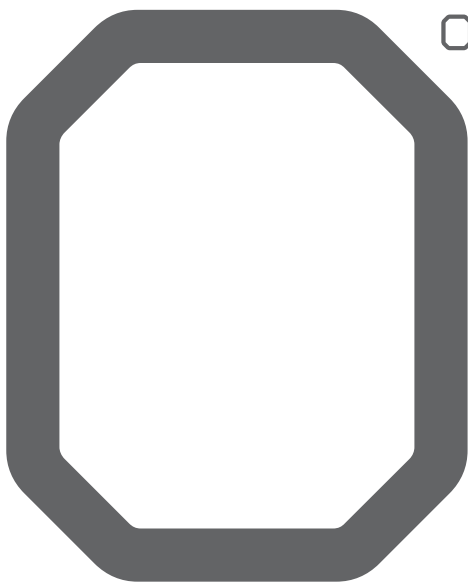




The Profession of IT Listening

Attractive offers, good customer service, and effective coordination all depend on good listening.

IT IS SUNDAY night at home. Your spouse says, “Tomorrow is trash collection day.” Your spouse thinks this is a perfectly clear request for you to take out the trash as you do every week. In your grumpy mood you think to yourself that there was no request because your spouse did not say it was a request. You respond, “Thanks for the information.” Outraged, your spouse demands, “What is the matter with you? Take out the trash!” Now you are both unhappy. The two of you had different listenings to what was said.

The software engineer delivers the software. The customer checks it and says, “It does not work.” The engineer says, “It’s what you asked for.” The customer exclaims, “But it’s not what I wanted!” The two of them had different listenings to what the requirements were.

Both examples illustrate breakdowns in listening. In the first, one spouse did not recognize the other’s utterance as a request. The other spouse maintained that the first should have recognized a request given their past history. The second example illustrates that the engineer was unable to listen for unspoken requirements

from the customer. In both cases, they exchanged messages but did not communicate their intents. When this happens, the parties to the conversation wind up unhappy. Their communication failed.

Successful listening is essential for successful coordination. How can we become better listeners? I will answer in four stages. First, I will frame listening as a process of interpreting the world. Second, I will frame deep listening as a process of listening for the listening. Third, I will use the conversation for action (CFA), a simple model of coordination, to show what to listen for to achieve successful coordination. Fourth, I will discuss deep listening as a skill we can acquire through practice with help from teachers and coaches.

Interpretations

Message exchange is a common model of communication. The sender encodes a message with enough redundancy that it can be accurately decoded by the receiver despite “noise” in the channel. This model equates listening with accurate decoding of messages. It works well for communicating machines but not for humans. We humans are living organisms constantly interacting with

each other and our environment. Each interaction provokes a body reaction unique to our individual history. We call that reaction an “interpretation” of what the provocation means. Day and night our brains are constantly updating our interpretations. Our entire history, including our ancestors going back hundreds of years, shapes our present interpretations. Communication depends on how each person interprets interactions with others. There is no guarantee the two parties have the same interpretations of what they are saying.

Our brains interpret in three dimensions: language, body, and moods. Language refers to what was said in the context of all that has been said before it, body refers to our reactions when speaking and listening, and mood refers to our degree of openness toward future possibilities. Moods are the most underappreciated aspect of how we listen. Moods are background bodily dispositions toward future possibilities. For example, a mood of joy assesses that good things are coming, a mood of anxiety that danger lurks, and a mood of resignation that the future holds no new possibilities. How people interpret conversations and what possibilities



they see depends on their mood. The spouse in a grumpy mood who did not take out the trash was not open to any new request, even though last week that spouse was in a cooperative mood.

The constant evolution of interpretations that moderate and shape our understanding is not captured in the message exchange model for communication. It is no surprise that two people in a conversation can have different interpretations of what each is saying. The ambiguities of human conversation are too complex to explain as machines exchanging messages.

Here, the term “listening” means our automatic interpretations of the words, phrases, sentences, or paragraphs spoken by others. Deep listening depends on attuning to how others are interpreting what we say, as I will discuss shortly.

Coordination

Coordination means to get several potentially independent parties to work effectively toward a common goal. If they coordinated well, they know they communicated well.

One of the simplest models for coordination of two parties—individuals or organizations—is called conversation

for action (CFA). It enables the two parties to achieve an outcome both seek. The common goal is stated as condition of satisfaction (COS) and usually includes deadline. The parties A and B achieve the goal by a conversation with four stages initiated by speech acts:

- A: requests B to produce a COS
- B: promises to do it
- B: declares delivery
- A: declares satisfaction

The request, promise, and two declarations are commitments that move the CFA to completion. In business, CFA is often called a workflow loop and “complete the loops” is a motto for productivity.

Coordination breakdowns are CFA failures. In the trash example, spouse

A did not make a clear request with clear COS. Spouse B did not listen a request and took no action. Spouse A thought a request was made and was angered by the inaction. Similarly, the software engineer and customer thought they agreed on COS, but they did not realize they did not until delivery. Successful coordination obviously depends on listening for the speech acts (or their absence).

Most of the time, we are not aware of the CFAs we participate in. Thus, we do not see what broke if our conversation fails to attain a COS. Our ability to see and overcome potential breakdowns can be approached in two ways. One is to take the CFA literally as a flowchart and try to keep it moving through micromanagement. The other is to take the CFA as a map of the commitments needed to achieve a COS and intervene when needed to generate a missing commitment. The first approach is likely to generate resentment toward the monitoring manager. The second is likely to generate gratitude that a stuck conversation is moving again.

