



The Listening Habit

THE ONE HABIT
WHICH ENABLES ALL OTHERS

BY SUMIT GUPTA

A DEPLOY YOURSELF REPORT

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Table of Contents

Why Listen?	3
1. How Listening Creates The Fallacy Of Reality?	6
2. How to Listen Well?	11
3. Listening Self-Assessment	17
What's Next?	20

Why Listen?

Why Listen?

Listening is one of the most basic skills required in human communication. But it is not a natural skill. Human beings are not born with good listening skills.

Most people think that they listen well. Yet I have found that listening is a rare skill. Listening requires patience and practice. It is very rewarding, but it is not easy.

True listening leaves both parties with a stronger bond than when they started. It is about forming a relationship based on care and compassion.

Another surprising aspect of listening is that it is unique to each of us. Our listening is as unique as our fingerprints. Based on our listening filters, all of us perceive and listen differently.

People who listen well have a huge advantage in life. Learning to listen well is your chance to offer a remarkable gift to others.

Learning to listen well is an investment, one you will never regret making.

If we can make listening a habit, it can enable so much more. To listen attentively is a gift, and when you share this gift with others, you create trust, connection and make future collaboration easier.

Listening is one habit which has remarkable higher order consequences. An investment in learning to listen well is an investment in the future. Listening is the bedrock of emotional intelligence and the key to communicating with influence.

This report is divided into 3 parts.

Part 1 deals with how each of us have a unique listening. And how our listening filters create our own unique version of reality.

Part 2 is about how to listen well and the massive difference it can make in our lives.

Part 3 gives you a questionnaire to do a reality check and assess how well do you listen?

Let's start with Part 1.

How Listening Creates The Fallacy Of Reality?

How Our Listening Filters Create Our Reality And Limit Us

One of my most vivid memories from my childhood is when my grandmother mistook me for my father. I first thought she had gone crazy, but I was relieved when it was diagnosed as a cataract in her eyes. Within a few days and after a small surgery, I was back to being her grandson. That was an easy fix — I thought at that time.

I had no idea that many years later, I was to discover a kind of cataract — in my vision and listening. The cataract which I am talking about are our listening filters. These filters create our own perceived reality which helps us in making every decision — big or small — of our lives. However, unless we know the various listening filters at play, we don't see our reality as a perception but as the absolute truth.

Whenever we see or hear something, we select what to pay attention to and what to ignore, often subconsciously, based on a certain set of filters. A simple example could be someone speaking our name. Even if we are in a crowded room, we will instantaneously pay attention if someone utters our name, even if they are behind or far away from us. Our filters make us give more attention to our name than any other word.

Similarly, other listening filters make us pay more attention to certain things and ignore others. They can make one of us cry and another laugh on hearing the same story. They allow us to make sense of the situation in front of us, which creates the foundation on which we base our decisions.

What are these Listening Filters?

1. Parents

Our parents are our first contact with humanity. As we grow up, our parents influence us the most. As we try to understand the world around us, our parents tell us stories to make it easier for us to navigate it. Everything that we consider as our most basic self — our religion, language, values, our political affiliations — are shaped by our parents more than anyone else.

Subconsciously we learn to listen to the outside world through them. Depending on what our parents think, and how they act, we learn to make our own choices, and judge others choices. We either end up seeing the world as they do, or rebelling against them and view the world contrary to how they see it.

2. Values and Beliefs

We filter everything we see and listen through our values (how we define right & wrong), and political, religious and other strong beliefs. For example – If a person has suffered racial discrimination in the past, he is likely to filter all future interactions with suspicion and caution.

If we hear what is in tune with our values and beliefs, we feel relaxed, joyful, and get an ego reinforcement which can easily be seen in our body language. When we hear or see something contrary to our beliefs, we are surprised and might even feel pain and shock. We feel our muscles tightening, which can develop into stress, frustration and anger. Again, this is visible in our body language. This is called cognitive dissonance in psychology.

3. Culture – Language, Society, Religion

We behave in the world according to the religion we follow (or not), the languages we speak and are spoken around us, and the norms of the society we live in. Whether we are direct or vague in our communication, whether we are disciplined in our daily dealings or not, whether it is polite to accept a gift or not, and other subtle things in our daily life — are shaped by the culture of the land we live in.

