bumped into you on the street today and you gave him a dirty look, what was going on? This isn’t your usual response.” By questioning myself I’m inviting myself to see my reaction. “Yeah, that was nasty of me. I have developed a negative attitude lately to pedestrians in this city. Too many of them don’t look where they’re going.”

Notice that the observation that I pointed out to myself was inquiring but non-judgmental. All listening must be neutral for it to be pure listening. However, I can reply by evaluating myself positively or negatively but there is no judgment in my critique. I didn’t feel good about myself giving him a dirty look. That’s something for me to observe about me, not to beat myself with it.

A good question for my observing self to ask is “What is going on inside of me right now?” It might be after my best friend left to go abroad. “I’m angry at him for leaving. I’m quite lonely now. I didn’t think I would have this reaction because before he left I was happy for him.”

There’s nothing to fear from my answer which needs to be absolutely honest otherwise it’s a useless exercise. When I know that we’re not looking for guilty parties, I can keep observing. I’m just getting to know myself better.

You can get a friend to listen to you. “Janice, what do you notice about me during the time we’ve known each other?”  I choose Janice because she’s pretty straight forward. “I hang around you because you’re a constant friend. Sometimes you’re pushy and intrusive and that makes me uncomfortable.” I haven’t thought of myself as pushy but Janice is the second person to tell me this in the past three weeks. Gosh, I must get to know more about this.

Getting to know myself through my observing self and through a few others like Janice is likely to be both confirming and challenging. If I don’t like what I’m seeing, that’s good news. It’s time to move on maybe with a little help from my friends.

I already mentioned that during the first half of my life I never listened to myself. I was too proud; I thought I was fine. Now, I see that I was too scared. I hid myself from others and I hid myself from me. I had to be the strong guy and nobody was allowed to find a chink in my armor. What a painful time that was. Even my pain was constantly being denied by me.

Listening to yourself is liberating and enables you to listen to and understand others. In fact, without self-listening, I doubt if you can hear others with any real degree of insight.

Kind of heavy, I guess. But really necessary.

## Prepare yourself to listen

You can’t always prepare yourself because life happens so quickly but when you can, prepare yourself.

\* Notice what might get in the way of your listening. You want to hear the other person at this point as well as yourself. Check out resentment and anger or other inhibitors in yourself.

\* Be conscious, from past experience, what to avoid and what seems to work with this person. Maybe being too direct is too threatening while encouraging the person to relate happenings, although lengthy, is effective.

\* The time and place are important when the issue is far reaching. You wouldn’t want to talk to your spouse about your marriage whilst he/she is preparing dinner for the kids. But it would surprise you!

\* What is your goal in listening? You must be prepared for anything but there needs to be a reason in the first place unless it’s a casual chat (which, in some instances, could have a goal). For example, are you likely to fire or retain this employee based on this talk?

\*Avoid small talk that is supposed to make someone feel at ease but is evident to the other that you’re feeling awkward about this forthcoming conversation.

\*Also avoid giving the impression that you are an expert listener. It’s called “playing therapist” with others. When others see you take on a superior role they will not want to share with you.

\*Are you sure you’re here primarily to listen? If so, the other should be doing about 80% of the talking.

## Introduction to a conversation

When you are the initiator of a conversation how you approach the other person or even a group of people is often the hardest part particularly if the subject matter is of a sensitive nature.

Strangely enough, you begin with yourself and not the other person. In order to get someone to open up they will do this more readily if they have been invited “in.”

Let’s take an example from two friends

“Sandra, our relationship means a lot to me. I think you know that. Recently I’ve been confused because I haven’t heard from you as much as in the past. I miss going out with you like we used to do. Maybe nothing remains the same, but I’d like to do the kind of things we used to do together. What do you think?”

You haven’t accused Sandra of anything like “Why haven’t you called me?” which implies an accusation. Nor have you let Sandra off the hook as in, “I know you’ve been very busy lately.” Sandra’s busy activities are beside the point and you don’t want to guide her away from your sense of loss. It would be easy for Sandra to reply, “Yes, Alice, you’re right I’ve been overworked at the office.” The real issue is likely to be something different. Not having enough time usually translates into who or what is important and who or what isn’t.

