

## SOURCE LINES

## THE REWARDS OF REALLY LISTENING

**J**oanna and Cyndi are sitting in a coffee shop. Joanna has just gone through a divorce and is telling her friend all about it. To a casual observer, it looks as if Cyndi is listening. If she had a bubble of her thoughts over her head like in a comic strip the thoughts running through Cyndi's head would read: "People get divorced all the time. It's time to move on. It would help if you got over it and lost some weight. At least that's what I'd do, if this ever happened to me." Cyndi thinks she's a good listener. After all, she's not interrupting or fidgeting, is she? What Cyndi is actually doing is hearing her friend. But, like so many of us, she's just not truly **listening**.

As toddlers, we learn to speak and to hear what others are saying. As we grow we learn to read and write, along with other useful skills. But few of us ever learn one of the most vital skills of all — to really listen. To really listen takes our whole attention and focus but the rewards can be huge: happier marriages and families, better communication at work, fewer misunderstandings between friends and others, calmer and less stressful lives. There's another bonus. When you listen well, you become someone other people want to listen to.

**REAL LISTENING CAN BE LEARNED.** In The Lost Art of Listening: How Learning to Listen Can Improve Relationships, author Michael Nichols, Ph.D. makes these key points about listening.

**ANYONE CAN LEARN TO BE A GOOD LISTENER.** While some might be better than others, listening is not determined by being educated, intelligent, rich or popular. Being a really good listener has great advantages and can lead to being better liked and respected as well as effective with others. Contrary to contemporary myth, men as well as women can learn to listen effectively.

**LISTENING IS ACTIVE.** It is a mistake to think of listen-

ing as a passive act, just showing up. Real listening requires paying attention, not just to words, but body language, voice tone, and emotion. Sometimes it is even more important to listen to not just what is being said but to read between the lines. It also means responding, not just in words but with our facial expressions, head nods and comments of understanding (Really? Is that right? Uh-uh. You've got to be kidding!). It is important to show we are fully engaged.

**LISTENING REQUIRES US TO TURN OFF THE NOISE INSIDE OUR HEAD.** To listen we have to ignore all those voices inside our heads, those judgments and criticisms... "Oh, I would never have done that" or "He just doesn't see how he's making a big mistake." It means ignoring the urge to advise and give suggestions (unless asked) and not trying to "fix" the problem or change the other person. Most of the time people are not asking for advice, solutions, or criticisms — they just want to be heard, validated and acknowledged. Listening well helps us feel connected to one another.

**REMAINING OPEN, NOT REACTIVE IS PART OF BEING A GOOD LISTENER.** When someone tells us something we don't want to hear, we may become defensive and shut down. We may react by lashing out or justifying ourselves. True listening requires putting aside our emotional responses and need to defend ourselves. If we believe the speaker doesn't have the story right or is being unfair, that's okay. We are more likely to have a chance to offer another version of the story if they feel heard first.

**LISTENING CONNECTS US.** Listening takes time—and it's worth finding the time. Good listeners resist the urge to interrupt with their own great story. As social beings who seek to build relationships, we need to connect with others and feel we belong through ac-

tivities, similar interests, family, or work. Communicating well, in a wide variety of ways, helps us feel a greater sense of belonging. Listening is the most important way to help others feel connected. As author Nichols puts it, "Listening isn't a need we have; it's a gift we give."

### THREE WAYS TO LISTEN MORE EFFECTIVELY

There are three ways you can learn to listen more effectively right away: Listen actively, listen with empathy, and listen with openness.

#### 1. LISTEN ACTIVELY

Understanding what another person is trying to tell us requires our active participation by *paraphrasing*, *clarifying* and *giving feedback*.

- **Paraphrasing:** we put into our own words what we believe the other person is saying to us. For example, we say: "If I understand what you're saying" ...or... "Let me be sure I've got what you're telling me right." Paraphrasing can help stop escalating emotions and act as a 'quality control' technique where you can identify communication errors, misunderstandings and misinterpretations. Accurate paraphrasing demonstrates respect and interest in the other person and improves our memory of the conversation.

- **Clarifying:** Clarifying is a companion of paraphrasing. It means asking questions until you have a well developed picture of what the other person's experience is: "In other words..." "Do you mean. . . ?"

- **Feedback:** After we have listened, paraphrased and sought clarification we need to give feedback. Feedback is a non-judgmental, non-argumentative way of sharing what we thought, felt, or sensed the other person was telling us: "Listening to what you said, I wonder if [ . . . . . ] is what's happening in the situation." "I want to be sure I understand your feelings—is this [ . . . . . ] the way you feel?"

#### 2. LISTEN WITH EMPATHY

- Our ability to listen with empathy naturally goes down

when we are speaking with someone who is self-important, angry, critical or wallowing in self-pity, etc.

- Empathy simply requires that we know and keep in mind that everyone, regardless of how outrageous, incompetent or mean is trying to survive.
- Listening with empathy means saying to ourselves: "This is hard to hear, but it's another human being trying to live."

When you find listening with empathy difficult ask yourself questions like these: What need is the [anger, etc] coming from? What worry or fear is the person experiencing? What is he or she asking for?

#### 3. LISTEN WITH OPENNESS

- It is all but impossible to do a good job of listening when we are judging and finding fault with what the other person is telling us. The danger of being closed is that we dismiss otherwise worthwhile people because you disagree with their ideas; we miss out on important information; and we turn other people off because of how we block them. Avoid "black and white thinking", labelling and mind reading, as they will prevent us from listening effectively.

Sometimes you may need to get personal support from someone to improve your listening skills.

- Consult a respected manager, co-worker or friend
- Consult with EAP Counsellor on your own or ask your EAP to present a workshop

"It is the province of knowledge to speak and it is the privilege of wisdom to listen."  
—Oliver Wendell Holmes

WRITTEN BY ALLAN FINDLAY, M.S.W., R.S.W.