



## Why listening is directly linked to Wellbeing & why we must not lose this skill in a sea of screens

By Suzy Bashford, 22 July 2024

Last week marked 'World Listening Day' (July 18th), but there are some experts who are worried that listening is becoming a "dying skill" and this is detrimentally affecting our collective wellbeing, especially in businesses.

Julian Treasure, listening consultant, is one such expert who has done five TED Talks on the topic including one entitled "5 Ways to listen better" and another "How to speak so people want to listen". He regularly consults with companies on how to improve their listening, speaking and the effective use of sound.

### Rise of social media

The seismic rise of "noisy" social media is partly to blame, he says, because "we are replacing a few deep relationships with lots of very shallow ones":

"Social media causes huge distraction with companies spending billions to seize our attention as that's their currency. And the thing is, as Scott Peck [psychiatrist and author] said 'you cannot truly listen to anyone and do anything else at the same time'. How often do we, these days, put everything down and give someone our undivided attention? We're always doing multiple things at once!"

The various research studies on listening support the theory that listening is getting worse, particularly in companies. Three out of four managers don't listen well, according to research from Psychological Associates in 2021 and 66% of companies aren't good listeners, finds the Tanner Institute's 2020 Global Culture Report.

### 'Listening is work'

Treasure's definition of listening is "making meaning from sound". Simple, right? Well, no, actually.

"Listening is work," he says. "It's very different from hearing. We hear everything. We only listen to certain things, and then we make them mean something. It's a mental practice."

He suggests that one thing that could "change the world" would be if people realised one of the most important aspects of listening which is that "your listening is unique, so is mine".

The thing is, often when we hear people speak we unconsciously put their words through internal filters in order to make meaning. But these filters are affected by our unique psychosocial make-ups, which are influenced by the culture we're born into, the family we have, the experiences we've lived, the language we speak, role models we've seen, beliefs we've adopted, et cetera...

### **Everyone's listening is different**

"All these factors colour our listening," says Treasure. "Every human being's listening is as unique as their fingerprints and the mistake most people make is to assume everyone listens like they do. But they don't."

Assumptions then lead to misunderstandings about what is going on in others' heads. This is especially true when tensions are running high because emotion can make it harder to listen, too. In order to be good listeners, we need to be very conscious of our listening and, potentially, the filters we are applying to the meaning our brain is making from what it's hearing. While Treasure calls this 'conscious listening', it's also commonly referred to as 'active listening' which has become somewhat of a buzz word in recent years.

### **What is active listening?**

But what does 'active listening' actually mean?

"It's really about paying attention, so that we go beyond hearing words to intentionally listening to understand what people are saying," says Alexandra Efthymiades, Co-founder and Director of Consensio, which specialises in conflict management.

"To do this, we need to be both self-aware and present in the moment. Active listening allows us to connect with people and understand what they mean and where they are coming from, even if we don't agree with it. It can forge an emotional connection with someone, which allows people to feel heard and validated. It's a difficult skill to learn, and very often, people think they are actively listening when they are not."

### **The age of distraction**

People often don't pay attention to what others are saying because they are distracted by something else, such as writing an email, checking messages on their phones, or thinking about something that is preoccupying them. Or they listen, and then get distracted because they are triggered by what has been said, and then start thinking about how they can respond.

"We are able to actively listen when we are intentionally present, when we slow things down and clear our minds, when we are self-aware and able to 'be' with the other person," she says.

Efthymiades believes that the reason why listening is getting worse is because of the fast pace of today's business world, an over-reliance on using technology to communicate, and the fact that relationships therefore become "transactional". It's then about getting things done, rather than understanding where other people are coming from, how they see and feel about things, and what they need.

### **Too focused on productivity?**

"If we are just focused on our to-do lists and being productive, then that often comes at a cost to our relationships," says Efthymiades. "The cost is that we are not actively listening and so people

don't feel heard or valued, and we miss out on opportunities to make stronger relationships at work and adopt better ideas that are coming from people who think differently to us."

It may sound counterintuitive, but slowing down and allowing time to actively listen to employees will save time and boost productivity in the long run. Efthymiades cites research that demonstrates the connection between empathic leaders and productivity.

"Empathy drives performance and part of that is listening to people and giving them a voice," she says. "It's such an important leadership skill, yet often managers are promoted based on their technical, and not necessarily people skills." (See this feature on the emergence of two promotional streams in career ladders in order to recognise that not all technical experts will thrive in people management roles).

### **When ego gets in the way**

Treasure has definitely witnessed this, as well as the ego-driven tendency for individuals, as they get higher in an organisation, to succumb to a "kind of pressure" to be someone who is supposed to "know and tell" people what to do:

"I think we need to be careful in organisations to promote people who are good listeners. But I wonder how many organisations have the question 'is s/he a good listener?' In their 360 degree reviews. The idea of a quiet, introverted, listening leader is often seen as weak, but some of the greatest leaders have been quiet and good listeners. Just think of Ghandi and how much loyalty he quietly inspired!"

Another aspect of listening that is fundamental to being effective is validating the person who is speaking. This is where you acknowledge the other person's perspective and say you can see why they hold the opinion that they do.

### **The power of validation**

"This is completely different from making someone wrong," says Treasure. "Making people wrong, invalidating them, is at the root of just about all human conflict. Unfortunately, we live in a world where there's a great deal of being right and making others wrong, exacerbated by social media which polarises opinions on purpose."

But businesses are missing a trick here because it's at the collision of opposing ideas where creativity and innovation are often born. Imagine, says Treasure, a business which said: 'OK, you think X and I think Y... how can we put these two together to solve this problem?'

For this reason, Treasure encourages people in his keynotes and workshops to lean in to challenge and people with different views from you.

### **Listening vs Hearing**

Listening and hearing difference is particularly important if your role in any way touches on DEI. Relationships, and validating people's feelings, are crucial to her role as Global Lead – Diversity, Equity and Inclusion at Ebay, says Estelle Jackson:

"I could go to bed every night thinking I'm only one person and I can't fix any of this but, actually, in my job relationship-building is everything and that's about being able to actively listen to others."

For her, the hardest thing to learn and practice has been “sensitive curiosity” in response to what someone has just told her. She’s learnt she has to use this skill to work out the reason someone is sharing with her: is it to vent and they don’t actually want her opinion? Is it because they want advice? Are they looking for a practical solution? Or do they just want her to agree with what they’re saying?

### **Curious sensitivity**

In order to be curiously sensitive, she often uses gentle questions which put the ball back into the sharer’s court and get them to think through the situation themselves, like: how do you think you could have done that differently?

Feeling listened to and validated are at the heart of good mental health. In fact, certain mental illnesses like Borderline Personality Disorder are widely attributed to a lack of emotional validation in childhood.

### **Listening is directly linked to wellbeing**

Carole Spiers, Chair of the International Stress Management Association (ISMA) UK, was a Samaritan for over 20 years, so has experienced firsthand how listening can save a life.

“It is humbling to know that simply listening to someone can help them emerge from the depths of despair and darkness,” she says. “Employees can be trained to listen if an employer prioritises it. As technology increasingly takes over our lives, we must ensure we don’t lose sight of this fundamental skill.”