



# The art of listening

Author: Janet Curran

Date: 18 April 2019



**lysna**

real listening, real impact



# The art of listening

It was a moment that stayed with me for years. Watching a hapless salesman ask a lady customer a load of questions. And then really annoy her with his response. Why? Because he wasn't listening to her. You could just tell from her body language and demeanour that she hadn't liked the first product he had shown her. So why did he continue pursuing something in the same line? Looking back, I could see that he was like a rabbit caught in headlights. He was desperately trying to do the right thing but perhaps the fear of getting it wrong was actually what was getting in the way.

I have to be eternally grateful to that salesman. Because that was the first time in my research career that I recognised the fundamental importance of listening well. My staple quote in sales training courses for years afterwards was always: "there's no point in asking good questions if you don't listen to the answers!" It took me a while to realise that even saying this to sales people often falls on deaf ears.

The inability of people to listen even when they know that they should is something that fascinates me. Because in every sales course I have ever run when I have asked the group what makes a good sales person the ability to listen always comes out as the number one. Surely it is not so hard, just to sit quietly, pin back your ears, and focus on what the other person has to say.

The reality is that it is not that easy. In this short paper I'd like to share with you all of what we in Lysna have learnt about listening throughout our years of research, training and coaching in leadership and sales. About what good listening looks like and what gets in the way. And the fact that our ability to listen to others depends on our ability to listen in to ourselves.



# The art of listening

## What does good listening look like?

Most people might recognise when they feel listened to well. It generally means that the listener demonstrates some understanding and better still even empathy with what you have had to say. In a piece of research conducted in 2018 into coaching culture we asked respondents about how frequently they saw the behaviours in the graph below displayed within their organisation. The stand out observation was that Listening/showing respect was the most commonly recognised behaviour. But people giving their undivided attention, being curious and asking questions, and seeking to understand what was being said rather than judge were the three least common. Yet all three of these reflect the **quality** of the listening. So, people might think and say that they are listening but in reality, they are not really listening at all.



Bill Isaacs, in his book *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together* names Listening as one of the four components of effective dialogue, followed by Respecting, Suspending and finally Voicing. Here Isaacs is considering listening as part of a dialogue **process**, which involves taking in information, making sense of that information and then using that information to give voice. It is what we do with the information when we take it in that is the important part and that depends very much on our capacity to **receive** it.

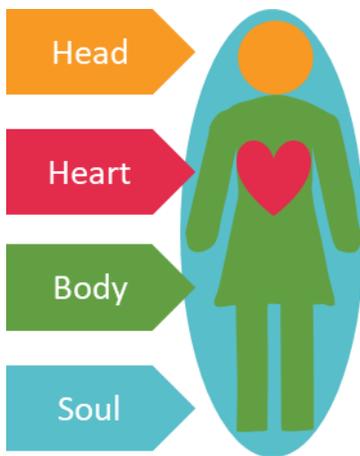
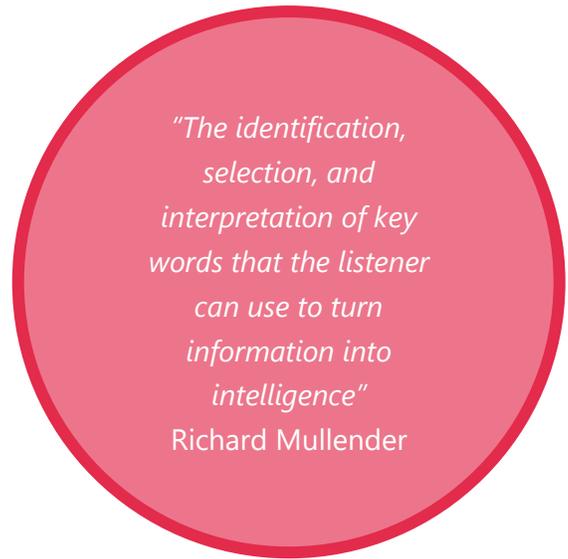


From William Isaacs (1999), *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together*



# The art of listening

When I first did counselling training, I was taught about the importance of giving attention to the other person, so I focused very hard on every word that they said. What I discovered was that this did not help me to listen well. Hanging onto every word meant that I didn't grasp the **sense** of what was being said. It was only when I was introduced to the hostage negotiator Richard Mullender's definition of listening that I realised what I was doing wrong. He defines listening as "the identification, selection and interpretation of **key words** that the listener can use to turn information into intelligence". It was the notion of key words that hit home. I suddenly realised that you don't need to listen to and remember absolutely everything that is said. But you also have to listen at different levels to understand what is really being said.



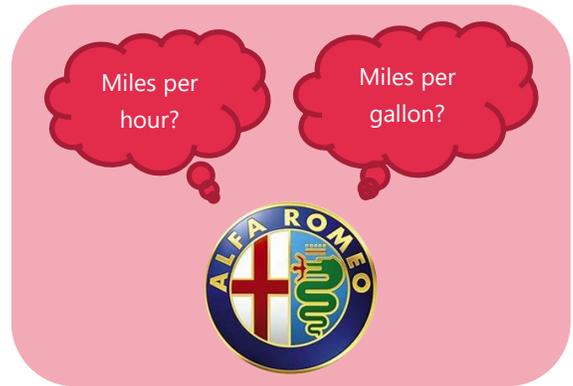
In Lysna we talk about Head, Heart, Body and Soul as being the levels at which we work when coaching. Head is about listening to the words, the facts of what is being said. Heart means listening into the emotions/feelings that are being expressed, either through words or tone of voice and body language. Body listening I have encountered through both mindfulness and systemic work. You can only do body listening if you have quietened your mind and got rid of thoughts. It's the listening that happens when you connect with your body, your gut instinct, and really listen into what it is saying, or what it senses that the other person is saying. I would say that most of the time most of us stay mainly in Head listening, with a little bit of Heart. We rarely get into Body. And Soul even less so. Soul listening is about connecting with our sense of purpose or what is happening out there in the universe. Some might call it spiritual listening.



