

STRATEGIES FOR FULL LISTENING

Full listening springs from a mind that says *I don't know it all* and *There is more for me to learn*. Listening in this way can be an adventure.

Full listening can also be scary. Listening fully means putting all our opinions on the line and asking if they are accurate or useful. Listening fully means opening up to the ideas of others and being willing to change. When we listen fully, we let go of the way we think things are supposed to be. For the moment, we let go of everything we think we know.

It's no wonder that full listening is so rare. Many people are so comfortable with and committed to their opinions that they simply shut down and stop listening.

By refusing to risk full listening, these people miss the potential rewards. Most of us want satisfying relationships. And the quality of our relationships is directly tied to the quality of our listening. People feel acknowledged, appreciated, and affirmed when we listen fully to them. Listening also gives us access to countless new ideas and options for solving problems. Listening well is one of the best ways to get what we want.

The strategies that follow can help us break through to the dimension of full listening.

Remember—communication at best is challenging

Few people devote serious energy to improving their communication skills. Unless there's an obvious barrier—a hearing impairment, a language barrier—people often take communication for granted.

Consider a simple word like *chair*. Upon hearing this word, some of us immediately think of the standard four-legged object sitting next to a kitchen table. Others think of a large stuffed recliner. Then there are rocking chairs, folding chairs, swivel chairs, highchairs, antique wooden chairs, leather chairs, poolside aluminum chairs, and electric chairs. Let's not forget the person leading a club meeting or taking charge of the board of directors. She's a *chair*, too. The deluxe second edition of *Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary* gives us yet another definition of *chair*: "an iron block used to support and secure the rails of a railway track."

If simple words like *chair* can be misunderstood, it's easy to see how more complex concepts—such as happiness, health, wealth, love, justice, and freedom—can wreak havoc.

Given the frequency of misunderstanding, it is best *not* to assume that listeners and speakers automatically share the same message. Remembering this can help us pay closer attention and raise the quality of our listening.

Commit to full listening

Walk up to the self-help shelf at almost any bookstore, and you'll find a row of titles about how to listen better. Many of these books are full of techniques, and many of the techniques are useful.



When it comes to listening fully, something important comes *before* technique. That “something” is commitment—an intention to fully receive what others say. Commitment involves a willingness to completely surrender to the person who’s speaking, and this willingness comes into play before we do anything else as listeners.

Be a sender or a receiver

Each of us has an agenda. When we’re talking, *our* personal concerns—what *we* want, what *we* need, and what *we’re* interested in—are usually on the front burner. The problem is that during most conversations, other people are giving *their* items top priority.

It’s no wonder, then, that genuine listening is so rare. We want to cover all the items on our agenda, and others want to do the same with theirs. We’re all trying to step up to the podium at the same time. Everyone’s talking; no one is listening. Everybody’s sending; nobody is receiving. Typical result: confusion.

Effective communication is a two-way street. People take turns sending and receiving. When one person is talking, the other just listens. Then they switch roles. This continues until they discover a shared meaning.

Listen only when you are willing to listen. If you realize you are not listening anymore, you have several options. One is to recommit to listening—to focus your awareness and listen. Another option is to tactfully leave the conversation. And still another is to make a direct request to switch roles and become the sender. If you do start sending, ask yourself how you can best use this precious gift—another person’s listening.

In any case, either send *or* receive. Trying to do both at the same time can strain relationships. When you’re listening, be quiet 98 percent of the time. The other 2 percent of the time, you can ask occasional questions for clarification or make comments that encourage the speaker to continue.

Wait before responding

Consider a typical conversation. Moments of silence are rare. As soon as person A takes a breath, person B jumps in. While person A was still speaking, person B was not really listening. Instead, he was preparing his remarks—“listening” with his answer running.

One strategy that can prevent this fate is the almighty pause. Before sending your message, allow a few moments of silence.

This strategy springs from a commitment to listen. When we are truly intent on listening, we usually digest what’s being said and *then* choose what we’ll say. We postpone our response until *after* the sender has come to a complete stop and we’ve taken time to understand her message.

In some cases, you can promote the speaker’s full self-expression by postponing your response for more than a minute or two. If you found the message difficult to receive—or if you sense that the speaker found it difficult to send—then consider waiting several hours or even several days before you respond. The more difficult the message, the longer the optimum waiting time.



Postponing your response slows down a conversation. It helps ensure that conversations include both a sender and a receiver. This can cool tempers and increase understanding.

Ask for more

You might come to points in a conversation at which the sender stops speaking for the moment. But that doesn't always mean she's done sending her message. Perhaps she's just pausing and has more to say.

To promote full listening, make a habit of listening until you're sure you've heard everything the speaker has to say. Then permit even more speaking. Ask, "Is there anything else on your mind?"

Listen actively

One way to promote accurate communication is active listening. When we listen actively, we repeat in our own words what we *thought* the speaker said. At that point, the speaker can make any corrections that seem appropriate: "No that's not quite it. What I really meant to say was...." Or "You got it. Couldn't have said it better myself."

