

The Five-Minute Listening Exercise



If you don't listen to people, you will eventually be surrounded by people who have nothing to say.

Years ago, I read the book **Leadership and Self-Deception** by the Arbinger Group. The “deception” is that we tell ourselves we care about people... but then we don't show that fact. Unfortunately, our intentions don't matter to others, only our actions do. That book made me realize I needed to do a better job of *showing* people I cared about them. I wore one of those colored bracelets around my wrist as a reminder to show at least one person I cared about them for 30 straight days... thus building an awareness and habit in the process.

What I learned is the number one way to show anybody you care about them is to *listen to them!* Let me share with you an exercise I do in workshops that shows the power of great listening. It is an exercise you can put to good use too.

It is a simple exercise you can do at work, with prospects, at home, and with friends. I call it *the five-minute exercise*. You can do it with two or three people, depending in part on how much time you have. Three is great because it lets one person be an observer. It is a great exercise to go through after completing some program, announcement, etc., as a way for people to process and share.

The Exercise

Person A will speak for five minutes about whatever the subject might be that day. It could be about sales, strategy, innovative ideas, or where they want to be in their career. Person A will talk *without interruption* for the full five minutes. A warning is given when there is one minute to go. What Person A does with their five minutes is up to them. If they get quiet, odds are they will think that staring at you is just way too weird, and they will begin to speak again, about anything.

Person B's job is to listen for five minutes, like some Buddhist monk or stone statue. You just sit there. No sounds, hand gestures, nodding, nada. Only pure listening. No exceptions are allowed. See if you can do it... for just five minutes!

Note: if Person A were to pause...that is not an invitation for Person B to say anything. Ever. As the saying goes, your job is to *let the silence do the heavy lifting*. Given the space needed, they will begin to speak again.

If there is a Person C, they can observe, sitting from the side, and then rotate into the next role so everyone gets a turn.

The Debrief

Once everyone has had their turn, you debrief the exercise. What did everyone observe or learn from the exercise?

I can tell you I have received profound responses. From bosses who realize they do not listen well, to salespeople and parents who admit the same. People have told me how much they learned about the other person in only five minutes. The exercise shows the power of being present with someone.

The first thing most speakers express is how unique it is to speak for five minutes without being interrupted. When is the last time they were able to do that? Second, many admit they were not as articulate about a matter as they thought they were. I often see this around career planning discussions. As Mary Kay so famously said, “Most people plan their vacations better than their careers.” Which is a fact. Third, they have their own internal dialogue going on about how what they say will be received, while they are saying it.

The exercise can give the person speaking an awareness that maybe I need to get my act together a little bit better! Maybe I am not as

articulate about my future or my role in this project as I thought I was when put through this simple exercise.

Then we debrief the listener's experience of sitting there without being able to say or do anything. Of course, they are going nuts listening without being able to give feedback. That's flat out weird. They may wonder if this person has an agenda or is being truthful...while they are trying to be a good listener.

They may be thinking about what they said when it was their turn, or how they will sound when it is their turn. Or what they must go home to tonight, or they left this morning, or what they must get back to at the office.

With so many conversations spinning around, we need a technique to silence this internal dialogue so we can be good listeners!

The Solution

I call the solution "*playing the game*." It came to me because of my study of NLP (neurolinguistic programming). In NLP, they teach a technique called "mirroring". For example, if you are trying to sell something to somebody and they're sitting across from you with their arms crossed, you should mirror them and cross your arms too. That's because, from a physical standpoint, people feel most comfortable looking in a mirror. As a trial lawyer, I learned how to mirror not just people's physical status but also their pace of speaking, tone of speaking, volume of speaking, and more.

One day I conducted an experiment on my then fiancée to see how well I could listen to her. We

had a 30-minute car ride, and I wanted to see how long I could go without adding any of my own information. She was a new chiropractor, so I began the questioning with, "How was your day"? Her answer was, "I had 10 patients". Now my normal reaction at that point would be to jump in and say something to the effect of "Let me help you put together a great patient referral program, and we'll double that number of patients". But I resisted my natural tendency to give unsolicited advice. (You have no idea how hard that was for me).

Instead, I said, "Tell me more," and for the next 30 minutes, I either asked her clarifying questions or questions like "And what else?". I was 100% present in the conversation. I told myself I would listen to her for as long as I could until I was "full" then I could mirror back what she said, almost word for word. When I got to the point of being full, I asked her if my understanding of what she said was correct. "So, what I heard you say was...".

What I realized that day is you can't have two conversations going on in your head when you're focused on repeating back what the other person is saying literally word for word. Mirroring, coupled with the appreciative inquiry, is the answer! At the end of that drive, she told me it was the best conversation we ever had!

What I have learned is playing the game for just five minutes is magical. Try it around any subject. Try it at the office today. Try it at home tonight. They will wonder what happened to you.

Who will be the first person on your list you will play the game with?



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