

Extreme Listening

by Claire Pedrick



Claire Pedrick

In this stressful time, it is not easy to quieten down and listen to our colleagues at work, or to ourselves, or even to God. The consequences of not listening are further stress and a flight to ‘basic needs’. The answer is to listen to hear, not to listen to respond.

The economy is making a noise. Plenty of noise if you believe the headlines. A newspaper hoarding this morning read: City to lose 2000 jobs. House prices down £30 000. In October there seemed to be more noise every day. Black Monday moved from a ten yearly event to a daily fact. Robert Peston was on the BBC 24/7.

In this climate it is tempting to react by shifting to survival mode. We need to make more money, keep what we have safe, protect our teams, nurture our customers and save ourselves. At a middle management level, pushiness seems to be valued although it can lead to self-destruction. In a bid to survive, we can lose the ability to listen – to anything. In a culture of diversity where many managers are already afraid to listen and acknowledge the stories of their teams through fear of saying the

wrong thing, the workplace can become a place full of people playing their own story in their own heads with all the risks that involves of inventing myths and causing conflict and division.

The cost of not being listened to can force employees inside their own heads where their list of priorities and things to do is joined by the clamour of uncertainty, survivor guilt, ideas, worries, plans and fears. That fullness means that there is no longer any space to listen to themselves either. It can also have physical manifestations through stress and anxiety. This is not new. Jesus told Martha, who was ‘worried and distracted by many things’, to slow down and listen (Luke 10: 38-42). If the minds of the workforce are being slowed down by a lack of

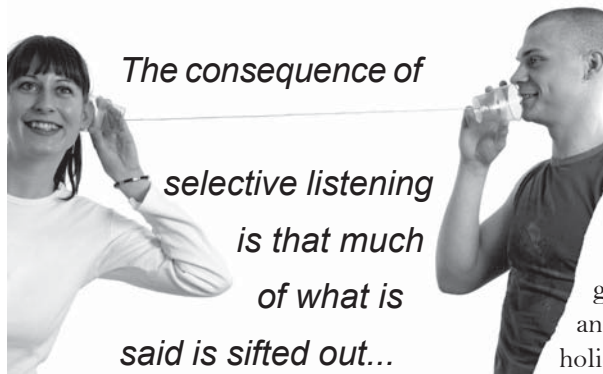
listening, what effect is that having on the economy? This is a self-perpetuating problem. If I’m not being listened to and have stopped listening to myself, and to God, then I am also losing the ability to listen to others. No wonder James encouraged the twelve tribes across the nations to be ‘quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry’ (James 1: 18-20).

I’ve been working in the NHS this week training managers to listen



Martha distracted, Mary listening
Minerva Teichert, *Jesus at the home of Mary and Martha*, 1935

and ask questions. As in all workplaces, it's an environment full of highly trained listeners. Look around your building and you'll find a plethora of outstandingly good listeners. Doctors are trained to listen for diagnosis, lawyers to listen for evidence – and never to ask how. If you're in finance you will know how to listen to a balance sheet. At a party, you're likely to be listening to see how what your companion is saying fits with your story and deciding what to say next! Managers and leaders listen in order to quickly find solutions to their staff's problems, and then after work



The consequence of selective listening is that much of what is said is sifted out...

listen to the family whilst thinking of something else. We all listen through our own frame of reference. The consequence of selective listening is that much of what is said is sifted out; we are hearing an incomplete story and the power of being fully heard is lost.

Extreme listening is a gift. Jeremy Clare of 'Whatever Next...?' talks about giving people a good listening to. Listening is hugely powerful and can allow people to transform their attitude to what is going on around them. Yesterday I

observed a group of health workers learning to listen to each other. You could see something happening in the room, and all of them came to a new insight on a work situation by being listened to and by having their need to have a safe space to talk respected. No advice, no stories. Just listening. That level of conversation allows us space to think and to enter new ideas and understandings. It only truly comes when our listener is fully engaged and not working their next question or comment in the back of their mind.