Active listening can be particularly useful in defusing arguments. When emotions run high, be sure to verify that you received the speaker's message. Summarize what you heard without judging it. Then fully allow any correction the speaker might make.

If we pay close attention as we practice active listening, we're likely to notice an almost universal signal of understanding. After we sum up their message, people nod their heads and say, "Yeah."

Listen through a filter

While listening actively, you might find it useful to listen through a filter—that is, to focus on certain aspects of the speaker's message.

For example, instead of focusing on the speaker's problems, you could listen specifically for any solutions he proposes. Instead of focusing on the speaker's past, you could listen for that person's vision of the future—what he wants and how he intends to get it.

Those are just two examples. You could also listen for the speaker's values, joys, strengths, confidences, requests, contributions, or anything else you choose to notice.

Listen as if you're the only listener

When you're in a group conversation, imagine that there are only two people in the room: you and the speaker. You're sitting front row, center—an audience of one. Your listening skills could rise to new heights. You'll automatically apply many of the listening techniques explained in this chapter.



Handle distractions

Even when you're fully committed to listening, you can find your thoughts wandering. If possible, write the distraction down. This can be useful when your thoughts involve an errand to run, a call to make, or something else to do later. Then you can return your focus to the conversation.

You might explain what you're doing so that you don't seem rude: "Excuse me just one moment. I'm distracted and need to make a note about something. Then I can pay attention to what you are saying."

Often you can handle distractions simply by noticing them and gently bringing yourself back to full listening.

Listen with two minds

First, listen with a receptive mind. Such a mind is still, calm, and open to fresh ideas. Full listening begins when we dip into this mind, keep our mouths shut, and channel all our effort into understanding another person.

When listening with a receptive mind, we simply assume that what we're hearing is the truth—from the other person's point of view. If we hear an idea that shocks or disturbs us, we ask ourselves *What if that's true?* and explore the possibilities.

There's another kind of mind that comes into play later. This second mind is questioning and critical. When we listen with this mind, we ask ourselves *What does this mean? What's the evidence? Is this idea logical?* We separate ideas that are inaccurate from those that are accurate and useful.

Listening fully calls for both of these minds. One without the other is incomplete. Just separate them in time. First, listen fully without judgment. When you're confident that you've received and understood the message, then you can take time to think critically.

Focus on the message, not the messenger

Most of us find it easy to stop listening when something about a speaker irritates us. If the speaker wears a lime-green leisure suit or has multicolored neon hair, we might become so busy judging his appearance that we stop listening.

One solution is to listen beyond the speaker. We can focus on the content of the message rather than the speaker's style, age, or appearance. When we do this, we might discover that the person who stutters has something important to say, or that the kindergartner who's too young to "know" anything has a fresh and useful outlook.

We can listen for kernels of wisdom from the people we disagree with the most. These might include Democrats, Republicans, lesbians, Christians, atheists, career army officers, pacifists, or anyone else. The person we loathe the most might actually have something useful to say to us.



Remember that understanding is not agreeing

Understanding and agreeing are two different things. As full listeners, our job is to totally understand the other person's point of view. Listening means receiving an accurate version of the message the other person is sending to us. Once we understand that message, we're free to respond in any way we choose. And one possible response is to disagree.

In confrontational situations, when they feel defensive, people often act as if careful listening is a sign of weakness. They fear that taking the time to understand another's viewpoint means giving up their own. That's a mistake.

It is a challenge to put our own ideas on the shelf so that we can listen carefully, showing a genuine intention to understand a new point of view. Yet skilled listeners do this routinely. Successful debaters can argue their opponents' point of view as well as or better than their opponents. This does not mean that they agree with their opponents.

Avoid “piggybacking” and counterpointing

Soon after my mother died, a friend came up to me and asked, “How are you?” I was still very emotional and thought that his question was an indication that he would listen to my response. So I said, “Thanks for asking. My mom died, and it's been hard for me. I was very close to her.”

“Oh, I know just how you feel,” he said. “When my father died, it was so traumatic. Let me tell you about it...”

That's an example of piggybacking. It happens when a listener suddenly stops listening, jumps on the speaker's topic, and starts talking.

Piggybacking can also happen when you talk about things you enjoy.

One of my daughters tried out for a prestigious dance school and was accepted. “Dancing is the love of her life,” I said to another friend of mine, “and I actually didn't think she'd make it. But she did, and when it happened I felt...”

“Wow,” my friend said. “You must feel great. I know that when my kids achieve things, I feel so good! In fact, I remember a time when...”

Many people might intend for their piggybacking to be a way to communicate their empathy with the speaker. Too often, however, piggybacking simply interrupts people and discounts their experience. To listen fully, avoid piggybacking.

Also notice counterpointing. This happens when a listener suddenly stops listening to state her disagreement with the speaker. Often this happens in the middle of the speaker's message—before he has had a chance to fully express his point of view.

