

## The power of listening

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By Brian Muldoon

In the heat of battle, we don't often think kindly of "the enemy." Although we may intellectually recognize that the other side is suffering, we harden our hearts to their tribulations, some of which we may have caused and can readily justify.

A hard heart is not always our best ally. It can blind us to the motives of our adversary and obscure our understanding of the reality in which he or she operates. It is not necessary that we agree or sympathize with our opponent, but it is foolish not to understand him or her. When we cut ourselves off from our natural tendency to feel compassion for others -- including our ex-spouse -- we reduce our effectiveness because we insulate ourselves from valuable information. Conflict polarizes us, so it's not surprising that we rarely see the whole picture.

Compassion is not the same as sentimentality. Rather, it is the discipline to resonate with another person, to feel what she feels, to connect, to move beyond the limitations of our own prejudices and opinions. It guards us against hurting ourselves through our unwillingness to hurt others. But compassion does not mean that we should surrender to their desires or exhibit weakness. It simply means that we will not stop being human just because we are engaged in conflict.

Conflict takes place in an environment of mistrust. Compassion helps to restore some measure of basic trust so that some form of functional communication can take place. When that communication occurs, we usually will learn something essential for the resolution of the matter. We already know what we think. Compassion allows us to understand what they think, and why.

The way in which compassion is most commonly and usefully expressed in the midst of conflict is through listening. Not just the kind of listening we do while we are waiting to speak, but real listening. When our listening becomes as passionate as our speaking, we're then able to invoke the transformative power of silence. It's only in silence that real change takes place.

## The Alchemy of Listening

Medieval alchemists regarded life as a process of refining and strengthening the soul as it moved closer to the divine. The soul was like iron. With the proper magic, it might become gold -- precious and easily shaped into objects of beauty.

Adversaries tend to take positions that initially seem ironclad. Like two heavily armored knights, they circle one another, and the sound of metal against metal rings out in the arena of combat. A court alchemist watching their stiff and heavy-handed struggle from the shadows might wonder how to transform their iron protection into apparel of pliant gold. Caught by the regal brilliance of one another, might not the adversaries approach the controversy differently? Listening has the quality of the wizard's alchemy. It has the power to melt armor and to produce beauty in the midst of hatred. Writer Brenda Ueland described the transformative properties of listening in *Strength to Your Sword Arm*: "When we listen to people there is an alternating current, and this recharges us so that we never get tired of each other. We are constantly being re-created. There is this little creative fountain inside us that begins to spring and cast up new thoughts and unexpected laughter and wisdom. If you are very tired, strained, have no solitude, run too many errands, talk to too many people, drink too many cocktails, this little fountain is muddied over and covered with a lot of debris. The result is you stop living from the center, the creative fountain, and you live

from the periphery, from externals. That is why, when someone has listened to you, you go home rested and lighthearted. It is when people really listen to us, with quiet fascinated attention, that the little fountain begins to work again, to accelerate in the most surprising way."

One of the greatest gifts a parent can give a child is to listen. As every parent knows, most warnings are forgotten and most advice is ignored, but the times we listen to our children -- to their fears and problems and victories -- are treasured moments that never seem to fade.

The parent who can listen to a child recognizes that birth is a lifelong experience. We are constantly emerging from an intangible womb, discovering hidden aspects of ourselves with each new interaction or challenge. When a parent listens with genuine interest to a child's cries of hunger, to his first words, to his frustration at school, the child receives a vitally important message: "I care. You matter."

This kind of acceptance is precious because it is so rare. The world can be a cold and hostile place, seeming to reject everything we value about ourselves. Listening creates an island of safety. As we mature, those who listen to us make it possible to explore that island. Those who hear us become our best friends, our lovers, our mates. They literally help bring who we are into being.

The need for listening is never greater than when we are in conflict. Long-distance charges go through the ceiling when a relationship sours. Endless community meetings follow the announcement that developers plan to build a high-rise or a half-way house near an established neighborhood. In times of conflict, lawyers and therapists prosper. Families and friends are drawn close.

Unfortunately, much of the listening we are afforded by others in times of conflict is of marginal value or is even destructive. Friends and family members often take advantage of our vulnerability by providing unsolicited opinions and projecting their own issues into the picture. Lawyers often prefer to strategize than to listen, which they often dismiss as mere "hand-holding." Everybody would rather give advice than allow us to come to it on our own. When someone is in trouble, the immediate reaction is to talk rather than listen.

