LISTEN UP!

Michael Burns, Livia Armstrong, and Kat Koppett
LISTEN UP!

AUTHORS

Michael Burns
Michael Burns is senior facilitator at Koppett, as well as artistic director of The Mopco Improv Theatre, the performance improv wing of Koppett's parent company, Mopco, LLC.

Livia Armstrong
Livia Armstrong is an improv program coordinator at the Mopco Improv Theatre and Koppett. She heads the youth program at the theater and performs as part of the mainstage company, The Mop & Bucket Co.

Kat Koppett
Kat Koppett is the eponymous founder of Koppett (www.koppett.com), a consultancy specializing in the use of theater and storytelling techniques to enhance individual and organizational performance. She is the author of Training to Imagine: Practical Improvisational Theatre Techniques to Enhance Creativity, Teamwork, Leadership, and Learning.

Community Manager, Career Development
Sue Kaiden

Editor, TD at Work
Patty Gaul

Managing Editor
Teresa Preston

Production Design
Iris Sanchez

IMPROVISATION AND LISTENING ............................................................ 1
THREE LEVELS OF LISTENING ............................................................ 2
WHY IS LISTENING SO HARD? ............................................................. 3
DEVELOPING IMPROV MUSCLES ......................................................... 4
LISTENING LIKE AN IMPROVISER ....................................................... 7
ACTIVITIES TO PRACTICE LISTENING SKILLS ................................. 9
CONCLUSION .................................................................................... 11

REFERENCES & RESOURCES ................................................................ 13

JOB AIDS

Conscious Listening Primer ............................................................... 14
A Ranting Exercise ............................................................................ 15

Need a trainer’s lifeline? Visit td.org/tdatwork.
To survive, humans need air, water, food, and shelter. But we know that to be fully human, mere survival isn’t enough. To thrive, we need to be seen and heard by others. We need to be listened to, to know that we are understood.

The experience of the 21st century so far might be summed up by the words information overload. Executives, managers, and learning and development (L&D) professionals face an unprecedented amount of information every day both in and out of the workplace—in emails, calls, texts, tweets, and even face-to-face. It can be overwhelming.

Our information-filled world can be isolating. Successful organizations know that forging strong relationships is more important than ever. Such relationships can make a gigantic difference in building a healthy and vibrant organizational culture. To cut through the constant drumbeat of noise and extract what’s important, skilled and careful listening is needed.

But taking the time to develop and maintain solid listening skills can seem like a luxury. How does a person—or a team—develop those skills? One way is to take a page from the world of improv. As Bob Kulhan explained in an interview with TD magazine, “When focusing on improv as it relates to business, the root of improvisation is as a communication-based art form. That immediately lends itself to dialogue, building relationships, focus, and concentration and listening intensely, including some other older types of methodologies for being present and in the moment.”

In this TD at Work, we will pull from the world of improv and more traditional organizational development sources to provide:

- a look at the three levels of listening
- a deeper understanding of why listening is hard
- examples of what great listening looks like
- ways to exercise and strengthen your awareness and empathy muscles.

TO CUT THROUGH THE CONSTANT DRUMBEAT OF NOISE AND EXTRACT WHAT’S IMPORTANT, SKILLED AND CAREFUL LISTENING IS NEEDED.

IMPROVISATION AND LISTENING

What is improv? Put simply, improvisation, or “improv,” is the art of creating in the moment, using only what is at hand. In its traditional form as a type of comedic performance, improvisers collaboratively make up scenes, songs, and stories—sometimes entire plays—on the spot, sometimes based on audience suggestions. You can imagine the pressure to delight an audience with no planning or opportunity to go back, edit, or revise.

This requirement to create with what exists in the moment without a script is what makes improv a lot like real life. Because we are improvising all the time in the workplace, we can apply the principles, philosophies, and techniques of the improviser to become more effective at “performing” on the job.

The most important, most foundational skill of great improvisers is not what the audience might first guess. It is not the ability to be clever or funny or even quick on one’s feet. It is actually the ability to receive. You must be open to receiving; you must listen.

Yes, great improvisers come up with creative ideas, have a wide range of characters they can play, understand narrative, and tell jokes. But none of that delights audiences if it is not connected to the moment. What is magical about good improv is that it builds with the “offers”—that is, the additional information or conversation—presented by one’s partners.

Before you can build on what your partner is giving you, you must notice it. You must understand it. You must accept it.
Listen Up!

Improv and the Workplace

It is probably not news to you that listening is important in the workplace. Keen listening and awareness skills are essential to organizational success in today's ever-changing, information-glutted, multicultural global environments. Idea generation, communication, and collaboration all depend on the individual's and the group's ability to listen and understand.

We may talk a great deal about listening in our organizations, but we can't always figure out how to exercise our listening "muscles." The good news is that improvisers have developed a huge body of tools and exercises to help us do just that.