The Skill and Practice of Listening

Extreme listening is a skill which needs to be practiced. It looks very simple. It sounds simple. And it takes a great deal of skill and practice. On holiday in the lakes of

New Hampshire, our friends kept on pointing out the cry of the loons on the lake. It took several days sitting by the water to learn to pick out their sound from the sound of silence and of nature around. It was only when we paddled up to a loon in a kayak that we began to understand their sound. Once we'd learned to listen for them we were able to begin to hear them. Elijah had to learn a similar story when he was listening for God – knowing that He was going to pass by (1 Kings 19: 11-13). He listened through rushing wind, a massive earthquake and a fire

before he heard God's voice in a whisper.

In crisis mode, the temptation is to listen to what Abraham Maslow would define as low level needs. "My job has been made redundant. I need to find another as quickly as possible in order to keep up the mortgage and credit card repayments." Stephen Covey would call this listening to the urgent and important. Yet if we actually take the time to really listen we can begin to focus on the important and not urgent. And as we do this, we begin to focus on much higher level needs. Is this crisis, in fact, an opportunity to ask: 'What do I really want to do with the rest of my life?'

As Christians, we have a particular gift to bring to the workplace. Like others, we listen through our own world view and frame of reference, but if we take seriously Jesus' commandment to love God and love our neighbour as ourselves, our world view and the story through which we listen is about community and not just about the individual. The Christian view is that as a community we have a corporate responsibility to give consideration to the needs of others ('freely give' - Matthew 10:8), and in our listening we perceive the individual as part of a community. Our story is also part of God's story which gives us a connection through history to a much bigger picture. The 'Saving History' story centres on Jesus' coming to redeem the world within a historical context, and this history continues

through the crises and successes, booms and busts, of the many generations who have found faith in Jesus within their history. This can be counter-cultural in a workplace where my needs and the needs of my family come first. Perhaps this can put in context the billions of pounds lost by the banks in 2008.

If we are going to listen even more effectively to ourselves, to others and to God, it will take practice. It's not about giving a good performance. Listening well is about paying attention and having a good process where someone can have the space and encouragement to say what they may not even know they are thinking without judgement or interruption.

To listen extremely to others, you will need to set aside time and place. For some people a silent environment is important. For others, simply a dedicated place – even in a corridor – is enough. I listened to a manager for a couple of years once every couple of months – in a coffee shop. When he changed jobs and his new employer wasn't going to pay for coaching, he asked how he would survive without me! My role was to help him to listen to himself, not to make him dependent on me. He now regularly goes to a coffee shop where he meets me – hopefully not a cardboard cut-out! And he can listen to himself superbly. When we are listening to another, we need to learn to

give them the space they need and the silence they need to hear themselves. Try it. Try listening to someone else for just a minute. Listen without interruption and without playing another story, question or comment in your head. It is extremely simple and requires dedication and practice! How did it feel?

Listening to Ourselves – and God

Some of us need help **listening to ourselves**. If you don't know what you are thinking until you speak, and your mind is cluttered



Are we listening to ourselves and to God?

up with tasks, problems, hopes and fears, you may need to find someone to listen to you so that you can listen to yourself. People like this need to train their listener to be a companion and not a conversationalist or the dialogue can easily go off onto someone else's story

Extreme listening shifts us from listening to respond to listening to hear – ourselves, our customers, our colleagues, our managers and God. Drop a coin

into an empty swimming pool and it will be almost twenty minutes before you can see it at the bottom of the pool. Stilling the water takes time. So does stilling our minds to listen. Twenty minutes is a long time if you're not used to silence. And it's a great exercise if you want **to listen to God**. Quieten yourself down, acknowledge and set aside all the clutter that comes up in the silence. And wait.

One or two good questions can support our listening. Fran Peavey says: "Questioning breaks open the stagnant, hardened shells of the present, opening up options to be explored." Surely in today's climate that, in itself is a gift. Listening offers the opportunity for us to access long term solutions and not simply short term fixes. The gift of extreme listening can transform a situation including the current economic crisis.

What will be possible when we fully develop our listening muscles at work? The author of Ecclesiastes said there was 'a time to be silent and a time to speak' (Eccl.3:7). Surely we can add a time to listen. That is a gift. ■

Claire Pedrick is Director of 3D Coaching. She listens to people in organisations from the public sector, not-for-profits, FTSE 100s and the church. She also trains managers to listen more effectively to their teams. Her prayer for 3D Coaching is 'Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth - at work - as it is in heaven.' She is married to a scientist and they have two teenage daughters.