To avoid piggybacking and counterpointing, simply wait until it's your turn to speak. Pick up on the speaker's topic or state your disagreement only after you've listened fully and you're certain that this is the most important thing you want to say.



Be careful of advice

As we listen to others, we might feel tempted to give advice. Giving advice, however, is not listening.

Trust people to arrive at their own solutions without your guidance as a listener. Consider offering advice only when people specifically request it, and then present your ideas as possibilities, not prescriptions.

Be careful of questions

Questions are often useful. For people committed to full listening, questions also have serious potential drawbacks.

Questions can be used to guide conversations and pull them in a certain direction—a direction that the speaker might not want to take. When listening fully, we ask questions rarely—only to clarify a speaker's message. When questions steer a conversation or smuggle advice into a conversation, they hinder listening.

Listen without obligation to act

When people talk about what they desire, they're not automatically asking for a response on your part. If your partner says that she'd like to vacation in Hawaii sometime, that doesn't mean you have to book tickets tomorrow. She might just want to speak her desires, sort them out, and explore possibilities.

When we listen to people's desires, we don't *have* to do anything about them. Knowing this frees us to listen fully. If we feel obligated to leap into action every time people open their mouths, we could feel overwhelmed and actually avoid listening.

Often people don't *want* us to do anything in response to their speaking. They just want to think out loud, or they simply want to be heard. We can grant them the gift of full listening.

Once in a while, people do want us to respond by moving into action. When that's true, they'll usually say so.

If you're not sure, you can always check it out: "You've told me something that you want. Can I do anything to help you get it?"

Listen with your body

People gather a great deal of information by observing our facial expressions, gestures, and posture. Remembering this can open a new dimension in our listening.

We can use body language that invites other people to speak. When we make eye contact and face the other speaker directly, we're usually saying, "I'm awake, I'm here, and I'm interested in what you have to say."

Eyes, in particular, have been referred to as windows to the soul. Often we gain insight into what other people really mean by noticing their eyes. Eyes that meet ours squarely and directly usually mean one thing; eyes cast downward or to the side can mean quite another.



To get the most from this suggestion, temper it with some cultural sensitivity. Many of us find intense prolonged eye contact uncomfortable. And in some cultures, direct eye contact is sometimes considered offensive or a sign of disrespect. While paying attention to people with our eyes, we can act appropriately.

Allow and encourage emotion

Some listeners are uncomfortable when the person speaking expresses strong emotion.

A person might be talking about his sadness and start to sob uncontrollably. Someone listening with an intention to comfort him, might say, "Please don't cry. It will all turn out OK."

Another speaker might be so enthusiastic that she celebrates her feelings with total abandon. She might laugh loudly, sing, or even break into a dance. Her friends might become embarrassed by this level of celebration and ask her to control herself.

Full listening means allowing and even encouraging others to express whatever they feel. We can tell them that it's fine if they laugh, shake, sing, sob, or express any other emotion, no matter how intense. When we grant this permission, we allow people to celebrate pleasant emotions and move beyond unpleasant ones. Both can be healing experiences.

Say your thanks

One effective way to follow up on full listening is to say, "Thanks for telling me. Now I know what you think and how you feel." This affirms the speaker and grants him permission to speak even more.

We can speak our thanks even when we disagree with people or feel threatened by what they say. By saying thanks, we put our judgments on hold and step away from antagonism.

The way we send thanks is important. If we say, "Thanks, I'm glad to know how *you* see the world," others might hear that as a subtle put-down.

To be present when people speak their fears, dreams, desires, and commitments is to stand on sacred ground. When people ask us to listen, they honor us. We can respond with gratitude.





Send or receive

This exercise helps to slow down conversations and ensure that genuine communication is taking place. It is especially useful when there's a potential for arguments or misunderstanding.

Find a partner who is willing to participate in this exercise with you. Then get two 3x5 cards. Label one card "sender" and the other "receiver." Ask your partner to take one card; you take the other.

The person with the "sender" card gets to speak first. While the sender speaks, the receiver's job is to just listen fully.

Next, trade cards so that you switch roles. But do this only after the original sender feels she's been fully understood.

You can switch cards—and roles—as often as you'd like. The point is to be conscious of your role in any given moment—to simply send or receive without trying to do both at the same time.

After doing this exercise, reflect on your experience with separating the roles of sender and receiver. Writing on a separate sheet of paper, describe what you learned about yourself as a listener. Also describe what it was like to receive the gift of full listening.

Practice listening

Enter into your next conversation with an intense commitment to full understanding. For the moment, forget about listening techniques or exercises. Just aim to understand another person's viewpoint as skillfully as you can. Do not worry about criticizing or responding to this viewpoint.

After the conversation, consider your listening skill. Perhaps you created some new listening techniques on the spot—simply from your commitment to understand. Describe in the space below how well you listened and specifically what you did while listening. Also describe any ways you intend to listen differently in the future.

I discovered that I ...

I intend to ...