Whatever Sandra’s response is, you will now switch over from talking about your own feeling and want to listening to what she has to say. (see later)

Another example, this time between John, a team member, and Harold, the team leader

“Harold, it’s been a year since I came to work here and, if possible, I’d like to continue. I guess much depends on what you think about me and my contribution. I’m a bit nervous because I don’t know how you feel. I’d like to have feedback from you so that I can have a better idea of how to perform better. I know I have a lot to learn and I’d like to have your input.”

This a case of the “reluctant boss.” Many in business seek to climb the managerial ladder to make more money but are not comfortable in a leadership position. (It’s called The Peter Principle which states that people are elevated to the level of their *incompetency*.) Once again, as in the last example, John is careful not to criticize his team leader although he could easily have done so, like, “Aren’t you supposed to give me an evaluation? It’s been one year.” This might be valid, but he would be closing the door on his objective which is to get Harold to give him a performance review.

Something different; Sally wants to help her husband, Frank.

This time let’s see how Sally wouldn’t want to begin…..

“Frank, you’re never at home. You just need to tell that inconsiderate boss of yours that you have a family and more to do in life than to work. You know I care about you, Frank, but I’m sick and tired of you coming home late and dumping yourself in your chair, only to fall asleep within 5 minutes.”

There’s too much here that blocks listening. Sally might be sounding like Frank’s boss. If Frank feels trapped in his job, what Sally is saying might be true, but it doesn’t fix Frank’s problem. Also, Frank might be tempted to stay even longer at work in the hope Sally will be sleeping when he arrives home.

Re-run.

“Frank, I hate to see you this way. You’re so tired every night and the kids and I miss having time with you. It’s been going on for too long. I need for us to talk about it…..for real.”

In this scene, Frank is given the assurance of his wife’s support. He probably hears that her patience is wearing thin and that trouble is not far away. Sally, as she should, is inviting him to deal with this situation as a number one family priority. She has set the tone for the ensuing conversation in which she will guide the proceedings mainly through listening.

So, when you want to listen to someone who isn’t volunteering to initiate, you need to open up the dialogue. You will focus on yourself and your feelings and needs so as to invite the other, in a real sense, to help you. By so doing you will keep far away from criticism which will only cause the other to be defensive or retiring or aggressive.

## How to get people to open up

This is quite easy. You just need to know to use open-ended forms as opposed to closed-ended.

Do you like school? Is a closed ended question which usually will get you a one word response like yes or no. Of course you can switch to an open-ended form based on the answer. If the answer is “no” you can say, “What is it that you don’t like?” You still might get a one word answer like, “everything”! Hard luck.

But all isn’t lost. “Well, that’s very puzzling because you have good grades. Tell me what’s going on. I’d be very interested in knowing.” That will likely get you at least a four word answer. “The teachers are lousy.” Now your moving.

Open-ended questions, like “How did you manage to do that?” are likely to elicit a story but “Please tell me how you did that” might get you more cooperation and let me tell you why.

As children, lots of us were at the receiving end of questioning that felt very uncomfortable. Why did you do that? Are you ever going to learn? What do you mean, you forgot? The list is endless. The result is that we can grow up feeling negative about questions. “How did you manage to do that?” can be heard as “How did you manage to do that, stupid?” I might ask the question wanting information but you might not hear it that way.

So here’s the way to get round the issue of questions; turn the question into a statement. “Tell me how you managed to do that” is questioning but it’s not a question. If you add, “I’m really interested to know” with an accompanying smile, you leave little doubt.

When listening, your objective is to enable the other person to expand. Having them tell a story is part of that expansion. In listening, you are being given information that increases your understanding. The purpose of that is not to enable you to solve the other person’s problem or to give advice, but rather to enable you to listen further with greater intelligence and depth.

## How to listen to a problem

The first and last thing to remember is that it’s not your problem and you need to do what you can to keep it that way. There are exceptions. If you own a small company, and an employee makes a $500,000 mistake, you have a problem, but even here, when you say you have a problem, it’s a different one. Your problem and the employee’s problem are distinctly different although connected.

There are three elements to bear in mind when someone has a problem and wants that you listen. For you, the listener, the first step is to help your friend (or whomever) to *define* the problem. It may be obvious but it might not be what you imagine. Let’s see….

You have a call from your friend Bob, who tells you that he was accosted on the street and the robber got away with his wallet and brief case. You arrange to meet him over a cup of coffee. You learn that he was carrying a lot of money, credit cards plus I.D. cards in his wallet and his bag contained his computer and some hard-to-replace papers. On meeting him you find him shaken and he proceeds to tell you what happened.