Leaders and Improv Skills

People follow you when they feel seen, heard, and understood. A leader may have the most brilliant idea in the world, but if she cannot connect to the needs and concerns of her stakeholders, she will have no followers.

Like good leadership, improv is not about being clever, caustic, or competitive. It isn't a platform for showboating. It's not about me, it's about us.

When employees describe great leaders, they will use terms like "tough but fair," "has my back," "approachable," and "a real person." Such leaders make their employees feel seen and heard. When people are seen and heard, and know it, they feel better.

The Business News Daily article "10 Things All Great Bosses Do" lists such behaviors as showing empathy, making employees feel included, getting to know employees, being open to new ideas, and setting clear expectations and helping employees meet those expectations. These and other "great boss" behaviors link back to great listening skills.

THREE LEVELS OF LISTENING

As the American financier, philanthropist, and statesman Bernard M. Baruch has been quoted as saying, "Most of the successful people I've known are the ones who do more listening than talking." We know from our own experience that it feels like most people do more talking than listening.

When the person you're with isn't speaking, it often appears that he is waiting to speak. And indeed, that is the first level of listening.

• Listening 1.0. Speaking and waiting to speak. Most of us, unfortunately, spend the bulk of our time at this level. It’s where the worst improv happens. It also makes for poor communication in the office. Consider a meeting when someone has the floor, but there are two or three other individuals with their mouths already half open, waiting for the speaker to catch her breath so they can chime in with their own opinions.

• Listening 2.0. Listening for ammunition. That is, making mental notes to refute what is being said. This is a debate mentality. It also usually makes bad improv. In the workplace, this may happen when people from different teams are in the same conference room. One person from the marketing team is speaking; meanwhile, a person from the
product development team is scratching
down notes—either on paper or mentally—
in opposition to what is being said by the
marketing team member.

• Listening 3.0. Listening to understand,
connect, and create. You’re not listening
to debate or refute, but to support your
scene partner (or, in business, your direct
report or client). At this level, you and your
conversation partners are on the same side.

What does great listening—listening at the
3.0 level—look like? Improvisers only have one
resource to make great theater happen in the
moment: their scene partner. As a result, they
learn to listen very carefully to that partner and
ask themselves how they can make that partner
look good. If both players in a scene do that, they
both end up looking great!

A great improviser—that is, a great listener:
• is fully attentive
• is curious about what his scene partner is
saying—not just about the facts, but about
what the scene partner cares about
• asks questions based on that curiosity and
stays focused on the answer
• is patient.

WHY IS LISTENING
SO HARD?

Here’s the bad news: We think we know more, and
perceive more accurately, than we really do.

Francis Crick, the co-discoverer of DNA, is
thought to have said, referencing his later work in
neurobiology, that 80 percent of what we “know”
to be true, we make up. In other words, we are
terrible at receiving information as it actually
comes to us. Instead, we make up most of what we
“perceive,” basing our made-up world on memory.

To develop our listening skills, we need to
get better at clarifying and confirming what
someone is saying, rather than assuming that we
understand and making up information. We need
to spot the danger that waits for us at every turn
as it relates to our lack of listening capabilities.

We need to be aware of these facts:
• Our brains process data into meaning by
making up stories. This can be useful—but it
also can be dangerous.
• Our story-building nature causes us to jump
to conclusions and treat those conclusions
as fact. We often are totally unaware that
we jumped to those conclusions because we
can’t see our own blind spots. And thus, the
story becomes fact in our minds.

A WANDERING MIND

Has this ever happened to you? You are listening to a presentation. For a few seconds, you give the speaker 100 percent of
your attention. Then, the speaker says “we offer blanket coverage ...” This triggers an association and you go into your head,
to a story that’s important to you. Up there in your “fortress of solitude”—your brain—you say, “Shucks! I was supposed to
get the sheets and linens ready for this weekend’s company! I’ll have to take them to the commercial laundry first thing in
the morning.”

Whoops! You’ve flown far away from that presentation you are supposed to be listening to. At super speed, you go back
to the speaker. But now, you can’t get back to 100 percent attention, because you have to make up another story, that is, what
you missed while you were “away.” You get back to the speaker’s point ... sort of. But then the speaker says “We see the glass as
half full ...” Boom. Back to your fortress of solitude! “And the wine for dinner. Darn it!” Quick as a flash, you realize—zap! Back to
the speaker, but now it’s even harder ... and so it goes. Even though you are trying to listen, you miss out on many of the most
important points of the presentation.

Let’s call these moments of inattention associative story time. We associate the here and now with an ongoing story from
our memory. These moments are not always bad, but they can make it very hard to stay in the here and now. When we need to
stay focused, they can be our Achilles heel.