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The skills of enquiry

The skills of enquiry are the skills of listening. On the ‘push’/‘pull’ spectrum that we explored in Chapter 2, listening is a core ‘pulling’ behaviour. And the quality of any conversation depends on the quality of the listening.

Stephen Covey famously said: ‘Seek first to understand, then to be understood.’ Only by enquiring into someone’s ideas can you respond honestly and fully to them. Only by discovering how they think can you begin to persuade them to your way of thinking. Only by listening can you begin to manage and lead them.

But skilled enquiry also helps the person you’re listening to. Listening – real, deep, attentive listening – can help them to think better.

I’ve summarized the skills of enquiry under seven headings:

- paying attention;
- treating the speaker as an equal;
- cultivating ease;
- encouraging;
- asking quality questions;
- rationing information;
- giving positive feedback.

Acquiring these skills will help you to give the other person the respect and space they deserve in order to develop their own ideas – to make their thinking visible.

Paying attention

Paying attention is one of the most respectful things we can do. Paying attention means concentrating on what someone is saying. That sounds simple: how can we listen without paying attention?

Of course, we often do just that. Nancy Kline puts it well, in her book, *Time to Think*:

We think we listen, but we don't. We finish each other's sentences, we interrupt each other, we moan together, we fill in the pauses with our own stories, we look at our watches, we sigh, frown, tap our finger, read the newspaper, or walk away. We give advice, give advice, give advice.

Real listening means pausing our own thinking and allowing the speaker's thinking to enter our mind.

Paying attention helps a speaker to find their ideas and express them. If we're paying proper attention, the speaker will become more articulate. And if we're not paying attention, they'll stumble and hesitate. Poor attention makes them more stupid; close attention makes them more intelligent.

Don't rush. Adjust your own tempo to that of the other person. Wait longer than you want to. And when they can't think of anything else to say, ask: 'What else do you think about this? What else can you think of? What else comes to mind?' That invitation to talk more can bring even the weariest brain back to life.

Interrupting

Interrupting is the most obvious symptom of poor attention. Sometimes, we can't resist it. Some demon inside us seems to

compel us to fill the speaker's pauses with words. It's as if the very idea of silence terrifies us.

Mostly, we interrupt because we're making assumptions. Next time you interrupt someone in a conversation, ask yourself which of these assumptions you are applying.

- My idea is better than theirs.
- The answer is more important than the problem.
- I have to utter my idea fast and if I don't interrupt, I'll lose my chance (or forget it).
- I know what they are going to say.
- They don't need to finish the sentence because my rewrite is an improvement.
- They can't improve this idea any further, so I might as well improve it for them.
- I'm more important than they are.
- It is more important for me to be seen to have a good idea than for me to let them finish.
- Interrupting will save time.

If you're assuming you know what the speaker is about to say, you're probably wrong. If you allow them to continue, they will often come up with something more interesting, more vivid and more personal.

Exercise

Next time you hold a conversation with a colleague, deliberately note down the number of times you interrupt them – and the number of times they interrupt you. When the conversation has finished, count up the two totals. What do the numbers suggest? How many of those interruptions were useful or necessary? (Not every interruption is unhelpful.)

Allowing quiet

Once you stop interrupting, the conversation will become quieter. Pauses will appear. The other person will stop talking and you will not fill the silence.

Think of these pauses as junctions in your conversation's journey. You have a number of choices about where you might go next. Either of you might choose. If you want to switch from listening to persuading, you might make the choice. But, if you're enquiring, then you give the speaker the privilege of making the choice.

Top tip

There are two kinds of pause. One is a filled pause; the other is empty. Learn to distinguish between the two.

Some pauses are filled with thought. Sometimes, the speaker will stop, perhaps suddenly. They'll look elsewhere, probably into a longer distance. They are busy on an excursion – and you're not invited. But they will want you to be there at the junction when they come back. They have trusted you to wait. So wait.

The other kind of pause is an empty one. Nothing much is happening. The speaker does not stop suddenly; instead, they seem to fade away. You're standing at the junction in the conversation together, and neither of you is moving. The energy seems to drop out of the conversation. The speaker's eyes don't focus anywhere. If they're comfortable in your company, they may focus on you as a cue for you to choose what move to make.

