

# **Article for Module 7**

## **The Secrets of Successful Listening**

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# The Secrets of Successful Listening

**Author:** The Economist. **Source:** Taken from [The Economist](#).

January 21, 2021

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“When people talk, listen completely.” Those words of Ernest Hemingway might be a pretty good guiding principle for many managers, as might the dictum enunciated by Zeno of Citium, a Greek philosopher: “We have two ears and one mouth, so we should listen more than we say.” For people like being listened to.

Some firms use a technique known as a “listening circle” in which participants are encouraged to talk openly and honestly about the issues they face (such as problems with colleagues). In such a circle, only one person can talk at a time and there is no interruption. A study cited in the Harvard Business Review found that employees who had taken part in a listening circle subsequently suffered less social anxiety and had fewer worries about work-related matters than those who did not.

Listening has been critical to the career of Richard Mullender, who was a British police officer for 30 years. Eventually he became a hostage negotiator, dealing with everything from suicide interventions to international kidnaps. By the end of his stint in uniform, he was the lead trainer for the Metropolitan Police’s hostage-negotiation unit.

When he left the force in 2007, he realised that his skills might be applicable in the business world. So he set up a firm called the Listening Institute. Mr Mullender defines listening as “the identification, selection and interpretation of the key words that turn information into intelligence”. It is crucial to all effective communication.

Plenty of people think that good listening is about nodding your head or keeping eye contact. But that is not really listening, Mr Mullender argues. A good listener is always looking for facts, emotions and indications of the interlocutor’s values. And when it comes to a negotiation, people are looking for an outcome. The aim of listening is to ascertain what the other side is trying to achieve.

Another important point to bear in mind is that, when you talk, you are not listening. “Every time you share an opinion, you give out information about yourself,” Mr Mullender says. In contrast, a good listener, by keeping quiet, gains an edge over his or her counterpart.

Hostage negotiators usually work in teams, but the lead negotiator is the only one who talks. “What we teach is that the second person in the team doesn’t really talk at all,

because if they are busy thinking about the next question to ask, they aren't really listening," Mr Mullender explains.

The mistake many people make is to ask too many questions, rather than letting the other person talk. The listener's focus should be on analysis. If you are trying to persuade someone to do something, you need to know what their beliefs are. If someone is upset, you need to assess their emotional state.

Of course, a listener needs to speak occasionally. One approach is to make an assessment of what the other person is telling you and then check it with them ("It seems to me that what you want is X"). That gives the other party a sense that they are being understood. The fundamental aim is to build up a relationship so the other person likes you and trusts you, Mr Mullender says.

The pandemic has meant that most business conversations now take place on the phone or online. Precious few in-person meetings occur. Some might think this makes listening more difficult; it is harder to pick up the subtle cues that people reveal in their facial expressions and body language.

But Mr Mullender says that too much is made of body language. It is much easier to understand someone if you can hear them but not see them, than if you can see but not hear them. He prefers to negotiate by telephone.

Another key to good listening is paying attention and avoiding distraction. In the information age, it is all too easy for focus to drift to a news headline, a TikTok video or the latest outrage on Twitter. In another study in the Harvard Business Review, participants paired with distracted listeners felt more anxious than those who received full attention.

The lockdown has increased the need for managers to listen to workers, since the opportunities for casual conversation have dwindled. Mr Mullender thinks that many people have become frustrated in their isolation, which can lead to stress and anger. He thinks there may be a business opportunity in helping managers listen more efficiently, so they can enhance employee well-being. After a year of isolation, many workers would probably love the chance to be heard.