Deep Listening

A particularly important kind of CFA is the offer (a conditional promise).

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The performer (B above) makes an offer. The customer (A above) accepts the offer and the loop continues with B delivering and A accepting the result. The bedrock of good offers is that they are attractive to customers. An offer will be attractive only if it takes care of a concern of the customer. Those who want to make successful offers must listen for concerns of customers. It takes practice to learn how to listen for concerns, especially when the concerns are not expressed. If a customer does not reveal their deep concerns, how are we to make attractive offers to them?

The key is learning to listen for how the person is interpreting the world, which can be called "listening to the listening." Deep listening is a form of empathy, seeing things the way the other person sees them. It achieves attunement with the other.

When we are formulating professional offers, we are particularly interested in listening for the "orienting concerns" of the people in our community. Orienting concerns are the deep values that guide them in life and give meaning to their actions. We cannot listen well without becoming aware of the orienting concerns of people we interact with.

Asking people directly what they are concerned about is not a reliable way to get them to disclose their concerns because they can be poor about expressing them. This was illustrated in the software engineering example earlier. Instead:

- ▶ Get them to tell stories about themselves, their histories, and their communities. Their stories will disclose their deeper concerns.
- ▶ Listen for what they see as breakdowns (events or conditions that block progress toward their goals).

A common sin in listening is to let your concerns trump theirs.

▶ Listen for their moods. You can do this by listening for the assessments they make in their stories. Listen for the reasons behind their assessments and ask questions to clarify. Inquire about the standards they are upholding in their assessments.

▶ Listen for things that make them anxious, bother them, or trouble them. Anxiety is a sign they care about something because they fear it will be taken away.

▶ Listen for differences between how you see things and how they see things. Do not confuse what you are concerned about with what they are concerned about.

Put yourself into a mood of curiosity for these conversations. Your conversations are a way to explore their world. What does their world look like?

A common sin in listening is to let your concerns trump theirs. When someone starts to tell you about their issues, do you automatically jump in with proposed solutions? Do you assume without verification from them that your preconceived idea interests them?

Listening Skill

Using the Dreyfus Hierarchy of skill development, we can make a picture of the various stages of listening skill, from beginner to expert. To progress, you need to practice at your current level and get coaching from a more advanced person to help you move to the next level. Here are the Dreyfus stages applied to developing listening skill:

▶ Level 1 (beginner). Hear and understand words and sentences. Verify that messages are accurately received with the "active listening protocol": You repeat back the words you thought you heard and the other party verifies that "you got it."

▶ Level 2 (advanced beginner). You bring your experience with the person to realize what they want even if they didn't say it explicitly. You can identify the speech acts in conversations and the commitments their speakers are making. From the commitments, you begin to infer their concerns. You recognize that others are shaped by their moods and you can recognize the most common moods as they appear in your conversations.

▶ Level 3 (competent). Your impulse

is to learn what concerns the others before you tell them your concerns. Thus, you embody Stephen Covey's advice to "seek first to understand and then to be understood." You automatically adjust your interactions to the moods you now sense in the others.

► Level 4 (proficient). You can now listen for concerns that are not explicitly stated by listening to their stories and becoming familiar with their history and situation. You regularly elicit the response "You see me!" You can shift moods so that your listeners become more receptive to your offers.

► Level 5 (expert). You listen for paradigms and belief systems. You can make them aware of their background assumptions, with which they may be unfamiliar and which are impeding them from attaining their goals. You have become a good coach. You are good at orchestrating moods, for example a team spirit that mobilizes a group behind a cause.

Notice that Levels 1 and 2 are very procedural. You follow protocols and checklists. At Level 2 you "cache" memories of familiar situations so that you no longer need to figure out which rules apply.

At level 3 you have significant embodiment. You are starting to manifest a skill that automatically "knows" what the person is asking or saying without having to go through the protocols and checklists. You regularly satisfy your customers. You know when to ask for help.

At level 5 you can recognize their belief systems (paradigms) and interact with them. Most beliefs of a paradigm are deep in the background; the person is unaware. When you point them out you get reactions like "that's obvious" that easily move to defensiveness if you challenge them. Coaching is a process of showing them how to become aware of conditioned tendencies in their paradigms that block them from their goals, and replace the tendencies with new practices that serve better.

At levels 1 and 2, conversations seem like message exchanges. You can correct bad habits, such as vague promises and lack of real commitment, by following the procedures. At level 3 you are starting to see the human social space as a space of many conversations and possibilities. There is no proce-

You are likely to be amazed at how much easier it is to craft attractive offers to your customers by learning to listen well.

cedure for listening for possibilities. It is a sensibility you develop along with the listening skill. The shifting of moods (level 4 and up) rests on your skill to show the other person new possibilities they did not see.

In working with students who are learning innovation leadership, my colleagues and I ask them to have 10 conversations a week with others. The purpose is not to pitch their projects, but to listen and learn what the others are interested in. We ask them to keep notes on these conversations so that they can reconstruct the commitments and concerns expressed. At first, many students find this difficult. Usually after five or six weeks they start to see these conversations as the highlights of their days. Try this yourself. You are likely to be amazed at how much easier it is to craft attractive offers to your customers by learning to listen well. ■

Further Reading

Denning, P. and Lyons, T. *Navigating a Restless Sea: Mobilizing Innovation in Your Community*. Waterside Productions (2024).

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