

Talk Less. Listen More. Here's How

Lessons in the art of listening, from a C.I.A. agent, a focus group moderator and more.

By **Kate Murphy** - Jan. 9, 2020



When was the last time you listened to someone? Really listened, without thinking about what you wanted to say next, glancing down at your phone or jumping in to offer your opinion? And when was the last time someone really listened to you? Was so attentive to what you were saying and whose response was so spot on that you felt truly understood?

We are encouraged to listen to our hearts, our inner voices and our guts, but rarely are we encouraged to listen carefully and purposefully to other people. Instead, we talk over one another at cocktail parties, work meetings and even family dinners. Online and in person, it's all about defining yourself, shaping the narrative and staying on message.

And yet, **listening can be more valuable than speaking**. Wars have been fought, fortunes lost and friendships wrecked for lack of listening. It is only by listening that we engage, understand, empathize, cooperate and develop as human beings. It is fundamental to any successful relationship — personal, professional and political.

In writing a book about listening, I asked people from Brooklyn to Beijing what it meant to be a good listener. The typical response was a blank stare. People had no trouble, however, telling me what it meant to be a bad listener, rattling off actions such as interrupting, looking at a phone, and responding in a narcissistic or confused way. The sad truth is that people have more experience being cut off, ignored and misunderstood than heard to their satisfaction.

Of course, technology plays a role. Social media provides a virtual megaphone, along with the means to filter out opposing views. People find phone calls intrusive and ignore voice mail, preferring text or wordless emoji. If people are listening to anything, it's likely through headphones or earbuds, where they feel safe inside their own curated sound bubbles. This is all fueling what public health officials describe as an epidemic of loneliness in the USA.

But tech is not the only culprit. High schools and colleges have debate teams and courses in rhetoric and persuasion, but rarely, if ever, offer classes or extracurricular activities that teach careful listening. You can get a doctorate in speech communication and join clubs such as Toastmasters to perfect your public speaking, but who strives for excellence in listening? The image of success and power today is someone miked up and prowling around a stage or orating from behind a lectern. Giving a TED talk or delivering a commencement speech is living the dream.

The cacophony of modern life also stops us from listening. The acoustics in restaurants can make it difficult, if not impossible, for diners to clearly hear one another. Offices with an open design ensure every keyboard click, telephone call and after-lunch belch make for constant racket. Traffic noise on city streets, music playing in shops and the bean grinder at your favorite coffeehouse exceed the volume of normal conversation by as much as 30 decibels, and can even cause hearing loss.

So how can we reclaim the lost art of listening? After a couple of years studying the neuroscience, psychology and sociology of listening, as well as consulting some of the best professional listeners out there (including a C.I.A. agent, focus group moderator, radio producer, priest, bartender and furniture salesman), **I discovered that listening goes beyond simply hearing what people say. It also involves paying attention to how they say it and what they do while they are saying it, in what context, and how what they say resonates within you.**

It's not about merely holding your peace while someone else holds forth. Quite the opposite. **A lot of listening has to do with how you respond** — the degree to which you facilitate the clear expression of another person's thoughts and, in the process, crystallize your own.

Good listeners ask good questions. One of the most valuable lessons I've learned as a journalist is that anyone can be interesting if you ask the right questions. That is, if you ask truly curious questions that don't have the hidden agenda of fixing, saving, advising, convincing or correcting. Curious questions don't begin with "Wouldn't you agree...?" or "Don't you think...?" and they definitely don't end with "right?" **The idea is to explore the other person's point of view, not sway it.**

For example, when trying to find out why people might go to the grocery store late at night, a focus group moderator told me, she didn't ask leading questions like, "Do you shop late a night because you didn't get around to it during the day?" or "Do you shop at night because that's when they restock the shelves?" Instead, she turned her question into an invitation: "Tell me about the last time you went grocery shopping late at night." This, she said, prompted a quiet, unassuming woman who had hardly spoken up to that point to raise her hand. "I had just smoked a joint and was looking for a ménage à trois — me, Ben and Jerry," she said. Grocers, take note.

You also want to avoid asking people personal and appraising questions like "What do you do for a living?" or "What part of town do you live in?" or "What school did you go to?" or "Are you married?" This line of questioning is not an honest attempt to get to know who you're talking to so much as rank them in the social hierarchy. It's more like an interrogation and, as a former C.I.A. agent told me, interrogation will get you information, but it won't be credible or reliable.

Instead, ask about people's interests. Try to find out what excites or aggravates them — their daily pleasures or what keeps them up at night. Ask about the last movie they saw or for the story behind a piece of jewelry they're wearing. Also good are expansive questions, such as, "If you could spend a month anywhere in the world, where would you go?" Research indicates that when people who don't know each other well ask each other these types of questions, they feel more connected than if they spent time together accomplishing a task.

Because our brains can think a lot faster than people can talk, **beware of the tendency to take mental side trips when you should be listening.** Smart people are particularly apt to get distracted by their own galloping thoughts. They are also more likely to assume they already know what the other person is going to say.

People with higher I.Q.s also tend to be more neurotic and self-conscious, which means that worry and anxiety are more likely to hijack their attention. If you fall in this category, it could be helpful to consider listening a kind of meditation, where you make yourself aware of and acknowledge distractions, then return to focusing. Rather than concentrating on your breathing or a mantra, return your attention to the speaker.

The reward of good listening will almost certainly be more interesting conversations. Researchers have found that when talking to inattentive listeners, the speakers volunteered less information and conveyed information less articulately. Conversely, they found that attentive listeners received more information, relevant details and elaboration from speakers, even when the listeners didn't ask any questions.

How you listen can work like a self-fulfilling prophecy: If you're barely listening to someone because you think that person is boring or not worth your time, you could actually make it so. Moreover, **listening to other people makes it more likely other people will listen to you.** This is partly because it's human nature to return courtesies, but also because good listening improves your chances of delivering a message that resonates.

Listening is a skill. And as with any skill, it degrades if you don't do it enough. Some people may have stronger natural ability while others may have to work harder, but **each of us can become a better listener with practice.** The more people you listen to, the more aspects of humanity you will recognize, and the better your instincts will be. Listening well can help you understand other people's attitudes and motivations, which is essential in building cooperative and productive relationships, as well as discerning which relationships you'd be better off avoiding.

We are, each of us, the sum of what we attend to in life. The soothing voice of a mother, the whisper of a lover, the guidance of a mentor, the admonishment of a supervisor, the rallying call of a leader and the taunts of a rival ultimately form and shape us. And to listen poorly, selectively or not at all limits your understanding of the world and prevents you from becoming the best you can be.

Kate Murphy is a journalist and the author of "You're Not Listening: What You're Missing and Why It Matters," from which this New York Times essay is adapted.