

By Indi Young

If you really want to draw out the best ideas from your colleagues or your direct reports, you'll need to practice deep listening. It's not the same as "interviewing." Listening is a skill that can be improved.



When you Listen, What Are You Thinking?

IMAGE

This heron knows that listening carefully will reward him with a meal.

“WHEN YOU ARE LISTENING, USUALLY YOU ARE WAITING FOR A PAUSE to say what you thought of in response.”

People will think for a second when they hear this phrase, then slowly acknowledge they're guilty. It's pretty common, and a little embarrassing. Who wants to be labeled “self-centered?”

Well, in most business cultures, people are rewarded for ideas, which grow from a person's own experience. That's self-centered, by definition. Yet the way we run working sessions or projects—even the chain of command within a company—is based on each person trying to contribute their ideas and tell others how things could be done. People tend not to listen deeply to others, especially outside their work group. This severely limits the perspectives that get represented in those new ideas.

I teach people listening skills for use in their work. Listening to the people you work with, and to the people you are trying to support with services and products,



is the most powerful path to smoother collaboration and innovation. Listening allows much deeper understanding of what others are trying to achieve, how their approach differs from your own, and how their thinking style changes based on context. Knowing these things gives you the power to make choices and plan for very clear opportunities.

When I teach listening skills, I begin with an emphasis on awareness: self-awareness and awareness of the types of things another person is saying. In the self-awareness category, I particularly want to help people notice the volume of their inner thinking and whether it drowns out the meaning of what another person is saying.

Notice your reactions

It's human to have emotions. You can't stop them from coming, just like you can't stop the weather. But you can be prepared and notice when you have a reaction to something you hear. Major or minor, channel your reaction away. If you ignore it and let it "rain" all over you, it will distract you from hearing what another person is saying.

CLEAR YOUR MIND OF QUESTIONS

Instead of probing, the way you might in an interview, stop thinking of what you would like to know. Don't think of yourself. Don't demonstrate what a well-versed conversationalist you are. Let go of your vast experience in whatever topic is mentioned. Bring a beginner's mind, because every single thing this other person is trying to communicate is new to you—because it is coming from their perspective. Let them tell you.

FOLLOW WITH RAPT ATTENTION

If you become skilled in the above items, your mind will be freed to follow another person's thinking. You'll be able to focus all your attention on what they are trying to communicate, making sure you understand what they mean with a few clarifying questions or micro-reflections. You will never choose a new subject to discuss; instead you'll keep to the topics the other person brings up. There is rich depth here. Understanding their perspective at depth will be a revelation to you, in many ways.

UNDERSTAND THE MECHANISMS OF EMPATHY

There are two kinds of empathy that are used in listening: "affective" and "cognitive." Both are useful to a deep listening approach.

Affective empathy (also called "empathic listening") is key to helping peers, direct reports, stakeholders, friends, and family through their emotions by offering to share the "burden" of those emotions. Sharing with a person who is non-judgmental, who does not offer solutions, is really freeing. To use affective empathy:

- Recognize the other person is experiencing an emotion.

- Remind yourself that their emotion is valid for them. There is no “should” or “shouldn’t” involved.
- Offer them a connection by letting them know you’d like to listen to them without offering solutions or judgments.
- Listen. Stay away from judgment.

Cognitive empathy is key to supporting people in better ways. It’s designed to reveal their thinking style and to access a greater breadth of thinking styles. Cognitive empathy is where we find the seeds for true innovation and support. To use cognitive empathy:

- Try to recognize surface concepts: preferences, opinions, explanations, statements of fact, generalizations. When you hear a surface concept, there is depth and history behind it that you want to uncover. Surface concepts do not allow you to develop cognitive empathy.
- Listen deeply, making sure you understand how the other person’s inner thinking works. To understand at depth, you need to encourage the other person to tell you their inner thought process, reactions, and guiding principles.

Listening is different from interviewing

When I help clients learn to listen, I often face preconceived notions about what a formal process of listening looks like. People think it involves work up front, thinking of goals and what questions to ask. I try to help people let go of these notions. While they are fine in specific contexts, like user research or job interviews, they get in the way of truly hearing someone.

Commonly people want an example of what it means to “go deep.” I use a demo and several exercises to help people tune in to their own informal human curiosity. The most common challenge I find is the expectation that a listening session will explicitly answer the questions that the listener has in mind. A listening session is different in that nothing will be answered explicitly... but it may get referenced along the way by a speaker who has something to say about it. You are not allowed to bring up concepts that the speaker has not already mentioned. Before learning how to listen well, people will not stop and dig in

INTERVIEWING TO ANSWER SPECIFIC HYPOTHESES



FIGURE 1

The listener on the right, in orange, is used to a more formal interview approach. This listener is thinking about their own goals—there is no “stepping into the shoes” of the speaker (on the left, in blue).



