



'The first step in becoming a good listener, before you can listen to others, is to listen to yourself'

Listen up!

Are you paying attention? **Janie van Hool** explains how our physical, mental and emotional distractions, plus the type of listener we are, influence how we connect in conversation

Just imagine: you're part of a conversation at an event held in a big, draughty aircraft hangar. It's freezing cold, you're hungry and your feet hurt. You know you have to leave soon because you can't miss the last train home. You're having a discussion with someone you've met previously, but don't know well and they're talking about the challenges they're having at work. They're not from your organisation and your business doesn't have the problems they are describing.

So, how's your listening? Probably not that great. Listening is hard because we're always distracted – our bodies, thoughts, emotions and environment are constantly calling out "NOTICE ME!". But being a great listener is about finding out how you can silence all of that noise. It's not magic or talent – it's self-awareness and discipline.

The first step to becoming a good listener, before you can listen to others,

is to listen to yourself. What do you need to bring yourself fully into the moment? Take a second to ask yourself these questions:

- **How are you feeling physically?** What are the demands being placed on your attention by your body at the moment? Some, such as hunger, thirst, a headache or a seating position that is uncomfortable, may be easily resolved and allow you to calm the noise.
- **How are you feeling mentally?** What are you thinking about? Are any of your personal concerns likely to get in the way of your ability to listen well? What could you do to park the mental noise and enable yourself to focus on the conversation?
- **How are you feeling emotionally?** What are you feeling right now? Perhaps you've got a case of listener burnout and you're too emotionally drained to be present in the moment. Maybe you're feeling excited about an event you're attending later, or you're dreading a long evening of paperwork. How can you settle yourself into a calm, relaxed and focused mood to give and receive the best from the conversation? Once you've got yourself sorted, it's time to think about how you want to listen – or perhaps how you tend to listen. Here are three ways of listening. See which ones you think apply to you. If you don't know, maybe take a risk and ask people how they experience you as a listener.

Solving

Are you a problem-solver? Ever find yourself knowing exactly what a person should do when they're talking to you? Perhaps you don't even have to hear them out – you know immediately what could be done to solve their problem.

But here's the thing: no one wants advice. Even if they ask for it, they may be taking the easy road. And anyway, why should you have to do all the work?

Solvers need to sit on their hands, ask questions and take the time to listen and get the full picture. You may end up giving advice if it's asked for, but you'll have a proper understanding and will be able to offer insightful perspectives informed by good listening.

Switching

Ever had an encounter with someone who responds to your story with "I know exactly what you mean" and then hijacks the conversation to make it all about them? Ever done it yourself? We all have. It can be an attempt to show empathy and let the other person know that we 'get it' because we've had similar experiences. We need to pay attention to balance in a conversation – the give and take that keeps you both engaged.

Supporting

I've saved the hardest for last. To give support as a listener means to just listen. No judging, no agenda, simply creating the space for another person to explore what's going on with them. It's an act of generosity and of kindness. Finding courage to hear what we might not want to, and managing our emotions as we hear it, can be a challenge.

As with so many skills, listening well is all about paying attention. The reward? Understanding, connection and the satisfaction of making a difference to another person. Well worth the effort.

Janie van Hool, author of *The Listening Skills* (Practical Inspiration Publishing, £12.99), is an expert leadership adviser in the art of communication