Suzanne Zeman, MSC
a coach for coaches, executives and business teams

1738 Shasta Street
Richmond, CA 94804
phone: (510) 524-7620
fax: (510) 524-6061
szeman@comcast.net

Listening to Listening: Using the Wisdom of Our Bodies
Suzanne Zeman, Master Somatic Coach

While attending a conference recently, I had a few minutes to talk with a colleague during a break. As the break was ending, I made a comment that seemed straight forward to me, but I felt her body tense up. I made a note to myself to check in with her later about her reaction. When we spoke during the next break, she admitted that she reacted to my comment, but did not want to "make a big deal" of it. However, I realized that the matter was important to her, and stayed in the conversation until we resolved the issue to both our satisfaction.

How rare is it to pay attention to what happens to the person we are "communicating" with, rather than focusing just on what we are saying? We often hear that listening is the key to effective communication, but how often have we considered listening to what the person we are talking to is listening? And why is this even important?

When several people hear something said, each has their own interpretation and story about what they hear, based on their history, culture, and life experience. So "listening" is unique to each of us. We may hear the same words, but interpret them very differently from what the speaker intended. Therefore, to be an effective communicator means being aware of how our speaking is interpreted by others. Interpreting what we hear happens automatically, and it happens in the body.

Our bodies remember. We remember all the events and circumstances that have been threatening, as well as those that have been pleasant, supportive and enlivening. Our brains, however, are wired to be on the lookout for danger and threat. If something appears in our environment that triggers a memory of "threat", whether real or imagined, our bodies do what we learned at an early age to survive, according to the part of our brain that is monitoring. When we are not aware of our automatic reactions, the "threat" is interpreted by our reptilian brain (the most primal of the brain's functioning), and is automatically defended against. Our bodies move away from, freeze, or fight with the issue. Stories arise in our minds to justify our automatic reactions, which could be physical movement, energetic shifts, and conversational tone – all forms of behavioral patterns.

By paying attention to the interpretations others have of our speaking, we can be aware of whether we are coordinating, whether we are aligned, or whether there is incoherence with the person we are speaking to. Incoherence is an assessment that we can feel in our bodies. In the example above, I "felt" my colleague's contraction, which I then interpreted as some miscoordination between us. When I checked with her later, I discovered that I made an assumption in my comment that perturbed her biology to the point that I felt a contraction in my

own body. Our biology does that. We "resonate" with each other so that we can feel what the other is feeling emotionally. The phenomenon is called **limbic resonance.**
Limbic resonance is the capacity for sharing deep emotional states arising from another part of the brain: the limbic system (1). The concept was introduced in the book by Lewis, Amini and Lannon, A General Theory of Love (2). According to the authors (professors of psychiatry at UCSF), our nervous systems are not self-contained, but attuned to those around us.

Limbic resonance and limbic regulation are also referred to as "mood contagion" or "emotional contagion" in the work of professors at the Johnson Graduate School of Management, Cornell University and at the Yale School of Management (3). In The Wise Heart, Buddhist teacher Jack Kornfield speaks to the musical metaphor of the definition of limbic resonance and correlates this discovery of Western psychology with principles of Buddhism:

> *"Each time we meet another human being and honor their dignity, we help those around us. Their hearts resonate with ours in exactly the same way the strings of an unplucked violin vibrate with the sounds of a violin played nearby. Western psychology had documented this phenomenon of limbic resonance. If a person filled with panic or hatred walks into a room, we feel it immediately, and unless we are very mindful, that person's negative state will begin to overtake our own. When a joyfully expressive person walks into a room, we can feel that state as well." (4)*

Strong emotions are easier to feel than more subtle responses. However, with mindfulness and practices to increase body awareness, we can sense reactions and responses to our speaking in every interaction. When we know that our bodies have this capacity to feel how the listener is reacting to and interpreting what we are saying, we have the opportunity to open our senses and practice listening with our bodies as we communicate. When we do this effectively, we are using the wisdom of our bodies to "listen to listening". With practice, we can distinguish what we are sensing, ask questions to validate what we feel, and learn to be more effective communicators, coordinating and designing our lives with the people we care about, respect and honor.

References

(1) Anthony Scioli and Henry Biller, *Hope in the Age of Anxiety,* Oxford University Press (2009).
(2) Thomas Lewis, M.D., Fari Amini, M.D., and Richard Lannon, M.D., *A General Theory of Love,* Vintage Books USA (2000).
(3) Sigal Barsade, "The Ripple Effect: Emotional Contagion and Its Influence on Group Behavior", *Administrative Science Quarterly* (December 2002).
(4) Jack Kornfield, *The Wise Heart: A Guide to the Universal Teachings of Buddhist Psychology,* Random House (2008).