When we are engaged by conflict, we naturally want to be heard. In dealing with our adversary, however, the need to be heard often becomes a struggle to convince the other person that we are "right." We want the adversary to cry "uncle" before we graciously make a concession. This is the point where conflict can most easily spin out of control. In our campaign to be right, it doesn't occur to us that our energies might more effectively be spent by listening to our adversary rather than in arguing. We are still influenced by a four-year-old child inside us who deals with conflict by putting his hands over his ears and shouting at his older siblings. We still secretly believe in the power of the tantrum.

Why is it essential that we become effective listeners to resolve conflict? It is because a change of heart is almost always required before a conflict can be put to rest. Something must shift to end the impasse. Arguing -- the assertion of the superiority of our position -- is not generally an effective way to change your adversary's thinking. Did arguing work the last time when your kids refused to go to bed? Did it work when your client questioned last month's bill? Did you really change his mind, or did someone simply give in?

An old adage counsels: "If in family matters it ever turns out that you are right, immediately apologize." There is always a price to be paid in establishing our moral superiority. There's nothing wrong with being right, but it's rarely worth the cost of getting someone else to cry "uncle." Being right is a private matter. It's enough that you know.

Listening is far more effective than arguing as a way to resolve conflict. Listening opens new routes past the impasse by creating a "place" for change to happen. A good listener is like an engineer dealing with a river that floods after a heavy rain. Only a fool would try to defeat gravity by attempting to push the river back upstream. The wise engineer makes gravity her friend. She builds a canal and holding ponds at the proper place and lets the water flow of its own accord.

Listening allows change to take place without forcing it. Any attempt to impose a solution is likely to be met with resistance. It is the nature of free will to remain free. Like gravity, free will instantly reacts to any attempt at coercion or manipulation. Listening respects the speaker's sovereignty. It is unnecessary to be defensive in the presence of genuine listening. Listening is one of the few human interactions that reduce rather than increase resistance. For confrontation or containment to be effective, it is often necessary that we also engage in an active campaign of listening.

A good listener is an attentive companion as the speaker is led to his own conclusions. The mind shifts when the awareness that "something's gotta give" is no longer blocked by the need to justify our feelings or actions. Once we stop being defensive, the mind is free to become creative. Change then happens naturally.

The challenge of listening to your ex can be daunting. After all, many of the things that will be said are probably hostile and directed at you. But the light it sheds is worth the heat you'll take.

Adversaries seldom convince one another of the merits of their own positions, but by listening they can convince each other of their good faith and constructive intentions. Once the parties believe that the other is acting in good faith, the likelihood of finding a solution is greatly improved. Being heard means that I no longer need to fight to make my point. By listening, my adversary shows that he or she acknowledges my right to take a stand, even if I'm wrong. We cannot both listen to our adversary and at the same time perceive the conflict in terms of winning and losing.

This is why bitter adversaries resist sitting down together. To listen to your enemy implies that you accept his right to have a voice. To have a voice assumes personhood and vitality. For the Israelis to meet directly with the Palestinian Arabs, for example, means that both already have recognized the legitimacy -- the legal existence -- of one another. The rest is details.

Keeping in mind that good listening is a rarity even within families or among close friends, it is not surprising that we would strongly resist listening to our adversaries. Nevertheless, one of the most powerful tools of conflict resolution is the application of what I call "deep listening" to one's opponent. Listening completely rewrites the script.

### **The Basics of Listening**

From the time we first start making gurgling sounds, all human beings are constantly taught how to talk. How to make words, how to make speeches, how to make sales presentations, how to argue a case to a jury, how to ask for what we want.

But there isn't much room in the curriculum for listening, and most of us don't come by it naturally. The focus of our educational system is on expression -- how to write or say what we wish to communicate. We spend 30% of our communication time speaking, 9% in writing, 16% in reading, and 45% of that time in listening. Listening is used the most and taught the least. And listening is by far the most difficult skill. In fact, listening is so rare a quality that it sometimes seems to belong in the exclusive domain of the professionals -- therapists, clergy, and talk show hosts.

Philosopher Mortimer Adler gave a speech on listening in the 1950s that compared the relative difficulty of listening and speaking: "I have discovered that I can easily give a college lecture for four hours without stopping. But to listen, intently, for even an hour is exhausting."