So what is the problem? It could be one of several. The obvious are his money, or the info on his computer, or the papers. Jumping to conclusions, as we have learned, is a hit or miss approach. Actually, his problem maybe unseen or intangible like time and work, as an example. Bob can recuperate everything….eventually, but it will be a herculean task. In the meantime his work and clients will suffer. The very thought of this distresses your friend most of all.

Your job in listening is to get him to define that this is his real problem. After listening to his story, a statement like, “Of all that happened, what is the one thought that you have that most worries you?” Or, as your friend relates his story he may have been telling you of his real problem but not explicitly. You have the sense that it’s not just the money so you can tell him, “I get the impression that it’s not just the money etc. that is troubling you.” By telling him what you have gleaned from his account, you will be helping him to put his finger on the main concern he has. He’s thinking in the back of his mind about what he’s going to have to do to keep afloat, particularly when it comes to dealing with his main customers.

Having defined the problem, you can now help Bob to *identify options.* “What are some of the things you can do to reduce the problem, particularly in the immediate future?” Through listening we can help the other to think through issues but we are not providers of solutions. We can make suggestions if we want but in so doing we have left the function of listening.

The final step is to ask for his *decision.* “What are you going to do now?” The skill that I’ve described is facilitation. In a way you are acting like a mirror to enable to see his situation and solution more clearly. In facilitation you aren’t an advisor.

Let’s take a simple example to show how facilitating can take place in any circumstances. Six year old Helen arrives home from school one day

Helen: Mom, I don’t want to go back to school

Mom: Oh, I thought you liked school. Something must have happened. Would you like to tell me?

Helen: Melissa says she doesn’t want to play with me anymore because Jill is also my friend.

Mom: So Melissa wants you to be her friend and for you not to be friendly with anyone else?

Helen: Yes, so I don’t want to go back there. Maybe I could go to another school.

Mom: Well, that’s one choice but it might be difficult. What else might you do?

Helen: I could tell Melissa she isn’t my friend any more, or, I could tell Jill she isn’t my friend any more, or, I could ask them both to come by here tomorrow for juice and cookies. Melissa doesn’t know Jill very well. Maybe she will like her.

Mom: So, which one will it be?

Helen: Bring them here for cookies? Eh?

Mom: Sounds good to me. Chocolate chips?

## The problem with giving advice

Some of us want to save the world so when we see someone with a problem, instead of listening to them we want to solve their problem for them. We might call this helping them, but more accurately, it’s rescuing them from themselves. I define help as doing something for people who  cannot do for themselves.

There are at least five problems with advice giving:

The first is when they don’t want your advice. “Let me do that for you” is met with, “Thanks very much, but I need to figure it out myself.” The Rescuers become a bit peeved with this response because they tend to find their sense of meaning in life through, so-called helping.

The second problem is that my solution for your problem might well fit me but not you. “I don’t feel well these days” is met with “You should take vacation time and go to the beach. The sea air is wonderful.” But the unwell person has no vacation time left this year and dislikes the coast.

A third problem is when you get into a game that has been dubbed, “YES BUT.”  It goes like, “I wish I had more money to buy a car” which is met with “You could take out a loan” which is further met with, “YES BUT my credit is bad these days.”   The rescuer continues to offer solutions but is always met with a YES BUT. It’s a common psychological game as explained by the psychoanalyst, Eric Berne in the book, Games People Play. Our friend who wants to buy a car might really want to do so but she doesn’t want the rescuer to be the problem solver usually because she resents him for some unknown reason. In essence, she is saying to the rescuer, “See, you think you’re so smart but I’m going to frustrate you by not allowing you to speak to my situation. Smart ass!” Recognize this game?

The fourth danger in giving advice is that the other will take it and come back to you later to tell you that it didn’t work. “My wife isn’t much interested in me anymore” is met with, “Sit down and talk with her. You’re a good man so tell her she’s lucky to have you.” Two days later, “How did the talk go with your wife?” is met with “She told me that I’m good for nothing and now wants a divorce.” As the rescuer, I will be forever blamed!

The fifth difficulty with advice-giving is the opposite of the fourth; the other will take your advice, it works, and he/she returns to you with a smile and a list of other situations for you to address. I experienced this with a woman who was having marital problems. I gave her a simple answer to a simple problem and it worked. Unwittingly I became her guru. It’s no fun being a guru, believe me!

