



If Ever There Was a Time  
to Listen – **IT'S NOW!**

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*“After 40,000 years of social evolution, what’s not going to change is that our kind are highly social animals.”*

## The Listening Paradox

Niels Bohr, the renowned Danish physicist, was fond of saying, “A paradox – now we can really learn something.” As we learn to manage our way through three overriding business challenges: complexity, uncertainty and a new social order, we run full force into, what appear to be, contradictory themes:

1. A focus on short-term shareholder value vs recognising that meeting the needs of all of the stakeholder groups is a business and societal imperative.
2. Accepting that to keep the employees we need most blended/remote employment is here to stay vs at the same time, doubling down on teamwork, collaboration and innovation.
3. Agility and responsiveness demand that we flatten the organization vs providing a clear developmental/promotion path to high performers.
4. Customers reward stability vs the inescapable need for relentless experimentation.
5. The need for those in key leadership roles to display coaching mastery vs the time constraints that arise when continuously striving to do more with less is the dominant theme.







6. Recognising that the power nexus in the organization is moving from the organization to the individual vs the need to build shared purpose, a sense of belonging, common organizational values and loyalty to what it is the organization stands for.

The learning that Bohr spoke of comes from seeing a paradox not as a binary choice between opposites, but as an inherent challenge about a need to see the overall challenge from a new perspective. By replacing “or” with “and,” one is forced into not just a creative solution, but a different mindset. It’s a way to view the world where awareness, agility of thought and the capacity to adapt comes from first knowing – really knowing – how to listen.

You can’t listen in a vacuum. Or as the late Peter Drucker pointed out, “Fifty years ago a leader knew the answer ... today he or she asks great questions.” Asking a great question without a comparable skill when interpreting the answer is about as useful as throwing an anchor over the side without a rope or chain attached. As for the paradox, to add texture to the current crisis, at no time in our history have leaders been faced with today’s volume of background noise, with the present blend of speed and complexity, and with the current reality that to lead invariably means being less knowledgeable than those being led. Yesterday, the team worked for the leader. Today, the leader works for the team.

When you step back to reflect, what becomes patently apparent is that at no time has listening been more important. At no time has your team needed you to listen more than they do now. At no time have those you rely on the most had a greater need for you to hear what they have to say. At no time, however, have there been more physical and emotional barriers. The good news? As we move forward, discontinuous change<sup>1</sup> can be a learning experience like no other. The not such good news? Don’t expect simplicity, sagacity and stability to break out any time soon. Believe it or not, when we look back, today may well seem like the good old days.

To add to the challenge, every decade or so, those smart enough to design the protocols necessary to conduct listening tests with leaders announce that our listening proficiency is, more or less, dysfunctional. Numbers that describe overall listening proficiency of 30 per cent, or less, are commonplace. Put another way, as our need to listen goes up, our listening efficiency goes down. In the past, moving on to the high potential track was, all too often, based on easy-to-identify attributes – overall image, use of language and skill in front of an audience. In an era defined by ongoing disruption, listening, speed of learning and the capacity to let go of the past are far better indicators of future success.

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1 Discontinuous change is when what worked yesterday is no longer meaningful, when accepted practices are no longer effective, when a new mindset is demanded.



## Why Don't We Listen?

Trust, rapport, personal connection and mutual respect can't move beyond intent if one of the parties is emotionally absent. The average person talks at a rate of about 125-175 words per minute. Meanwhile, we can listen at a rate of up to 450 words per minute. We fill that "vacuum" by daydreaming, attempting to both be in the conversation and elsewhere, by thinking about how we are going to respond when the other person has stopped speaking (script writing).

We don't listen when we make subconscious choices about whom we perceive as being not worth listening to: people who we deem to be less educated, less experienced, who have only tangential knowledge of the issue; who are from a different culture, who don't share our beliefs or whose use of language is less developed – particularly when lack of time and/or crisis frame our lives. We don't listen when we make the (invariably misguided) assumption that the speaker's contribution to our well-being is likely to be of "marginal value."