4. Intentions, Expectations and Mood

We enter every conversation with an expectation of the outcome. For example – my expectations are very different when I talk to my colleague at work compared to when I run into him over the weekend. Similarly, my expectations differ when my wife calls me up at our usual time and when she calls up unexpectedly during the middle of the day. What we listen to in these different circumstances is shaped by what we expect to happen.

Our listening is also shaped (or filtered) by our mood. At the end of a long day when we are tired, if we don't get our expected response in a meeting, we might easily get frustrated and angry. But if we get the same response at the beginning of a day when we

are fresh and energetic, we might respond in a totally different manner. The difference in both these cases is our mood impacting our listening.

5. Personal Prejudices

We all have certain personal prejudices, which can be racial, economical or something even more subtle – like the way one dresses. We listen and treat people differently based on these prejudices, most often on a subconscious level. An example is considering one colleague more ambitious than another based on how they are dressed.

Another example is how we listen when approached by a homeless person on a street. Do we trust them when they approach us for money, or think about whether they are just going to use the money to get drunk? We all have such personal prejudices formed over the years which live in our subconscious and give us a filtered view of the world around us.

We are likely to ignore anything that opposes these prejudices, and very likely to agree and bond with anyone who shares the same prejudices as us. For instance, if we have a personal dislike for a person, we are likely to be dismissive about his ideas. On the contrary, when we interact with people we admire, we might behave over-optimistically in situations which warrant more caution.

Does everyone have the same filters?

Absolutely not. Just like our fingerprints, each one of us has unique listening filters. Based on our past, we all filter how we experience the world and make meaning of what we see and hear. Furthermore, our listening filters change (or evolve) daily based on new people we meet, successes and failures we have, and prejudices we form.

Our listening filters give each one of us a unique view of the world around us. These filters are like glasses through which we view the world. We put on our black glasses, and then complain the world around us is black. Not only that, we argue and fight with others wearing red glasses that the world is black and not red. Sounds silly, isn't it! Yet we all do it.

What can we do about them?

Every decision we make, whether it is trivial or a life changing one, depends on how we assess the situation. Our listening filters help us create this assessment, which in turn limits the options in front of us. If two people act differently in the same situation, the difference is in their listening assessment of reality. Reality is the shaky foundation on which we all rest our decisions.

As you read this article, and understand it through your own listening filters, don't be led to believe that there is something wrong with having them. Instead, they are very useful in giving us a filtered set of options in each situation which help us navigate through life.

However we are blind to the fact that these filters give us our perspective of life in each moment. We are not even aware that we are unaware of our listening filters. If we can be present to them, we are likely to empathise and understand how others see things differently.

Knowing that others may see the same situation differently can help us stay humble in challenging times. Being aware that our listening filters limit our available options can give us a big picture view and bring a smile on our face in stressful situations.

In doing so, we don't have to throw away our coloured glasses through which we view the world, we just have to be aware of them. And perhaps, try differently colored ones every once in a while.

Making an attempt to sincerely view a situation from the other person's point of view is what Real Listening is all about. If we can do so, we will make our conversations a bit more constructive, our days a bit more fun, and our relationships a bit more meaningful.

This brings us to the end of **Part 1**. In the next part we will look at how to listen well and the massive difference it can make.

How to Listen Well?

How to Listen Well and the Massive Difference It Can Make?

Considering that listening is one of the most basic skills required in human communication, I find it strange that there is no formal training on how to listen in our school and college system?

The lack of emphasis on listening skills could be because we believe that listening comes naturally to us as human beings. But from what I have learned in life, listening is not a natural skill and it takes conscious effort to listen well. Below are my biggest learnings on listening well:-

1. Why Do We Listen?

The first and the most obvious, question to ask when we are listening is “Why?” Are we listening because after listening we will get our chance to speak up? Are we listening because we have an agenda in the conversation and are thinking about how we can achieve that? Or are we listening because we just want to be polite, and otherwise we couldn't care less about what the other person is saying?

More often than not, we listen because of one of the above reasons. And it is not because we are selfish or deliberately trying to be rude, but because this is our normal (though subconscious) way of operating in most conversations in life.