Wait out the pause. If the pause is empty, the speaker will probably say so in a few moments. 'I can't think of anything else.' 'That's it, really.' 'So. There we are. I'm stuck now.' Try asking: 'Can you think of anything else?' If the other person is ready for you to take the lead, then do so: ask a question, make a suggestion.

Showing that you are paying attention

The best way to look as if you are paying attention is – well, to pay attention. But sometimes we need to consciously work at paying attention. Begin with your eyes: practise looking steadily at the speaker when you're listening to them, and start to notice when you glance away. Generally, we don't look nearly enough at the people we listen to.

Working on our eye movements benefits both listener and speaker. If you look more attentively, you'll actually pay more attention to what the speaker is saying. (The speaker will probably look away from you more frequently; it's what we do when we're thinking about what to say.) Relax your facial muscles: no frowns or rigid smiles. Use minimal encouragers (more about those in the section on 'encouraging' below.) But come back, always, to the way you use your eyes.

Be aware that such attentive looking may actually inhibit the speaker. In some cultures, looking equates to staring and signals disrespect. You need to be sensitive to these possible individual or cultural distinctions and adapt your eye movements accordingly.

Treating the speaker as an equal

You'll enquire well only if you raise the other person's status. 'Pushing' behaviour, which raises our status, will always lower the other person's status (look back at Chapter 2). That will interrupt their thinking, and may mean that you never discover valuable information and ideas.

For managers and leaders, status in conversations is often complicated by power. Power can come in many different forms: the power to reward or punish, for example; the power deriving from regulation or expertise; the power conferred by a senior role. When power combines with status-raising 'push' behaviours, we can easily find ourselves becoming patronizing.

Patronizing the speaker is the greatest enemy of equality in conversations. It grows out of the way parents and carers treat children (the word comes from the Latin word ‘pater’, meaning ‘father’). Of course, we often have to treat children like children. We need to:

- direct them;
- control them;
- think for them.

If you’re a manager, you might see that list as a more or less comprehensive list of your responsibilities towards the people you manage. And you might think that the way to discharge those responsibilities is to talk. But wise managers – and leaders – know that there’s far more to be gained from listening than from talking.

As soon as you think you know better than the other person, or provide the answers for them, you’re patronizing them. You cannot patronize someone and pay them close attention at the same time.

Cultivating ease

Good thinking happens in a relaxed environment. Cultivating ease will allow you to enquire more deeply, and discover more ideas. When you are at ease, the solution to a problem will sometimes appear as if by magic.

Many people are uncomfortable with the idea of ease at work. They’re so used to urgency that they cannot imagine working in any other way. Many organizations equate ease with sloth. If you’re not working flat out, chasing deadlines and juggling 50 assignments at the same time, you’re not worth your salary. It’s sometimes assumed that the best thinking happens in such a climate.

Not so. Urgency keeps people from thinking well; they’re too busy *doing*. After all, doing is what gets results, isn’t it? Well, not when people have to think to get those results. Sometimes, the best

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results only appear by *not* doing: by paying attention to someone else's ideas with a mind that's alert and at ease.

Cultivating ease is a behavioural skill. You don't have to *feel* at ease to promote ease in another person. (How would you speak to a person who is threatening you with a gun, for example?) Breathe out, slow down your speaking rhythm, lower the volume and the pitch of your voice. Banish distractions: unplug the phone, close the door, find somewhere quiet and comfortable. (You may need to leave the office.) Make time. If the time isn't right, postpone the conversation.

Encouraging

In order to liberate the other person's ideas, you may need to do more than pay attention, treat them as an equal and cultivate ease. You may need to actively encourage them to give you their ideas.

We're back with that key question we discovered in Chapter 1: *What effect am I having?* The speaker's thinking is largely the result of the effect you are having on them. So if you:

- suggest that they change the subject;
- try to convince them of your point of view before listening to their point of view;
- reply tit-for-tat to their remarks; or
- encourage them to compete with you,

you're not encouraging them to develop their thinking. You're not enquiring properly.

One of the worst enemies of encouragement is competitiveness. We can easily find ourselves using the speaker's ideas to promote our own. It's all part of that habit of adversarial thinking.

Competition forces people to think only those thoughts that will help them win. If the speaker feels that you're competing with them, they'll not only say less, but think less. Conversely, if you feel that the speaker is trying to compete with you, don't allow yourself

to enter the competition. The ladder of inference (see Chapter 3) is one very powerful tool that will help you to defuse competitiveness in your conversations.