Would I ever give advice? Yes. If someone was frozen with fright on the roof of a burning building, I would probably shout “Jump; you’ll be O.K.”

## Listening to feelings

You never hear a person more deeply than by listening to how he/she feels. What we think is more academic and what we feel is more “soul.” Hear my feelings and I will know you are truly listening to me. I will also know that you understand me.

We avoid talking about feelings; they are too personal, too intimate, so we talk about whatever surrounds our feelings. “It looks like you were really hurt when she left you” is met with, “Well, that’s life; you’ve got to get up and go on, don’t you think?” In other words, “Don’t you dare to enter the world of my mixed up emotions.”

I’m Scottish, and therefore British (but maybe not for long due to the forthcoming referendum on independence). We don’t like feelings. We try to keep a stiff upper lip and those who shed too many tears or talk too much about how they feel are thought of as weak. You must be strong! Of course, it’s a lot of bunk and psychologically damaging. I didn’t manage to escape the damage. Like nearly everyone else around me, I kept my feelings to myself. As a young man I couldn’t reveal my hidden fears, but if I became ‘justly’ angry now and again, that was O.K. Men were allowed that.

To feel is human; to understand and reveal honest feelings is maturely human. I say “honest” because feelings of anger and resentment or similar volatile emotions aren’t honest. “I’m angry at you; you tell me nothing” is a poor substitute for “I get scared when you go silent since I don’t know what you’re thinking.” Honest feelings are basic and deep. They describe me and not you. Or, it’s what I feel about me and not what I feel about you.

“How do you feel?”

(reply) “I feel like quitting this job.”

“I think I know that, but how do you ***feel***?”

I am grateful to the U.S. for many things, not the least of which is challenging me to identify, and then face my feelings. It was hard work. You’ve lived with feelings all your life and always have buried them like they’re monsters but our feelings are our best friends when we get to know them. The reason is that feelings point us to what is really going on inside of us. Feelings are neutral; they are what they are; they are neither right nor wrong. Some of them feel bad but these feelings, with the good ones, are always helping us to understand ourselves and are clear guideposts to direct us in more healthy directions.

We won’t be much good at listening to the feelings of others until we are in constant touch with our own feelings. If you think you’re in that category, good! That’s your starting point. You’re not used to consulting how you feel but you feel just the same as what others experience. Ask yourself from time to time throughout the day, “How do I feel (not think)?” If it disturbs you sometimes, excellent! Keep going because it will get better. Pay a few hundred dollars, if need be, to sit down with a good therapist. It’ll probably prove to be priceless.

Let’s watch the process of listening to feelings. It is often called “active” listening but I’m not crazy about that description since all forms of listening have to be active.

·        Between friends

Bill. “How’s the job going, Peter?”

Peter. “It’s a job, that’s all I can say about it.”

Bill. “Well, like it’s boring or something?”

Peter. Yeah, it’s boring. I want to be in engineering, not manufacturing.

Bill. I think I know what you mean. It’s depressing to get up in the morning and not to look forward to your work.

Peter. That’s true. If I don’t change jobs I’ll really get depressed. But a couple of beers help!

Bill. Cheers! Being depressed is no fun. Until you can find a position in engineering how are you coping, apart from the beers, I mean?

Peter. I really don’t know. I guess I am depressed these days. Do I seem depressed to you?

Bill. Yes you do, and it bothers me to see you so down. If you want we can talk more over a cup of coffee.

·        At home.

Bob: Honey, I wish we would go easier on the food budget.

Erika: O.K. Bob, but tell me about it. What’s on your mind?

Bob: It’s just that we’re going overboard.

Erica: You’re anxious about finances?

Bob: Well yes. It’s just that things are tight just now.

Erica: Bob, I don’t think I’ve seen you this worried in a long time. We can cut back on some foods, yes, but I sense there’s something bigger behind all this.

Bob: I might be laid off.

Erica: No wonder you’re worried.

Bob: Erica, I’m scared. What will we do?

Erica. We’ll manage if it happens. That’s what we’ll do. Now tell me how you’re going to stop the worrying.

In contrast to listening, Erica needs to talk with Bob about being upfront with her. Bob is one of these guys who tries to get his message in through the back door. The food budget had little or nothing to do with his problem.

·        At work.

