

The Third Ear: A Powerful Tool To Becoming A Better Listener - Bruna Martinuzzi

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Stop rushing to fill the silence, dispense advice and complete other people's thoughts. Be a better leader by learning how to listen on a deeper level.

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"I am convinced I have a third ear," [Dr. Joyce F. Brown](#), the president of the Fashion Institute of Technology, said in an [interview](#) with *The New York Times*. "I listen, I really pay attention and try very hard to understand the nuances."

The "[third ear](#)," a concept introduced by psychoanalyst Theodor Reik, refers to the practice of listening for the deeper layers of meaning in order to glean what has not been said outright. It means perceiving the emotional underpinnings conveyed when someone is speaking to you.

Developing this ability is a powerful tool, no matter what position you occupy in life. We can all become more effective if we set out to develop our third ear. It helps us appreciate what's driving other people and aids in making better decisions.

But many people have trouble listening with both ears, let alone developing a third ear. There is a misconception that [digital natives](#) have not developed the capacity to communicate face to face, to be fully present in the moment in order to hear those who are trying to communicate with them. The truth is, for most of us, our ears need syringing.

What can we do to improve our capacity to listen more effectively? Here are eight practical tips:

Get Inspiration From Psychologists

We can learn a thing or two from those who are in the business of listening for a living. For example, psychologists say that people have [three common ways of hiding a problem](#): They might tell you something important just as they are about to leave the room; they might only mention the safe parts of their story; and they might share important information indirectly. When you use your third ear, you use your gut feel to sense if any of these things are happening.

For example, you remain present with the person to the very end of the conversation, rather than start to pick up your phone or look through papers on your desk as the person is leaving. Give them their full moment with you. As well, when you listen attentively, without distraction, you are more likely to notice gaps. You can probe the gaps gently, pause and help people share what was left unsaid. Listen also for how people express themselves. Not everyone is comfortable saying it as it is. Some people's style is to skirt around issues rather than be outspoken. Help them out. "It's been somewhat challenging" might mean "I am angry because goals for this project keep changing." When you listen for the sub-text, you can do your part by drawing attention to the elephant in the room. You end up having an entirely different conversation.

Spare the Advice

American journalist Ambrose Bierce said, "Advice is the smallest current coin." There is much truth in this satire. Unsolicited advice is rarely appreciated—it's the equivalent of showing up at someone's house unannounced. We also give advice in the form of stories. No one is really interested in our war stories. This well-meaning behavior disrupts the listening process because it gets us to switch from hearing the person out to forcing them to hear what we have to say. Most people are usually under an obligation to politely sit and listen to advice. Stifle your need to dispense advice. Make space for people to speak, let silence do its part, and you might find that they're more likely to share from the heart. We never know what we may miss when we rush to fill the air with our words.

Determine Your Goal For Each Relationship

We've all heard the usual advice for developing better listening skills through active listening: paraphrasing, summarizing, verbal and non-verbal encouragements, and asking clarifying questions, to name a few. These are all important recommendations. However, to truly develop your ability to listen with the third ear, it goes beyond that. It's

not about a mechanical "point and click" process. Being good at it requires heart. It requires a genuine desire to connect with the person as one human being to another. It's about building a relationship, and there is no more powerful way to do this than with a genuine effort to truly hear what people are saying; to intuitively understand where they're coming from, and what they are leaving unsaid. When this happens, it creates a strong bond that engenders trust and loyalty. There's no doubt that listening moves us closer to each other.

One way to do this is to consider your goal for each relationship. For example, your goal for one of your team members may be to boost her confidence so that she can take on greater responsibilities. When you listen with the third ear, you have an opportunity to uncover her anxieties. It's only by understanding where these are coming from that you can meaningfully help the person progress in her job.

