

LISTEN UP!

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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 and 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.

LEARNING TO DRIVE

Unfortunately, knowing that listening is important doesn't make us good at it, any more than knowing a steering wheel is a vital part of a car makes us good drivers. To get better at listening, we need to work through the awkward phase of learning and practicing many new skills that we must use all at once.

When driving a car, we need to check the mirror, look left, look right, be aware of signs, and know where the pedals are. Remember how daunting that seemed when you were learning to drive?

Similarly, there are a host of skills we need to learn to become an accomplished listener. These will—at some point in the future—become second nature.

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. Even 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.

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