Making others agree to what we have to say gives immense pleasure to us human beings, and in most conversations, we subconsciously try to achieve that. Unfortunately, listening takes a back seat in such conversations where we are mostly operating on auto-pilot.

I claim that the only objective of listening, whether it is your spouse, friend or a business colleague at the other end, is to get what the other person is communicating. Not what the other person is ‘saying’ but what he or she is ‘communicating’.

This requires conscious effort and continuous training in the act of listening because it is very natural to fall back into the default mode of listening.

2. What Do You Listen For?

Listening effectively is much more than hearing the sound and words coming out of the other person's mouth. True listening happens when you 'get' the other person's world – i.e. when you empathically see and feel about the situation just as the other person does.

It is about getting the emotions – of joy, anger, frustration, resentment, etc – which are often hidden beneath the words actually being said. Can you feel the other person's pain, fear, excitement, or happiness?

True listening is about standing in the other person's shoes and seeing the world from their point of view, and it takes a lot of effort to do this well. It is as much about hearing what is not being said as it is about what is being said.

True listening requires patience to wait it out and the courage to go beyond our personal prejudices and see something from the other's point of view.

3. How Do You Listen?

So the next question is – how do you do that? Based on my experience, here are some guidelines which can help anyone to listen well:-

- **Shut Up.** Don't interrupt the other person. Ever. Remember, you are supposed to be listening.
- **Be attentive, alert, and interested.** Remove any distractions like mobile phones from the scene. Let the other person know that he has your full attention through nonverbal behavior.
- **Use filler words like “uhh”, “hmm”** and body language to acknowledge what he is saying. Invite and encourage the other person to say more by saying “tell me more about it”, or “I am listening”.
- **Be ok with silence.** This often gives the other person time to gather his thoughts and speak up again.
- **Listen for the emotions** behind what is being said and sincerely attempt to step in the other person's shoes and feel the same emotions yourself.
- **Hold any judgment or advice** if it comes up in your head. Do not try to comfort the speaker by saying words like “It is not that bad” or “Give it some time”. Don't get angry or respond in any way. Just listen. And feel.

“We have two ears and one mouth and we should use them proportionally.”

— Susan Cain

4. Who Decides if You “Got it” or Not?

The above guidelines are not a guaranteed way to listen to someone and you should never assume you have listened well because you think so. The speaker is the only person who gets to decide whether you “got” it or not.

After the speaker has finished saying whatever he had to say, sum up whatever was said and how they feel. You don’t have to agree or disagree with the speaker at this point, you only need to paraphrase what you have understood and ask the speaker for validation.

When the speaker says that you “got it”, make sure he is not just saying that to be nice or to avoid an uncomfortable environment. Only then can you be sure that you have listened to what was communicated. If the speaker says that you didn’t get it, ask him to explain more and repeat the process.

5. Listening Creates our Perceived Reality

When we listen to someone, we create our own perceived reality. This perception is unique to each person, and if 10 people were to listen to the same thing, it is possible that they can create their own interpretations and perceive the reality in 10 different ways.

How we listen is determined by filters like our culture, habits, values, beliefs, intentions, and expectations. Most often we subconsciously pay attention to certain things and omit others from our listening based on these filters. It is these filters, and the reality they create for us that help us make decisions in life.

Each one of us has our own set of listening filters which creates our own reality which is neither any truer or falsier than anyone else’s. Realising this is a big first step to work with people who see the world differently from us.

The important thing to realize here is that the “truth” we form by the above process is only “our” truth, and not the absolute truth. Throughout any interaction, understanding

that others' perceptions of the world are equally valid as ours is key to gaining any level of understanding with them.

True listening often requires the patience and courage to see and acknowledge how the speaker has perceived his or her reality. It requires compassion to understand another's reality, especially when it is different from our own.

Everyone has a right to form their own perception based on how they experience the world around them. Indeed, if you stop and think about our listening filters, we quickly realize that it would be literally impossible for two people to share the same "truth" in the deepest sense.

Once we understand that our apparent "truth" is only a perspective, it allows us to view the same situation differently and accommodate someone else's point of view. This is the foundation of empathy and is of immeasurable help in resolving conflicts.

“Most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply.”

