



Great Conversations - text

Chapter 2

Communication skills: attention and listening

Attention and listening

Have you ever realised, part way through a conversation, that you were not listening to the other person? It happens to most of us. Listening is harder than we think, thanks to our short attention spans and our tendency to get distracted by thoughts, memories and the brain's incessant quest for dopamine.



Being a great communicator will require you to focus your attention and to craft messages so you capture other people's limited attention.

In this chapter you will learn a number of tips to help you focus your attention and listen more acutely and this exploration will also help you to appreciate that others also have limited attention and this will give you good reasons to craft your messages to them intentionally.

Your brain is a filter

Without an ability to manage your attention, listening and communication will be impossible.

In one second, your five senses are sending about 11 million bits of information to the brain for processing. Data from your environment - visual, auditory, skin and other body sensations - are bombarding the brain with information.

Only about 50 bits of that information can enter into your conscious attention. That's a staggeringly small percentage: 50 out of 11 million.

Your unconscious brain, including your limbic system, is filtering, sorting, comparing, unconsciously responding to signals and deciding what's relevant to send to the conscious mind. And most of that filtering will be based on what our interests are, things that are familiar to us and what we *choose* to pay attention to.

It's no wonder we miss so much.

The benefits of focus

As hard as it might sometimes be, you must be able to focus your attention on your colleagues and truly listen to them in order to do your best work.

Active listening

Listening is an essential communication skill.

When we listen, we show respect to another person and we can deepen a relationship. Listening enables us to learn something new, hear new ideas and challenge our own perspectives and views. Listening is also the avenue for hearing others' interests which gives us the opportunity to support and grow them.

But our brain's many activities often get in the way.

Brain tendencies that prevent listening

So, what is going on in the brain while we're trying to listen?

The brain has a tendency to bring memories of past situations to life as we listen or it may look for problems to solve and solutions to provide. A reward hungry brain will tend to be the lookout for ways to acquire dopamine, perhaps by trying to belong or getting a sense of status.

The brain will often just default to a habitual way of listening. For example, if you have spent most of your career as a problem solver, you will have a tendency to be the problem-solver in all of your conversations.

Let's look in more detail at six of the brain's tendencies that get in the way of listening fully.

Problem Solving

The brain loves to solve problems. We get a nice dose of dopamine when we do.

Every time we solve a problem, it strengthens problem solving neural pathways which means many of us have some strong problem-solver habits.

But not all conversations are about problem solving. Sometimes we listen for a problem and there wasn't a problem to begin with.

Relating

It's very common that as we listen to someone, we will recognise the experience as similar to one we've had before. This can be a means to relate and build rapport.

But then we will tend to listen for how their experience is the same as ours. Rather than listening for what is new, unique or interesting for them. We might think that we know how they feel or what they experienced. But we don't. We only know our experience in a similar situation.

Waiting to respond

Someone is telling you about a project. There was something that caught your attention and you wanted to ask about it. From that moment, you started thinking about your response or a question you wanted to ask. Because you are focusing on that, you are no longer listening.

The conscious mind can only focus on one thing at a time. We need to ask ourselves, will we focus on our own interests or the other person and what they have to say?

Getting involved in the details of the story

As humans, we are designed to absorb stories. For hundreds of thousands of years, humans used stories and an oral tradition as a means to teach and learn. So, the brain has been designed for this tradition.

We relate to a story, we get hungry for details - for our own interest. As we focus on and ask about our own interests, it may be a distraction from what the other person wants to tell us.

Forming pictures

As we listen, the brain will naturally form pictures and images in our mind.

These pictures might be reminders of our own experiences from the past. Or they might be new ideas. In either case, if we begin to focus on our own pictures, we stop listening. Our attention is on our own past or an imagined future and we miss the opportunity to be present and curious about the other person and their experience.

Judging experience as good or bad

The brain is a judgement machine. It is always working to classify our experiences as "good" or "bad", as it tries to help us make wise choices in the future.

Unfortunately, the brain applies our own measures of "good" and "bad" to someone else and their experience, thoughts or ideas. As we judge, we distort our ability to listen, especially if the ideas are quite different from our own.

And, as we judge their experience or ideas, this can also lead to judgements and biases about the person, not just their ideas.

Which of the above tendencies prevent you from fully listening?

Counteract your brain's tendencies

It is possible for you to build your listening skills and counteract your brain's tendencies to divert your attention.

Being a great listener builds trust and leads to robust working relationships.

Now that you know how your brain pulls your attention in different directions, it is easy to understand why listening is so difficult. To build your listening skills, investigate these six simple-to-use strategies that will counteract your brain's distracting tendencies.

Tip 1: When you want to solve problems, stop stealing dopamine

Solving problems feels good because you get a dose of dopamine every time. But when you solve other people's problems, you are robbing them of this same feel-good opportunity.

Stop stealing their dopamine!

When a problem is presented to you, first listen for - or ask about - what the other person wants in this conversation. If they ask for you to fix it, great. But maybe they will tell you they want your help in thinking it through and finding a solution themselves.

If you support them to find a solution, they will get their own dose of dopamine and they will be more committed to the solution because it's their own idea.

Tip 2: When you are relating too closely to their experience, know that their experience is different

Relating to others is likely to give you a sense of belonging and connection. But remember, your experience is not necessarily the same as theirs.

When you find yourself thinking, "I know exactly what you mean!", you might need to check yourself. While you may have had a similar experience, their experience and their feelings are unique to them.

Focus on their version rather than assuming their situation was just like your own.

Tip 3: When you find yourself waiting to respond, mirror their voice in your mind

If you find yourself waiting for your chance to respond or ask a question, it may be more helpful to set your response aside and refocus on the person and this conversation.

One way to improve your focus is to "voice mirror". This is a technique where you repeat what the other person says in your own mind, as if you are speaking their words.

This can take a little practice but it's worth a try.

Tip 4: When you get lost in the details of the story, focus on the person not the details

When you find yourself focused on the details of the story, see if you can shift your attention to the person. Imagine trying to pan out, like a wide-angle camera.

What is the bigger picture for the storyteller? What are they trying to tell you? What do they really want? What is important for them?

A conversation is about the person as much as the detail of what they're talking about.

Tip 5: When you are forming pictures in your mind, focus on their picture

When your brain forms pictures in your mind in response to what you hear from someone else such as a memory or a new idea. When this happens, challenge yourself to mentally set your picture aside and come back to it later.

Then, actively listen for what is unique about the idea or picture the other person is trying to paint. Listen carefully to nuances that are different from your own images.

Tip 6: When you are judging their experience as good or bad, expand your curiosity

When you find yourself thinking, "oh, that's good!" or, "that's wrong!", it may be time to expand your curiosity.

The world isn't really black/white, right/wrong, good/bad or you vs them, even though our limbic system wants it to be that simplistic.

Discipline yourself to set aside your tendencies to judge and instead, expand your curiosity. Expand your ability to be with paradox: learn to hold your own view and listen to others' view at the same time. This will require some PFC power, but this is the only way to truly hear someone else's point of view. And who knows, you might learn something incredibly valuable from them.

Which of the above tips would you like to practice to improve your listening?