# The art of listening

## Demonstrating good listening

There are certain verbal behaviours that you can use to demonstrate that you are a good listener. At the start I talked about the link between listening and questions. A good listener is someone who can ask deeper and more thought-provoking, challenging questions that really dig into what has been said. We use questions to get the other person to think about what they have said and at times possibly get them to challenge or reframe their thinking. We can also use questions in quite a manipulative way to challenge thinking. Or we can ask questions to clarify our understanding of what has been said. This type of question is extremely useful to make sure everyone is on the same page. After all, misunderstandings happen all the time in conversations. To give you an example: when my son was learning to drive, he asked me this question: "What's the maximum you've got out of your car?" At the time I had an Alfa Giulietta and I was really focused on its fuel economy. "51 miles to the gallon" was my response. He looked at me in absolute disgust (the way teenage boys can often look at their mother). "Mum, I was asking you how *fast* you've got it to go". A simple testing understanding question from me at the start: "what do you mean by maximum?" would have avoided the subsequent ridicule.



A second aspect of good listening is being able to manage the cognitive load. Despite what is said about multitasking our Head space is only really good at dealing with one thing at a time. When listening well we have to be able to receive the information, process it and make sense of it, and then come up with a response. No wonder then that we often fall back on prepared responses or spend the listening time thinking about what we want to say next, rather than focusing on the other person.



The simplest way to reduce the cognitive load **and** demonstrate good listening is to repeat back what has been said. Not only does it demonstrate to the other person that you have been paying attention it also provides the listener with an opportunity to make sense of what has been said and then decide what to say next. I have always found Summarising, i.e. stating back the key points of the conversation - to be a little used but extremely effective behaviour. Some people recommend Paraphrasing where you repeat back what has been said in your own words. For me that is starting to add something of the listener into the conversation and also is less effective in reducing the cognitive load as you have to think about how to paraphrase. Summarising brings a pause, an opportunity for reflection and to gather your thoughts.



# The art of listening

Asking for time to think, or even better allowing silence to fall is another effective listening device that rarely gets used. When I've monitored silences in a conversation, I find that pauses between two people speaking rarely last longer than a couple of seconds. We just feel so driven to fill the space. But silence is valuable reflection time. It enables us to sit with what has been voiced and really think it through.

Empathy is another effective listening behaviour. Whereas Summarising focuses on Head words and facts Empathy helps us move to the Heart. Empathy is about acknowledging how the other person is feeling. It's **not** expressing your own feelings, or how you would feel in a similar situation – that's Sympathy as far as I am concerned. And Sympathy is nowhere near as effective as Empathy when it comes to creating rapport with another person.

## What gets in the way of listening?

What stops us listening to others is all the noise that goes on within ourselves. Especially in our Heads and Hearts. Which is why in Lysna we talk about the Pain Baby. Your Pain Baby lives in your Heart but it sends messages to your Head all the time. It carries all the emotional hurts and pains that you have collected during your lifetime, including the ones that you cannot even consciously remember. We call it the Pain Baby because when these emotional hurts and pains get triggered the Pain Baby starts to cry. And what is the only thing that we can hear when a baby starts crying? You've got it – the baby. So, what do most of us want to do with our crying Pain Baby? Pick it up and soothe it? Find out what's wrong? Or ignore it? Leave the room? Scream at it? Either way the chances are we will choose a strategy that means the Pain Baby just keeps on crying. Which then means that we won't be able to hear anybody else at all.



Crying Pain Babies tend to result in the defensive responses we see happening so often in conversations. A defensive response is the complete opposite to what Isaacs advocates in terms of respecting the other person's point of view and suspending judgement. Being judgemental is another killer of good listening and often it is the judgement of the Pain Baby that is being thought or spoken.

So good listening starts with being able to listen into ourselves. When we have an emotional reaction to what is being said how often do we take the time out to notice our reaction? And then to consider it? Where is this reaction coming from? What is it about? What is really causing us to get uptight? The more we can learn to listen in and answer these questions the more self-aware we become. And once our Pain Baby feels that we are listening to it and appreciating it, guess what? It tends to shut up. After all, the crying is only trying to protect us from getting hurt like we have been hurt in the past.



# The art of listening

It's the same with our thoughts. We can view them as clouds that pass through our Heads. The problem comes when we jump on them without really considering where they have come from and whether they are helping us right now.

Once we have learnt to listen into ourselves and acknowledge what is going on inside us, we can then become more fully present in conversations. Being present means being there not just physically but also mentally (in terms of our minds being empty of thoughts), emotionally (in that we are in a calm emotional state) and spiritually. Then we can begin to listen to what is being said with a view of trying to **understand** the other person, rather than judge them. This is what Isaacs means by respecting and suspending. By the way, respecting someone else's opinion does not mean that you need to **agree** with it. It's about acknowledging that it's their opinion and they are entitled to have it, and that unless we have walked a fair way in their shoes, we should not judge how they came to have that opinion.



## Summary

To summarise (using my favourite listening behaviour) here are our key points on the art of listening:

- Listen out for the key words
- Respect other people's opinions
- Seek to understand, rather than judge
- Listen with your Head, Heart, Body and Soul
- Ask question to dig deeper and/or check your understanding
- Use Summarising to confirm the content of what has been said
- Allow silence to fall
- Empathise with any feelings
- Acknowledge your own thoughts and emotional reactions without getting defensive

Contact your local Lysna consultant for more details on how we can help you develop listening skills for individuals or teams.