What is exhausting about listening is the effort to restrain our own incessant inner chatter and desire for attention. All it takes is a decision to give that attention to the person speaking. Being polite is not enough. We must be willing to clear away the debris until the muddy water gives way to the pure spring beneath. "Tell me more," we must learn to say.

The late therapist Carl Rogers observed: "The major barrier to... communication is our very natural tendency to judge, to evaluate, to approve (or disapprove) the statement of the other person or the other group. Real communication occurs, and this evaluative tendency is avoided, when we listen with understanding. What does that mean? It means to see the expressed idea and attitude from the other person's point of view, to sense how it feels to him, to achieve his frame of reference in regard to the thing he is talking about."

Rogers's point was not just that listening makes for a clearer understanding of another person's views, although this is certainly so. Listening actually changes the person to whom you are listening. Based on his extensive experience as a psychotherapist, Rogers concluded that "listening with understanding is the most effective agent we know for altering the basic personality structure of an individual." If it works in therapy, it can work for me and you.

Listening, then, is a communication. What we communicate by effective listening is that we have heard and understood the content of what is being said. That means that the message doesn't require the speaker to engage in repetition, clarification, or elaboration. The speaker has completed his or her task. This shifts the energy of the conflict. It is no longer driven by the speaker's need to be heard. The first speaker can now become a listener. The big picture -- composed of all sides of the question -- can now emerge.

To communicate effectively the listener's message that "I have heard and understood what you have said," the following elements are required:

1. **ATTENTION.** Put everything else aside. Make eye contact. Suspend your critical, judgmental side and open yourself so that everything can flow directly into your inner self without obstruction. Become a vessel. Fill up.
2. **EMPATHY.** Allow yourself to be touched. Permit the other person to find the chord in you that resonates with what is being said.
3. **MIRRORING.** Repeat what has been said so that the speaker knows that the content of the communication has registered. Don't interpret or diminish it. Don't subvert it, twist it, or respond to it. If you are really good at listening, you may be able to restate it better than it was originally said, but this can be dangerous if the restatement is perceived as a sneaky way to undercut the speaker's point. Mirroring is successful only when the speaker is able to say: "That's exactly right. That's what I was saying." A good listener is like a good journalist: no matter what one's own opinion, listening means being able to report the other's views fairly and objectively.

The key to "listening with understanding" (as Rogers calls it), or "deep listening," is to have and communicate the intention to listen. The degree of your intention will determine how effective you are. If your intention is clear, the technique will fall into place.

### **The Practice of Listening: Good and Bad Listening**

Our lives are filled with examples of bad listening. Parents who act as if their children are not entitled to their own feelings and opinions. Employers who don't want to know what their workers

think. Customers who won't listen to their vendors and vendors who are more concerned about the profit line than the product line.

When the purpose of communication is argumentative, there is very little room for deep listening - the purpose of which is to see what is burning in the deepest reaches of another's heart. In arguments, one listens only enough to learn what positions to rebut. The kind of listening that happens in lawsuits and other disputative contexts could be called "shallow listening." When a person feels attacked and responds defensively, very little listening will occur.

We resist listening to one another when we assume that by listening we are being asked to solve or do something about the matter. Especially if our conduct is being described, it is natural to want to respond. It takes practice and discipline to listen faithfully to one another without feeling a need to agree, disagree, or do something about it. Every communication does not have to be a debate. Listening can be an opportunity for a friend or spouse simply to express a feeling, or to come to terms with something that isn't likely to change or be solved, or maybe to solve it herself.

Good listening requires enormous discipline. Some come by it more easily than others, but all of us can benefit from the conscious practice of our listening skills. Sooner or later, someone will test our abilities.

Community conflict is an excellent place to learn how listening works -- or doesn't work. A number of years ago I was appointed to chair a commission to advise the new mayor and city council of Phoenix whether to sign a proposed development contract that had been negotiated by the prior administration. The developers planned to raze all buildings in a one-square-block area of the downtown area and replace them with more attractive commercial and retail structures. It would mean the relocation of a number of marginal businesses as well as one or two prospering concerns.

When we were scheduling the commission's public hearings, one of the city planning department employees warned me to expect a filibuster from the wife of the owner of a major department store who was threatening litigation if the city went ahead with the proposal. "Don't worry about that," I was advised by John Goodson, a fellow commission member. John, a creative and inspired lawyer, promised to guide me through the hearings. "I'll show you how to eliminate her hostility and come out with an even better proposal," John promised.