We tend to avoid those who make our life difficult, those who make us angry, those who ask the questions that make us uncomfortable. Communication enacted through Zoom creates





yet one more excuse. To be a leader is to actively seek out those who disagree with you. To be a leader is to make the first call of the day – both video and voice preferred – to the person you least want to talk to. To be a leader is to listen hardest to the person on the team who frustrates you the most. We invariably gain most by listening to those who are most unlike us. Personal breakthroughs happen when we afford others the opportunity to challenge our way of thinking.

Someone who comes to the issue for the first time brings not just a fresh perspective but, as often as not, a new way to see what is possible. The customer that we can learn from is not defined by those we currently serve. Important as it is, new insight is not limited to listening to the customer we lose. It is the customer we have never landed, the one who rejected our offering out of hand that often offers the most compelling evidence of new opportunity. The paradox: the people we reject as being those who offer little value are very often those from whom we can learn the most.

Innovation is often spoken of as if it were magic dust that the idea fairy sprinkles on those so blessed. Innovation is a combination of curiosity, creativity, challenging the status quo, concept generation, customer awareness, choosing the right project, collaboration and commitment to the craft, which we refer to as “teamwork.” Meanwhile, the element that is often missing, the leadership lubricant, the innate ingredient that turns ideas into a winning investment costs little and yet reaps huge rewards? Listening! Listening to the markets. Listening to the customer. Listening to those who have to build or sell what others imagine. But most of all – listening to each other. If you want greater impact from innovation, start by making listening a core competency.

Generally speaking, women are better natural listeners than men. Indeed, nothing strikes greater fear in the average man than those four words, “We’ve got to talk.” The terror emanates not from “talking,” but from the implied subtext, “You’ve got to listen.” It turns out that the differences between the sexes are not just the obvious physical ones; our brains are also wired differently. PET scans suggest that during human interaction there is 15 per cent more blood flow in the female brain. The outcome is that the emotional centre of the brain is far more active in women, with the result that they take in more of the conversation.

The assumed superiority of the speaker is compounded by an educational system that presents listening as the passive role. When, for example, did you last read a school report that commented on your child’s skills in listening? All relationships ultimately are about power. Unfortunately, the “power role” is mistakenly assumed to be the one in the spotlight, the actor who delivers the soliloquy, the leader presenting the information. Nothing could be further from the truth. The appearance of power is not the same as actually having power. A professional actor will be quick to point out that delivering the lines is the easy part and that the real “art” lies in how the other players listen.





If you are still in doubt about the relationship between listening and influence, watch a top salesperson at work. To the inexperienced, selling is a form of tonsil tennis. To those who build long-term relationships, it's a behavioural ballet where listening is little short of an art form. The next time you are in a meeting, take a mental note of who is doing the listening. That is where the power lies. Like a conductor with a hidden baton, it is the masterful listener who shapes the outcomes – who, unobserved, uses the subtlest of signals to steal the show.

## Becoming Better Listeners

There is a positive side in all of this. In much the same way that we know most of us are poor listeners, we know what it is that outstanding listeners do that makes them special. We know the difference that makes a difference. And lest we forget, if you want someone to listen to you, first you have to show that you can, and do, listen to them.

How do we become better listeners? Getting rid of distractions is the start of it; using our whole body as an antenna is part of it; but being there, really being there, is the heart of





it. We listen when we make an emotional commitment to be fully present – to be in the moment. We listen when we put a hold on likely interruptions and spend a few moments clearing the clutter from our mind. We listen when our self-talk moves to full volume with a message that emphasises, “The next few minutes are an invaluable learning opportunity.” We listen when we put the needs of others ahead of our own needs. If you are operating in virtual space, double down on each of these behaviours. If you are on Zoom or some other video connection, especially if your face is full-screen, set the scene for exemplary listening – take the clutter out of the background, avoid casting shadows on your face, adjust the camera to be near eye height (buy a stand for your laptop).