— **Stephen R. Covey**

6. Listening Creates Connections

When done well, listening creates deep understanding which leads to trust and respect among both parties, even if you were to disagree with the subject at hand. It enables the speaker to release their emotions and feel at ease, often even helping them to think better.

It reduces stress and helps to ease the situation which creates a foundation – a safe environment in which collaboration and problem-solving can take place. True listening leaves both parties with a stronger bond than when they started.

Another way to look at listening is like an investment. If you spend 30 minutes truly listening to someone, it can create a connection that will make your relationship stronger. A strong bond with someone can help you avoid stressful situations and make decisions quickly in the future.

Since this kind of listening is so rare in our ever distracted world of gadgets and notifications, it is all the more significant when it happens. To know that someone

listened and understood what you said is a remarkable gift, and you should not miss the chance to give it to others.

What I have described above is not easy, and it is very tempting to hit back with your own accusations when someone is angry or frustrated with us. But it (listening) is a skill which can be mastered over time.

Most of our time spent in communication involves listening, and hence I can't stress enough on its importance. I also believe that the ability to see a situation from another's point of view and to shift perspective is one of our most important abilities as human beings and one which can help us solve many of the problems we face today.

Conflicts don't occur because of different perceptions. Rather, conflicts occur because of our inability to step outside of our own perspective and acknowledge the other person's point of view.

And this is why I believe that listening and understanding different points of view is a superpower for those who possess it. Friction should be between points of views, not between people, and certainly not between organizations and nations.

7. You Can Be Right and Still Be Wrong.

In the end, we must ask ourselves this question – Do we want to be right, or effective?

And this is the question that can be answered by seeing things from another's point of view.

Do we want to be right and prove others wrong and secure a personal victory?

Or is it more important to be effective in dealing with the topic at hand, even with the different points of view we might have?

Once we learn to choose the latter, we can take meaningful steps towards reaching solutions and agreements that are more positive and inclusive than any individual point of view.

This brings us to the end of **part 2** of this report. **Part 3** will present a self-assessment questionnaire to help you figure out how well you listen?

Listening Self-Assessment

Exercise - Listening Self-Assessment

How well do you listen? Use this self-assessment to find out how well you listen and to identify areas for improvement.

When someone is talking, I :	Usually	Sometime	Rarely
Plan how I'm going to respond.	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 5
Keep eye contact with the speaker	<input type="checkbox"/> 5	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 1
Take notes as appropriate.	<input type="checkbox"/> 5	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 1
Notice the feeling behind the words.	<input type="checkbox"/> 5	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 1
Find myself thinking about other things while the person is talking.	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 5
Face the person who is talking.	<input type="checkbox"/> 5	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 1
Watch for significant body language (expressions, gestures).	<input type="checkbox"/> 5	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 1
Control fidgeting or other distracting habits.	<input type="checkbox"/> 5	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 1
Interrupt the speaker to make a point.	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 5
Am distracted by other demands on my time	<input type="checkbox"/> 1	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 5
Listen to the message without immediately judging or evaluating it	<input type="checkbox"/> 5	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 1
Ask questions to get more information and encourage the speaker to continue.	<input type="checkbox"/> 5	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 1
Repeat in my own words what I've just heard to ensure understanding.	<input type="checkbox"/> 5	<input type="checkbox"/> 3	<input type="checkbox"/> 1
Totals for each column:			
Grand Total =			

Scoring:

49–65 = You are an active listener.

31–48 = You are a good listener with room for improvement.

13–30 = You need to improve your listening skills.

If you received a score between 13 and 48, develop a plan for strengthening your listening skills. Write your ideas in the space below.

What's Next?

Did you find this report useful?

If yes, then forward this report to someone who you think would benefit from it. You can send it via email, or share it on social media. The report itself can be found at

<https://www.deployyourself.com/r/listening-habit-report.pdf>

Are you ready to Deploy Yourself?

Deploy Yourself is about understanding ourselves, developing our strengths, and acting in a way that allows our own unique light to shine upon the world, instead of following the path others have decided for us.

Join the Deploy Yourself newsletter to understand coaching and leadership from different angles. Every two weeks, you will battle-tested ideas at the intersection of psychology, neuroscience, and leadership in your inbox.

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