

## EveryDay Matters: Listen UP

People are often unaware that there are at least four levels of listening in common practice. Each listening level has a legitimate use. Each higher level requires more energy on the part of the listener. Roughly categorized, the levels are as follows:

### **(1) Ah-huh/ah-huh listening**

We are not really listening; our ears register sound – we are *hearing*... but we are not listening. Maybe we are tired, bored, distracted, etc. Think of how you listen around chattering children or really talkative 'friends'. Men reading the newspaper or watching a sports event often practice this mode of listening.

Listening in this way can be for self-defense (after all, not every spoken word is worth listening to) but it can also be a habit of discounting the speaker. That may be something to rethink. There may be individuals in our lives to whom we *always* listen in this way: certain people at meetings, certain individuals we routinely meet, even certain family members.

When two people interact at this level, what takes place is an entire 'conversation' which actually consists of two unrelated monologues. This level of listening requires the least amount of energy.

### **(2) Defensive listening**

We hear the words of the other person but we are really focused on what it means to us. We are very busy thinking: "Where does this leave me? Is it a good thing or a bad thing for me? Am I in danger? Will this cause me pain?" And often we wait impatiently, wanting to explain, reason, excuse, etc. We can even be angry, defensive, frustrated, wanting to attack if we feel threatened, thinking more of what we will say in reaction to, rather than simply listening for the full story. Or we may one-up the speaker: "You think *that* was bad? Wait until I tell you what happened to me!"

Because listening in this mode makes assumptions about the meaning behind the speaker's words without asking for clarification, it can easily result in unnecessary disagreements. This level of listening requires slightly more energy and is a very common way to listen. In fact, most of what passes for listening in today's world falls under the first two modes of listening.

### **(3) Interested Listening**

Our attention is truly focused 'over there' on the speaker. We are really interested in learning about the subject or the person, and we have suspended judgment. We are simply open to collecting any and all information. We ask open-ended questions. We want to know *more*. Think of attending a lecture on a subject which fascinates you. Think of people beginning to fall in love. Think about when you feel really connected to a friend.

This mode of listening also happens when a parent hears an 'alarm', whether that is a certain tone in a child's voice, or silence when there should be noise. Think about listening at the bedroom door of a sleeping baby.

This is a listening mode that is very informative but it does require more energy. We have gathered our attention from other things in order to concentrate on 'what is going on'. It is a rewarding way to listen because we are able to collect better information and thus are able to make wiser decisions. This is a very affirming way to be listened to.

Who listens in this way to you? And to whom do you extend this mode of listening?

### **(4) Laser-focused Listening**

We not only listen to the words but we also pick up emotions, body language, the environment, mood, energy level, pace, etc. Think of people who are deeply in love. They just drink it all in.

Think also of how you listen when you think someone might be breaking into your living quarters. You focus every ounce of your energy and attention in order to assess what is going on!

This level takes a great deal of energy but properly used, it is immensely valuable.

If anyone has ever granted you the gift of listening to you in this way – having no agenda but yours, it is a rare and memorable experience.

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It would be an interesting exercise to decide to listen at a level one higher than we usually do in our work and family life. Even a small investment of time at an upgraded level could provide very interesting results. A commitment of 10 minutes/day to listen at a deeper level to the people in our lives could reveal some quite useful information.

The resulting reaction of the person being listened to would also be very interesting feedback. To be truly heard by a spouse, parent, sibling, friend, boss, co-worker, for even 10 minutes is often perceived as a gift of great value, as it should be: it is a deliberate commitment of a portion of our limited time and energy to that individual.

How about we listen **UP** for a week and see what happens.