Fling The Door Wide Open

Many leaders say they have an open door policy. While they mean well, in reality, often people's perception is that the door is left ajar, and not everyone is welcome through that door. That's because those on lower echelons don't always feel safe walking in to bring forward issues that need airing. In his [Leadership Primer](#), Colin Powell states, "The day soldiers stop bringing you their problems is the day you have stopped leading them. They have either lost confidence that you can help them or concluded that you don't care."

Think about the culture in your department or team. Is there truly open communication? Are there any tacit sacred cows that no one would dare bring up? Have you made it absolutely clear, not only from your words, but from your demeanor and style of leading, that the door is wide open for everyone, no matter the rung they occupy on the corporate ladder? Unfortunately, people's perceptions becomes their reality. Blow the barriers to communication. Making yourself truly accessible to listen to everyone is one of the most clear messages you can send that you care.

Put Listening On Your Learning Agenda

Some people are blessed with the gift of being good listeners. We know who they are because we feel good when we walk away from having spent time with them. The encounter with these people is usually calmer than with others because we feel heard,

we feel that we didn't have to struggle to get a word in the conversation, and we weren't interrupted in mid-sentence. These people are soothing to the spirit. The truth is, they are a minority in a noisy world. Given our differing temperaments, it's unrealistic to think that we can all aspire to be that way. But we can all benefit from improving in this area.

Start by doing a little soul searching to come to terms with how you truly show up. If you're not naturally predisposed to being a good listener, make it a point to include this in your self-development as a leader, both in your personal and professional life. Listening is a learnable skill, if you truly commit to make it an imperative in your growth. Enroll in a strategic listening class, or work with a business coach who uses an experiential approach to help you practice the desired listening behaviors. The International Coach Federation has a free [Coach Referral Service](#) with a searchable directory of international, ICF credentialed coaches.

Know Your Weaknesses

Perhaps one of your weaknesses is impatience—you are harried and you want people to cut to the chase. You may feel you know what they're going to say anyway, so you interrupt them. In this [brilliant video](#), organizational consultant Tom Peters says that most managers are 18-second listeners. That's how long they will listen before interrupting. Does this describe you? No one can really teach us how to change this; we have to consciously make the decision to stop these habits that are damaging to us and to others.

In [Power Listening: Mastering the Most Critical Business Skill of All](#), Bernard T. Ferrarri identifies [six types of poor listeners](#): the *Opinionator* (squashes ideas that don't match his own; listens only to reload his rebuttal to others' input); the *Grouch* (everyone else's ideas are wrong); the *Preambler* (windy lead ins, self-serving, questions are simply stealth speeches); the *Perseverator* (talks a lot but doesn't say much; doesn't advance the conversation); the *Answer Man/Woman* (spouts solution before there is even a consensus of what the challenge might be; desperately eager to impress); and the *Pretender* (not really interested in what you have to say; feigns engagement; may have already made up his mind or just couldn't care less). Be honest with yourself and recognize if you sometimes unwittingly fall into one of these categories.

Beware Of Assumptions

We all make assumptions when we listen. These can hinder our ability to fully understand what is said. Try this sobering [2-minute listening practice test](#) to see how well you are at active listening. The results may surprise you. Train yourself to listen attentively, and don't rush to fill in the gaps with your own interpretation. Get in the habit of pausing and asking yourself: "Is my interpretation an objective evaluation of what I heard, or am I making up my own version of what I heard?"

Practice Humility

On some occasions, listening signals [intellectual humility](#). It means acknowledging to ourselves and others that we don't have all the answers, that others have as much of an opportunity to be right as we do. It's being comfortable with being wrong. Above all, it's approaching a conversation with a beginner's mind: open to learning from others; deciding to temporarily abandon our need to sound authoritative; staying wide open to the possibilities of what we hear. Doing this takes us away from an ego driven state to an enlightened state. It frees our mind to be fully present, it silences the background noise in our head, and we are more predisposed to listen attentively. As Margaret J. Wheatley put it, "We have the opportunity many times a day, every day, to be the one who listens to others." There's a lot to gain from this.