"How will we do that?" I asked. "By listening to her. Really listening." John smiled as if he knew something mysterious.

Sure enough, at every meeting, she showed up and took her place in line to speak against the proposal. We had considered setting a five-minute time limit on presentations, but John insisted that there be no limits. "She gets to talk until there's nothing more to say. We will invite her to discuss all of her concerns, in detail, until she's ready to sit down on her own."

At each meeting, John made certain that the woman from the department store did not leave the microphone until she had said everything that was on her mind. If she made a general statement, John invited her to go into detail. If she brought documents or photographs, John asked if they could be incorporated into the record. Even when the rest of us became irritated or impatient, John's attention never flagged. And he always thanked her for her contribution.

It was near the end of our third or fourth meeting. Following John's coaching, I had said, for perhaps the twentieth time: "Is there anything else you'd like to say? Anything at all?" A smile appeared on the lips that had been so tightly pursed for weeks on end.

"No," she said. "I think that's all I have to say." And she sat down. John looked over at me and grinned.

Now, for the first time, I could work productively with the woman and her husband and get their input on the project. They would be guaranteed a store location in the heart of the new development at bargain prices. Perhaps they would even be allowed to invest in the project. Nothing more was said about bringing a lawsuit.

Listening doesn't always mean that opposition can be eliminated, of course. Differences will remain, no matter how effective the listening. But deep listening -- listening that is patient and unhurried -- provides an excellent vehicle for removing the emotional obstacles to dealing with the differences. Listening makes it possible to talk about solving a problem rather than simply maneuvering to undo one another.

It's easy to forget to listen. When we get too focused on achieving our own goals or making a point, listening is the last thing that comes to mind. The moment we begin to regard others as incidental, as obstacles to our progress or a blank slate on which we must write, listening becomes impossible. A tyrant has neither the desire nor the capacity to listen.

Learning how to listen is more than mastering a technique or a formula. Good listeners develop the deeper aspects of their character that give power to the quality of their listening. Good listeners prepare themselves for the experience. They take the process seriously. They know how to set everything else aside and attend to the emergence of the unknown. Listening requires respect for the dark mysteries that can come forth from another person.

Listening is a conscious matter. We must quiet our own thoughts, release our expectations, and become aware of our own feelings. Listening requires patience. We must wait for the thoughts to take shape in another person's being and give time for the words to form and find expression.

### Listening and Fairness

Listening changes not only the one to whom we listen, but the listener as well. To listen is to subject ourselves to our own sense of what is fair. When we listen, the grip of our passion and prejudice is loosened.

Equity theory demonstrates that we automatically adjust our inner sense of what is fair (and, consequently, our own "bottom line" position) in proportion to the cost to our adversary of the underlying experience or event. In short, empathy equalizes. Listening allows us both to confront the adversary in a non-threatening way as well as to bring us both closer to a reasonable middle ground.

I have observed this countless times in mediations. One party will explain that the case cannot be settled because there is no reason for either side to change its position. But once they are face-to-face, they can no longer regard one another as numbers or a file or an anonymous enemy. They can no longer pretend that the injustice has been one-sided. There are two sides to every coin, we are told. Once we see this to be true, the basic human impulse of fairness begins to alter our sense of what we want to achieve in the transaction. This explains why stubborn people are bad listeners: they might learn something that changes their view of the matter. It also explains why propaganda (which vilifies the enemy and restricts access to information about his suffering) is important to our ability to conduct long-term warfare. When the enemy is human, and we cannot deny his pain, we feel the longing to be just.

### Summary

Of all the tools available to us in dealing with conflict, none is more important than attentive, intentional listening. Listening helps reduce resistance and opens our thinking to creative solutions. Listening not only clarifies the message but changes both the messenger and the listener. Listening makes it possible for both sides to have a change of heart

Listening doesn't happen by itself. It takes a conscious decision and a willingness to release the distraction of "being right." In learning how to listen, we develop the virtues of patience and even humility. Ultimately, listening teaches us to resolve conflict by letting it resolve itself.

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*This article has been edited and excerpted from **The Heart of Conflict** by Chicago-based mediator and author Brian Muldoon. In this thorough overview of dispute resolution, Muldoon offers insights into listening, collaboration, and problem-solving negotiation, examining the shifts in relationships that occur during the mediation process. He also offers practical steps to help you move from conflict to cooperation -- and to create a new partnership with your ex.*