Claude Debussy once remarked, “Music is the stuff between the notes.” Masterful listening implies “listening for” and not “listening to.” It means listening not just for what is said, but also for what is omitted. It means hearing the silence. It means interpreting the message in the space between the words. It means, when emphasis adds to the understanding, making the silence louder. It means, when faced with a tough negotiator, forging the silence the way a blacksmith wields a hammer. It means being tuned into the subtleties of the speaker’s body and the sub-text in the language. The payoff? When we are fully engaged we start to hear not just the speaker’s intentions, but the meaning behind what is being presented. And in that meaning we can start to understand the speaker’s true intent and state of mind.

Professional rally and race car drivers do something intuitively (at a level of excellence) that the rest of us do only after a fashion. They understand that simultaneous use of our hands and our eyes (hand-eye coordination) is how we are naturally wired. They, however, take that capability to a whole new level – to the point that where they look is where the car steers, not a split second later but, literally, in the moment. Leaders who are attentive listeners, in like manner, “tune in” all of their other senses. As a result, they are especially good at picking up subtle clues of disagreement. Here we face another paradox. Everyday logic would suggest that “agreement” is a prerequisite of progress. This ignores the gift of disagreement. Conflict is an idea in the making. That is why diversity is so important. That’s why, especially in this current environment, listening in the way you have always wanted to be listened to has the capacity to turn concern into the art of the possible.

Great listeners develop “peripheral awareness.” The message is important. But no less important is sensing how the message lands with everyone else in the room – virtual or otherwise. To listen is to be an active partner in the communication dance – with all the dancers. To listen is to be the master of both content and context. Listening is not exclusively a real-time experience. Mastery is to develop a “listening memory.” It is a memory that builds a pattern of understanding around what the speaker is passionate about, for there lies untapped energy. It is a memory that builds understanding around what the speaker gets angry about, for there lies insight into what the speaker fears most. It is a memory that builds awareness as to what the speaker seeks to avoid most, for there lies insight into the





speaker's capacity to lead. It is a memory that builds insight into the speaker's authentic-self, for there lies their true path to mastery.

## To Listen Is to Care

To listen is to care. Not to listen, to half-listen and to “script write” (to think about what you are going to say while the speaker is talking) are arrogant and overt acts of disrespect that carry an unambiguous, collective message, “Get on with it, my time is more valuable than yours.” And does the other person (and everyone else present) pick up on that message? Every time!

We improve the quality of the listening experience immeasurably when our body language says to both the speaker and those present, “What you are saying is important to me.” When we lean in slightly and maintain good eye contact, we signal that we are fully present. When we reinforce key statements with positive body language, such as a slight nod of the head, we are letting the speaker and everyone else present know that the message is landing.







And when we allow the speaker to pause and we resist the temptation to jump in, we show respect. The intensity described comes with a soft edge. When we appear relaxed, we make the speaker more comfortable. Our willingness to smile is a measure of our openness. When we use a gentle voice, we are emphasising that this is a shared experience. When we paraphrase, restate and, as appropriate, summarise what the speaker has said, we are saying that we care. Even when it is clear that the speaker has concluded, when we wait two beats before giving our own response (or question), we give emphasis to the speaker's message. Video conference? Do everything outlined but do so a little more deliberately.

Masterful listening is to listen without biased judgement. It is to be receptive not just to new knowledge, but to new ways of being. Listening without judgement means that we must first strip away our own mask of self-judgement. It is a level of listening that draws on a willingness to be vulnerable. It is a level of attentiveness that is only possible for those who have the capacity to be emotionally "still."

Listening mastery means constantly striving to reach the next level. It is ongoing learning that starts with a simple question, "What is the one thing that I can do that will make the greatest difference to my ability to listen?" To grow as a listener is to write at the top of every page on the note pad or screen you are using, "I will listen." To grow as a listener is to self-rate oneself at the end of every key meeting or coaching session. Learning also means feedback from others. It means a willingness to appear vulnerable. It means being humble. It means asking others on the team how they would rate your listening skills. It means seeking input from the customer. More than anything else, of course, it means acting on the input.