 Sylvia has recently become an Administrative Assistant. Her supervisor is Diana who has been in the company for 20 plus years.

Diana: How is it going Sylvia? Are you happy working here?

Sylvia: So far, so good. Are you satisfied with my work?

Diana: Yes and no. You’re doing O.K. It’s just that Helen, your predecessor, was here for a long time and I was so used to her.

Sylvia: I’m sure you miss her. And with her dying so suddenly, it must have been painful for you.

Diana: It was. Thank you for understanding.

(An hour later)

Diana: I was thinking. Comparing you to Helen wasn’t fair of me. I must have hurt you. But I want you to know that you’re doing fine and I’m here to help you in any way I can.

Sylvia: That means a lot to me. Thanks.

First Sylvia listens to the feelings of Diana, and then Diana seeing she has been hurtful to Sylvia, provides feeling feedback that would cause her to be relieved.

When you listen to the feeling of another person don’t worry if you’re wrong in your assessment. The fact that you attempt to give feedback will register with the other person and it’s likely that he/she will tell you the feeling being experienced. Example…

“Mary, you seem to be anxious these days.”

(Reply) “Not so much anxious as disappointed.”

Remember that there is a fearful or hurt feeling behind anger. “You’re angry with me, aren’t you?” misses the mark but you might say, “I should have included you and I didn’t. I discounted you and I’m sorry about it.”

How are you feeling right now? Pay attention to your own feelings and listen to the feelings of those around you.

## Listening to criticism

This is more fully treated in the first of this series, How To Give and Receive Criticism. Here is a synopsis.

The most important point to remember is that when someone criticizes you, he/she is saying something more about themselves than you. “You are a very selfish person” is how that person experiences you. It’s not important whether the person is right or wrong because it is fundamentally a perception. Someone else might think you are a very giving person. If you respond as if you are under attack you will undoubtedly fight back or defend yourself or just withdraw into your shell.

Instead, with a steady eye on your criticizer, listen further. “Tell me, Sam, what causes you to say this?” You will want this person to become descriptive so that you know what’s behind the accusation. “You don’t share information with me. I think I’m generous in sharing with you.” Now you know a bit more but you need to go further. “You are very generous in telling me what’s going on and I certainly need to share information with you. Please tell me specifically what I’m withholding from you.”

Sam is now led by you to be more and more descriptive. Whatever he now tells you, you can deal with because the criticism is no longer in the realm of what is personal; it’s now in the area of information. Sam might enlighten you as in, perhaps you don’t share enough and you need to decide what to do about that.

I guess you can see how powerful you become when you can lead a person who criticizes you into one who becomes cooperative. If you allow the criticism to “get at” you, you are left struggling and you appear to be weak.

Consider this dialogue:

Sally and Regina are two teenager sisters.

Sally: Regina, have you seen my new blue dress? You’re always taking my things.”

Regina. Mom has it. I’m guilty as charged. I took it to show Mom and I probably shouldn’t have.

Sally: No you shouldn’t. It’s up to me to show it to whomever I want.

Regina: You’re right. Mia culpa! Please forgive me. But, sis, tell me more about me always taking things. I’m not aware of this.

Sally: Well, during the summer when I was gone, you borrowed my handbag

Regina: I did, and remember I told you about it on the phone? I thought that was over. (Sally is silent) You know, I was wrong to show Mom your new dress. I think now that you wanted to show it to her yourself to see the look on her face. You must be feeling badly about me.

Sally: That’s true. I’m upset with you.

Regina: I’m feeling terrible. How can I make it up to you?

Sally: You can buy me a chocolate sundae.

How do you think Regina handled Sally?

The trick, so to speak, is to keep the focus on the other. Get out of yourself and into the needs and concerns of those who attack you. They haven’t yet learned how to communicate what they really want to say in concrete terms. You are simply helping them through listening.

## Changing the conversation

There are some conversations that are time consuming or negative or, for one reason or another, are unacceptable. In our impatience we can change the subject only to find out soon enough that we have created distance between ourselves and others.

John: As I was saying, the new project is challenging and it will take all hands on deck to get it done. Of course, some of us will be involved more than others……

Betty: Excuse me, John, can you come to the main point of what you are saying?

