

FINDING THE NUGGET



PEOPLE HAVE A STRONG NEED TO BE HEARD AND UNDERSTOOD.

Listening — hearing and understanding — can lead to more effective communication at work and at home.

Unusually perceptive listening is the basis for increasing visibility, credibility and effectiveness. One of the best ways to move a conversation or meeting forward is to build on points that have been made by others — whether or not you agree with them. When you expand on an idea raised by another person, you acknowledge their contribution and move to a refined version of what they shared. The first step in this process is listening to what the other person is saying with the intention of finding a valuable nugget to build upon, even if it is buried in mud.

As time allows, you may choose to write down the key points you heard to make it easier for you to refer back to them. One successful method is to draw a line down the middle of a piece of paper. On the left side, keep track of items raised by others; on the right, record thoughts and questions about those issues.

There are a number of challenges that interfere with listening. You may dislike or have little respect for some people in the meeting. They may raise issues in a way you find demeaning or upsetting.

Your emotional reactions may be so strong, you have to restrain yourself from leaving the room. In your opinion, they may be boring, arrogant, ignorant or any one of a hundred other attributes. None of these issues matter in relation to your ability to listen for the key points they are making.

You are responsible for the messages you take in, irrespective of the speaker's personal characteristics. You may be justified in accusing them of glossing over important facts, or of being unfair, dominating or discriminatory. However, you will not gain any credibility or help make progress on the issues unless you can create something more valuable. Just pointing out the problem or being paralyzed because of it does nothing to help you or the organization.

You might wonder, "But what if I really disagree with what the person is saying?" Listening and understanding a point is different from endorsing it. Whether you agree with a view being expressed or not, the first step is to understand it. In fact, logically, you can't know if you agree with it or not until you understand what it is. If you can't listen to something that you think is flawed, and learn from it, you are missing out on a significant human pursuit. Many half-baked ideas can be transformed into

breakthroughs after being understood and improved.

Throughout our lives, there will be many things others say with which we will not agree. If the person holding the opinion is an important player at work or home, it is very useful indeed to understand why they see things as they do.

Practicing listening can also improve relationships substantially. Learning how to appreciate what a loved one is really saying, and looking for the nugget to honor in their communication, shifts the whole relationship. To have open communication, personally or professionally, the discipline of listening helps get you there.

A listening call to action

The next time you are listening to someone share information at a meeting, ask yourself a few of the following listening questions:

- What point has the speaker just made? This is the basis for any further communication on the subject. Use this question to help yourself pay attention if your mind has wandered. Take notes.
- What was important about it? Different people have different perspectives on what is important

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about the same issue. You may see the budget shortfall as preventing needed services from being provided. The CPA in your midst may see it causing reconciliation problems. Assume there will be many important aspects of a key issue. What you perceived before you came into the meeting is just one of them.

- What is the essence of the issue? Seek insight into the heart of the matter. What is at the core or root? How can you express this in a simple, yet accurate manner?
- Is there any emotion associated with it? Listening for emotion is important because many people make decisions based on how they feel about an issue. You need to know if this is a highly charged issue, or more run-of-the-mill. How you respond will change based on the degree and type of emotion expressed by the speaker and the others in the room. Connecting with the emotion around the point raised is just as important as connecting with the content.
- What additional information would someone who raised that point care about? This question helps you sort through your own personal

databanks to discover if you have any relevant factual information to introduce into the conversation, or if you need to suggest that gathering a particular type of data would shed light on the issue.

- What have I learned about the situation from this comment? What can you learn from hearing others speak? It may be one of a thousand things, such as the way they approached the topic, the politics of the situation, the economics underlying the approach, their beliefs, leverage points, etc. Keep your focus on learning something new, rather than defending what you knew before you walked in the room.

Be generous as you are considering the questions above. Sometimes people fumble with their words, their point may not flow logically, or they may not share their opinion gracefully. Pay attention to the point they were trying to make. Give them the benefit of the doubt. Look for the nugget of gold. If you do not understand what they said, ask clarifying questions. A few you can use are:

- “Can you say more about that?”
- “When you said ... I didn’t understand exactly what you meant.”

- “I would like to understand that last point more fully”
- “Is the issue ... (describe what you thought you heard)...?”

Be patient with yourself as you practice unusually perceptive listening. As you find yourself slipping into judgment about the speaker, feeling impatience, remembering previous interactions with the person or disengaging from the conversation for whatever reason, gently return to the listening questions. Make a few notes about the issues being raised, and bring yourself back to the present interaction. You will find the rewards are worth the effort.

Integrated Work Strategies LLC is a leadership development firm. Jessica Hartung’s 16 years of professional experiences with government, non-profit and commercial organizations have provided strength and flexibility to her skills as a coach and consultant on interpersonal communication, leadership development, group dynamics, team building, remotely managed teams, and professional development planning. She is frequently called upon as a trusted advisor to senior leadership teams. Contact information: 303-516-9001 or jessica@integratedwork.com, or visit www.integratedwork.com.

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