



# The Science of Listening

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## THE TAGLINE FOR THE CURRENT

Prudential advertisement is, 'Always listening, always understanding'. The voice-over goes on to say - 'We believe the best financial solutions start with listening'. This is true for any solution or conversation. Listening is the root of a conversation and one of the hardest skills we perform as humans.

Various studies have been done on listening and it shows that we only listen to 25%-50% of a conversation. This proves that though we do 'listen' everyday of our lives, we are quite bad at it. Imagine the amount that is wasted in a conversation with a client, supplier or colleague.

If you Google the topic 'listening skills', there is a myriad of information you will find in this area such as 'active listening', 'effective listening' and so on. These are all great techniques to use but how effective are they?

## Active listening

The key points in active listening are:

- 1) Pay attention – make eye contact, put distracting thoughts aside etc
- 2) Show you are listening – nod occasionally, use small verbal

comments like 'yes', 'uh huh'

- 3) Provide feedback – in the form of paraphrasing
- 4) Defer judgement – do not interrupt and keep an open mind
- 5) Respond accordingly – respond after taking in the information you have 'listened' to

I have been in many conversations where steps 1-5 were applied and yet the 'listener' had not listened to what I had said. I experienced 'superficial' listening where steps 1-5 were applied without really 'feeling' each step of the process. It felt as though the 'listener' had no genuine interest in what I had to say. When this happens, the conversation seems superficial or fake. We have all experienced this type of conversation.

Listening is actually a simple skill as the steps above show. As humans, we mess up this important process



because of two fundamental things:

- 1) we are not using all our senses, and
- 2) we are capable of being at more than one place, mentally, at any given time. Steps 1-5 will fail if mentally we are not 'present' in each of the process as we execute them.

What this means is that to really listen or communicate effectively, we need to develop all our senses and have a high level of self-awareness. I believe that the development of our senses automatically leads to a high level of self-awareness.

How do we develop our senses effectively?

## Our senses and social circuits

Daniel Goleman, guru of Emotional Intelligence and Social Intelligence,

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in an article in the *Harvard Business Review*, talks about the biological processes that happen in the brain or social neuron circuits during interactions. It is about interactions with others based on their emotions, which leads to a certain neuron circuitry. This enables us to 'read' others and fine-tune our communication style to suit them.

Extrapolating this to 'listening', this means that to truly 'listen', one has to be able to 'read' the other in order to build rapport, empathise, inspire and, most importantly, make the other feel 'felt'. It is about 'seeing', 'hearing' and 'feeling'. Not an easy task but achievable by all if we put our minds to it.

These are skills within the 'perception' function. In my last article, I talk about 'perception'. It is our ability to assess a situation, engage empathetically, inspire etc. These skills are present in all of us. For some, it is very tuned in and for others, it needs fine-tuning. This is in congruence with Daniel Goleman, who says that we can develop our neural networks by actively changing our behaviour. These social neuron circuits can be strengthened through practice.

The practice would be a personal change or transformation programme starting with a self diagnostic of where we are now. I do this by measuring the strength of our 'perception' and 'action' functions. Based on the diagnosis, a programme is customised to enhance the

skills that require 'fine-tuning'.

## Firing up our senses

Being a third culture child, I have grown up in cultures other than my own, where I have had to be involved in conversations in languages unknown to me, but I learned to 'listen' to what was being said. This skill taught me a lot in my growing years, which has been immensely useful in adulthood. I remember going into a client meeting in Madrid, Spain, where the team did not speak English except for one individual and I had to use my 'listening' skills. I could interject where necessary in the team's conversation even though I did not speak Spanish, by purely 'listening'.

'Listening' is more than just using our ears. It is about assessing the content of the conversation using our eyes AND 'feeling' what is being said. It is this collective mechanism that allows us to build rapport, inspire and 'feel' others' emotions. It is at this stage, as Daniel Goleman states in his article, that the neuron circuits in our brain are fired up and we reach collaborative outcomes. If this does not happen, the interaction seems forced or fake.

Even in conflict resolution, cross-cultural initiatives or any mediation for that matter, I believe, the key component is listening. By 'listening' first, we can then understand and over time, develop trust and our own style of communicating to create good and lasting relationships with others.

So yes, everything starts with 'listening'. How good is your 'listening'?

To take a personal diagnostic assessment, visit [www.optionsandchoices.asia/ourapproach.htm](http://www.optionsandchoices.asia/ourapproach.htm) 

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