Betty is probably speaking for most people in the meeting and she might be successful in causing John to move along quicker towards the conclusion, but at what expense? John may have taken hours to prepare his presentation. He also might be very conscious that making speeches isn’t his strong point. Betty might cause him to become nervous and flustered. As a result, John is unhappy and even resentful towards Betty which later reveals itself in his not-too-subtle non-cooperation with Betty and others who are like her.

What has happened is that the transition from John’s lengthy discourse to the main point has been too sudden. What is needed is a smoother transition so that John is moved along without being so discounted. The skill is called, “Pace and Change.” You pace (go along) with the other to establish identity before making the switch to something different. Betty changed without pacing.

How do you pace? By listening! We’ll come back to John and Betty. First of all, look at the following dialogue that might be a clearer example that makes the point.

Two men are standing at the bus stop on a cold wet morning. One strikes up a conversation with his fellow sufferer.

1st Geeze, what a morning!

2nd Yeah, it’s pretty unpleasant. (pacing)

1st Do you notice the bus is always late on mornings like this?

2nd Do you think the weather has to do with the lateness? (trying to change)

1st No, it’s this rotten bus system

2nd I’ve just come to live here. Is the bus system notorious for being poor? (pacing)

1st Oh, yes, just like every other service in this God-forsaken town.

2nd (Jokingly) Oh dear, looks like I’m going to enjoy living here! (change)

1st (Smiling) I guess it’s not so bad.

2nd Here’s the bus! Have a good day. It can only get better, don’t you think?

1st Now, that’s true! Have a good day, also. Nice to meet you.

The movement from a negative beginning to a more positive one is best when it’s smooth and not too sudden.

In the case of John and Betty it’s not likely to be so smooth but it can happen. At the point of Betty’s interruption, she can acknowledge John (to count, rather than to discount him).

Betty: John, please excuse me for joining in. I think you have done a good job of convincing us of the challenge. Now I’m anxious to hear your conclusion and recommendations.

John: I’m just coming to that, Betty.

Betty: (smiling) Great!

There’s no guarantee John will speed up but he might do so depending on how sensitive he is to his audience. He’s not so likely this time round to hate Betty’s guts.

The Pace and Change skill has many advantages and can be used in any scenario. You are telling your little girl a bedtime story (you are listening to what she wants, so you are pacing) and at the end you say, “I think it’s bedtime. Let’s go and clean your teeth” (That’s what you want so now you are changing). It’s basically the same as at the bus stop. Only the methodology has is different.

Keep Pace and Change in mind; it’s constructively manipulative!

## Listening to body language and tone of voice

The best way to understand body language and voice tone is to watch a good video on the subject. In this concise book, I’m limiting what I want to say and I hope it will give you some very important pointers.

·        Don’t worry about your own body language and tone of voice. If you are honest and sincere in your communications, the language of your body and tone will be in accordance with your words. It appears to work that way. If you are lying or hiding something then if your words don’t give you away, you’re body or voice language will.

·        Be sensitized to others. If you are tall and you’re talking with a short person, it probably will be better for you to sit down if a chair is handy. If you have a loud voice, be aware of the reactions of others since  loudness equals aggressiveness in the ears of some people.

     Likewise, be aware of off-putting personal habits like blowing your nose furiously in the presence of others. If you aren’t aware of anything, you   still might be doing things unconsciously so ask a friend who will be truthful with you.

·        When listening to others look for what seems uncharacteristic about their body language or tone of voice. For example, if someone is quiet spoken and you find him talking loudly and perhaps faster, then you know something is odd. However, if his words “agree” with the change in body and tone, you will have a clear message. In this case there isn’t a discrepancy between words, body movement and voice tone.

·        When the body language and/or tone of voice don’t agree with the words being spoken, the real message is to be found in the body language and/or voice tone. “I’m not upset” accompanied by peering eyes and agitated body movements, indicates she is upset! Forget the words.

·        Question what you hear and see. Folded arms may indicate resistance but if the person concerned folds his arms to be comfortable, then there probably isn’t any resistance. If someone looks away from you when you’re talking, it might be that she is resisting you but some people look away to concentrate better. When speaking, if a person doesn’t look at you he may be lying but it’s not certain. Listen and look for other indications. If this person looks flushed in the face while looking away, you have a good idea that he is lying.

Listening is a never ending exercise. It is, in my opinion, the pivotal point in communicating. As I said to begin with, if you listen well, you understand, and if you understand, you know what to do, and this in turn, makes you powerful. Happy listening!

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