Instead of competing, welcome the difference in your points of view. Then try to find common ground. (Look back at Chapter 3.)

Minimal encouragers

Minimal encouragers are brief, supportive actions that show the speaker that you want them to continue. They can be:

- sub-vocalizations: 'uh-huh', 'mm';
- words and phrases: 'right', 'really?', 'I see';
- repeated key words.

Behaviours can include:

- leaning forward;
- focusing eye contact;
- head nodding.

Minimal encouragers support the speaker without interrupting them. They demonstrate your interest, both generally and in particular points that the speaker is making. But beware: they could subtly influence the speaker to say what they think you want to hear, rather than what they want to say. And, poorly used, they can signal impatience or become an empty gesture.

Asking quality questions

Questions are at the heart of enquiry. That's obvious: enquiring *is* asking a question.

But, of course, questions can do much more than enquire. We can use them to spark an argument or to make ourselves look

clever. Questions can be statements in disguise; we can use them to criticize, ridicule or even insult.

It's not always considered good form to ask questions. We may stop ourselves asking a question because we fear challenging authority, or looking stupid. In some organizations, asking questions is simply 'not done'. 'Questioning,' said Samuel Johnson on one occasion, 'is not the mode of conversation among gentlemen.' (I assume that he was being ironic.)

The best questions open up the speaker's thinking. A question that helps them to think further, develop an idea or clarify a thought, is a high-quality question. So use questions to:

- find out facts;
- check your understanding;
- help the other person to improve their understanding;
- invite the other person to examine your own thinking;
- request action.

A whole repertoire of questions is available to help you to enquire more fully. Specifically, we can use six types of questions.

- *Closed questions* can only be answered 'yes' or 'no'.
- *Open questions* cannot be answered 'yes' or 'no'.
- *Leading questions* put the answer into the other person's mouth.
- *Controlling questions* help you to take the lead in the conversation.
- *Probing questions* build on an earlier question, or dig deeper.
- *Reflecting questions* restate the last remark but with no new request.

The ladder of inference can provide all sorts of questions. You can also use it to invite the speaker to ask you questions.

One particular kind of question is especially powerful. It can liberate the speaker's thinking by removing the assumptions that limit it. This magic question starts with two words: 'What if'.

Guess an assumption that the speaker might be making and then ask either, ‘What if this assumption weren’t true?’ or ‘What if the opposite assumption were true?’

Examples of the first kind of question might include:

- *What if you became chief executive tomorrow?*
- *What if I weren’t your manager?*
- *What if you weren’t limited in your use of equipment?*

Examples of the second kind might include:

- *What if you weren’t limited by a budget?*
- *What if customers were actually flocking to us?*
- *What if you knew that you were vital to the company’s success?*

Exercise

Next time you prepare for a fact-finding conversation – an appraisal interview, perhaps, or a project update – make a list of the questions you could ask. Try to include at least one of every type: closed, open, leading, controlling, probing, reflecting, ‘what if’. Think about a possible order for these questions, and how some questions might be alternatives or potential questions, depending on the direction the conversation takes.

Rationing information

Information is power. Withholding information can be a power move, putting you at an advantage over the other person. But offering *too much* information can also interfere with enquiry: it can stop the other person thinking effectively. So it helps, in enquiry mode, to *ration* the information you give.

- *Don't interrupt.* Let the speaker finish before giving any new information. Don't force information into the middle of their sentence.
- *Time your intervention.* Ask yourself when the most appropriate time might be to offer the information.
- *Filter the information.* Only offer information that you think will improve the speaker's thinking. Resist the temptation to amplify some piece of information that's not central to their thinking.
- *Don't give information to show off.* You may be tempted to give information to demonstrate how expert or up to date you are. Resist that temptation.

Top tip

Ask the other person what information they need to know before you start to offer what *you* think they need to know.

You can also ration the amount of information you ask the speaker to give you. Ask for information at the right time and for the right reason; better to let the speaker work out their own ideas and then ask for a summary, than to keep interrupting them with questions.

Giving positive feedback

At its simplest, we use feedback to check that we've understood. But feedback can do more: it can help us to switch from listening to speaking – from enquiry to persuasion, perhaps. It can prepare us to move from first-stage to second-stage thinking, from problem to solution. And feedback can reinforce the speaker's sense of self-worth, which can lead to improved performance.