Indi Young is a speaker, writer, and UX researcher. She empowers makers to know their “problem space” and create inspired product designs through empathy and deep understanding. Young is the author of two books, *Mental Models* and *Practical Empathy*, and has spoken at more than 40 conferences across the globe. Her online courses,

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DEVELOPING EMPATHY TO UNDERSTAND DEEPLY

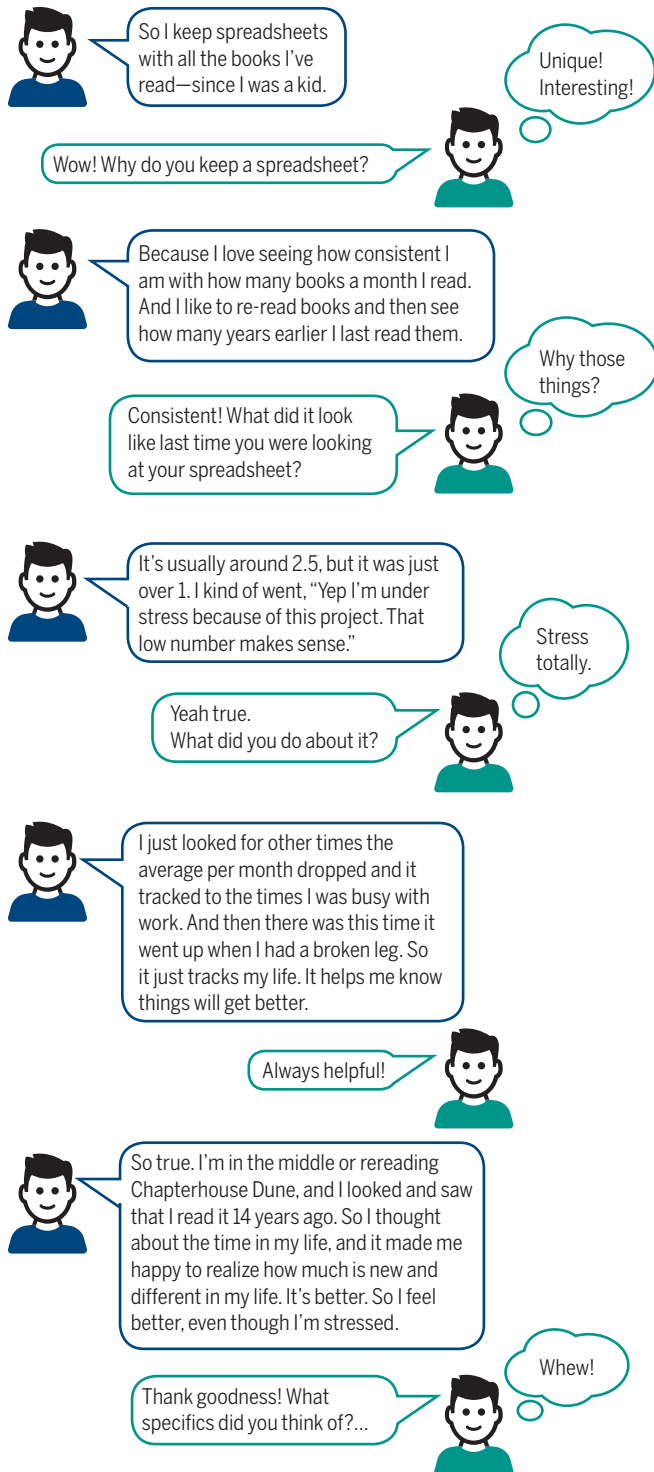


FIGURE 2

The process of developing cognitive empathy, while also being open to emotional empathy. The listener (on the right, in green) is feeling curious about what the speaker (on the left, in blue) is saying and also feeling a bit of what they're feeling.

to topics that sound rich to them because they assume they know what the speaker means. When you tune in to your human curiosity, whenever anything surface-level pings your curiosity, ask more about it. For example, “I lost 70 pounds, bought a bike, and turned a spare bedroom into a home gym” by itself is just a statement of fact. However, if you tug gently with a few questions, you can find out why the speaker decided to create a home gym, what past events influenced the decision, why they decided on a bike and where that idea came from, what thinking they did to create a workout plan, and everything (motivation and momentum, heart and soul) that went into losing 70 pounds. These are rich fields. You can't develop cognitive empathy by hearing only surface-level concepts—you have to tug at them and find out what the roots are. Figures 1 and 2 offer some examples.

In a listening session, your job is to follow the other person. When they are speaking at the surface level, you notice explanations and generalizations that hint at deeper inner thinking and the history behind that thinking. You hint back that you're interested in learning more about that at depth. The speaker feels supported by you. You are filled only with curiosity about what is said. The rest of the world and your goals do not intrude. You can relax now and let them tell you their own thought process as they pursued the purpose you are studying. ■