None of this implies that to listen we must lose, or mask, who we really are. Listening is not an act of manipulation. When someone else turns up, when any attempt to listen more effectively distorts our sense of self, we take away from – rather than add to – the listening experience. To become more effective as a listener is not about learning how to act in a way that contradicts our sense of identity. It is far more about reaching within and discovering/ amplifying qualities we already possess. When we listen to others we listen to ourselves. In listening we, thus, discover our authentic-self. By comparison, poor listeners struggle with leadership-of-self, generally, and resilience, more specifically.

## Conclusion

Listening is not a spectator sport. It's an intense, full-bodied, emotionally involved, empathetic experience. Listening is hard work. Then again, so is change. Habits and especially social habits, once formed, are very difficult to change. That said, those who don't make listening an every day priority are going to find themselves on the wrong side of history.

Make no mistake, the workplace will change. The urgent need to address the environment;



artificial intelligence; the next generation of computers; ongoing disruption; the ever-increasing speed at which things happen; a move to stakeholder value; that, by way of design, the organization that created wealth in the last century is a total misfit in this one; and a host of other factors will combine to create organizations that are flat, fast, focused, flexible and fertile (to new ideas).

After 40,000 years of social evolution, what's not going to change is that our kind are highly social animals. It's clear from social media sites like Facebook that we are just as much a village today as we were before one of our kith and kin said, "Do you know what, if that flat bit were round it might roll!" Dignity, respect, trust, caring, empathy, social kinship, storytelling, teamwork and the need to be listened to aren't going to be thrust aside – they define who we are as a species. Or, as Calvin Coolidge once said, "No man ever listened himself out of a job."

And what sort of listener are you? To find out, go to the Listening Tree at the end of the text.



# The Listening Tree

10

I ask for feedback on my listening.

9

I listen not for what is said, but for what is intended.

8

As a signal of respect, I go out of my way to use the speaker's words.

7

I pay attention to the speaker's non-verbal language and I do not interrupt.

6

I consciously do not allow myself to "script write" i.e., I do not think about what I intend to say while the other person is talking.

5

After listening to what someone has to say, I wait for two beats before I speak. In doing so, I am signaling that I am listening.

4

To listen is to be there! When I know that an opportunity to listen is coming up, I put a hold on interruptions and spend a few moments actively clearing the clutter from my mind.

3

As part of my listening agenda and, when possible, I go out of my way to build physical rapport with the person speaking. This includes maintaining good eye contact and adopting a complementary posture.

2

I listen not just with my ears but with my whole body. I make this apparent by giving affirmative, physical cues to the speaker: leaning in slightly, reinforcing key statements with a slight nod of the head, smiling in appropriate places, and maintaining listening intensity even when the speaker pauses.

1

Before any conversation, I remind myself that prejudice, past experiences with the individual, and assumptions that you already know what the person is going to say, severely limit listening effectiveness. I also remind myself that listening, far from being a passive role, is the power position in any conversation. Thus, if the speaker is unable to get their points across, I have failed.

## Self-Assessment

Think about a recent conversation and review your listening at each level (1-10). For every level where your response is "that's absolutely me" you gain 10%. If in any doubt, or if the statement describes you "sometimes," you do not score at that level.

## Score

30% (or less) doesn't listen  
40% listens out of self-interest  
50% listens for knowledge  
60% listens for meaning  
70% listens to uncover wisdom  
80% + mastery

John O. Burdett



*John O. Burdett*

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*– J. O. Burdett*

**JOHN O. BURDETT** has worked in over 40 countries as an executive and as a consultant for businesses that are household names. He continues to work on leadership development and organization culture for some of the world’s largest corporations. In 2019, his work with ABB’s top 240 executives received a major international award for the most innovative leadership development initiative of that year.

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He has written extensively on executive coaching and was awarded international coach of the year by the Finnish Institute of International Trade. Business graduates at the University of Texas indicated that his material on coaching was the single most valuable learning source they took away from their undergraduate degree. He has also coached numerous executive teams around the world in how to coach. He

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Apart from a range of corporate leadership workshops, he has taught at business schools on both sides of the Atlantic. His work on the MBA program at the University of Toronto received a teaching excellence award. John holds a doctorate in management development and is a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.

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Go to the TRANSEARCH International website to download John’s books and articles (gratis). The site also has a number of webinars.