For many managers, of course, feedback is often not the *result* of a listening conversation, but the *reason* for holding the

conversation in the first place. Many managers find performance feedback stressful, especially if they fear a hostile response from the employee. In the survey commissioned by the Interact consultancy in 2016, over a third of managers (37 per cent) claimed to feel uncomfortable giving performance feedback to which the employee might respond negatively.

This anxiety impels the manager to get through the meeting as quickly as possible. That's understandable: we're programmed to avoid pain. But the result is a conversation in which the manager does nearly all the talking and the employee remains silent. It's all 'push': no enquiry, no listening, no real attention.

Now consider the effect of this conversation on the employee. In a survey of almost 4,000 people, Jack Zenger and Joseph Folkman found that people's attitude to feedback alters significantly according to how well they feel listened to. The less people felt their managers listened to them, the more likely they were to believe that the feedback was dishonest. In particular, employees who felt that their managers didn't listen to them were significantly less happy to receive negative feedback.

The conclusion's clear. Performance feedback works best when the manager begins by listening to the employee.

Top tip

Consider the classic opening line of a feedback meeting: 'Come in and close the door, I want to talk to you.' Imagine it rewritten as: 'Please come in and close the door; I want to listen to you.'

Whether you're managing or not, the best kind of feedback is *genuine, succinct and specific*. And, of course, it can have those qualities only if you've listened well.

Choose carefully when to give your feedback. If in doubt, ask whether it is appropriate to start your feedback or whether the speaker wants to continue. Ask:

- for permission to feed back;
- how the speaker sees the situation in summary;
- what the speaker sees as the key issue or problem.

Only then should you launch into your own feedback.

Balancing appreciation and criticism

There are two kinds of feedback: positive and negative.

We often assume that negative feedback is more realistic than positive feedback. ‘Get real’, we might say to justify criticism. We might assume that positive feedback – saying what we like about an idea – is naive and simplistic. Years of training and experience in critical thinking may have taught us not to comment on what we approve or like.

Actually, of course, the positive aspects of reality can be just as realistic as the negative ones. Adding positive feedback to the negative doesn’t distort our view of reality; it adds to it.

Top tip

You can discover a source of positive feedback simply by asking yourself, ‘What’s good about this idea?’ You could even ask the speaker the same question. The answer will nearly always reveal something that you had not noticed before. And that can form the basis for positive feedback.

We can transform negative into positive feedback by using the phrase ‘how to’. For example, if the other person is suggesting doing something and you want to say, ‘We simply don’t have the resources to do this’, you could rephrase the remark by asking ‘How could we do this with the limited resources we have?’ If you want to say ‘You haven’t thought this through’, you could ask ‘How can we develop this idea more thoroughly?’

Those two simple words – ‘how to’ – can have a magical effect on the quality of your feedback.

Exercise

Spend one day noting down all your responses to ideas from other people. How many times were your comments negative – in other words, expressing what you didn’t like about something or what you thought was wrong with the idea? How many comments were positive – expressing what you liked about the idea or what you thought was good about it? How could you transform the negative comments into positive ones? Could you, for example, turn a criticism into a ‘how could we’ question?

Summary points

- There are seven key skills of enquiry:
 - paying attention;
 - treating the speaker as an equal;
 - cultivating ease;
 - encouraging;
 - asking quality questions;
 - rationing information;
 - giving positive feedback.
- To pay attention:
 - listen;
 - don’t interrupt;
 - allow quiet;
 - show that you are paying attention.

- To treat the speaker as an equal:
 - give equal turns to speak and listen;
 - don't tell them what to say;
 - don't assume that you know what they mean better than they do.
- To cultivate ease:
 - find time;
 - make space;
 - banish distractions.
- To encourage:
 - don't compete in the conversation;
 - explore differences of opinion;
 - use minimal encouragers.
- Ask quality questions to help you:
 - find out facts;
 - check your understanding;
 - help the other person to improve their understanding;
 - invite the other person to examine your own thinking;
 - request action.
- To ration information:
 - don't interrupt;
 - time your intervention;
 - filter the information;
 - don't give information to show off.
- To give positive feedback:
 - balance appreciation and criticism;
 - assume constructive intent;
 - feed back on specifics.