

CENTRE FOR COACHING  
IN ORGANISATIONS

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# The 5<sup>th</sup> way to listen

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*"We think we listen, but very rarely do we listen with real understanding, true empathy. Yet listening, of this very special kind, is one of the most potent forces for change that I know."*

Carl Rogers

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In August 2020 we published a White Paper called 'Learning to Listen'. In that paper we considered the business case for listening and how we can all help organisations become better at listening. In the Paper we described the 'Listening Model', four ways to listen. The purpose of the Model is to enable people to listen more purposefully and therefore more effectively in any given scenario. In this Paper we explore a fifth way of listening. The fifth way of listening is based on theories of change that acknowledge the social nature of meaning making, including the process through which we all decide who we are and who we want to be.

## Listening matters

Last year CCO published a White Paper in which we espoused the importance of listening. We outlined evidence suggesting that listening is a critical leadership capability<sup>i</sup>. But although few people would argue that listening is important, few people seem to be good at it - poor listening has been identified as the number one derailer in corporate Australia<sup>ii</sup>. This is partly because we don't have great language to talk about how we listen. In some organisations people talk about 'active listening', a term coined by Carl Rogers. He defined active listening as a form of listening in which the listener i) fully understands and appreciates the emotions of the speaker, ii) can set aside their own perspective, iii) is open and transparent about their own thoughts and feelings, iv) is able to accept the speaker for who they are and enter the other person's world 'without prejudice'. These are quite specific (and very demanding) aspects of listening, but the term 'active listening' now usually reflects a less ambitious form of listening, one in which the listener is just expending some degree of effort to understand what the other person may be trying to say.

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*The term ‘active listening’ appears to have evolved in many quarters into something relatively undemanding and unambitious.*

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Jo Tyler searched the term ‘active listening’ on Google and found most definitions to be highly transactional<sup>iii</sup>. For example, one definition said:

*“... active listening is certainly not complex. Listeners need only restate, in their own language, their impression of the expression of the sender.”*

To restate what someone else says doesn’t necessarily imply that the listener fully understands and appreciates the emotions of the speaker, is able to set aside their own perspective, is open and transparent about their own thoughts and feelings, is able to accept the speaker for who they are, or knows how to enter the other person’s world ‘without prejudice’. The term ‘active listening’ appears to have evolved in many quarters into something relatively undemanding and unambitious.

### **Four ways to listen**

In our last White Paper on listening, we described the ‘Listening Model’. The Listening Model suggests that there are four ways in which we can choose to listen<sup>iv</sup>. None of these are right, none are wrong; the model invites us to choose how to listen in any given scenario – to be purposeful in our listening.

#### **Listening to noise**

When we listen to **noise**, we are listening to see if others are speaking. We are not listening to what they are saying, we are just listening for whether or not they are speaking so we can jump in with what we have to say, without being seen to interrupt. We are listening *intently*, because we don’t want to be seen as being rude. We are listening intently to the tone of the person speaking and the pace at which they are speaking, trying to anticipate when we can step in and say our bit. We are listening intently to the thoughts in our head, saying things like ‘*when will she be quiet!*’ and ‘*would he mind if I interrupted now?*’ This is sometimes an effective way to listen, for example when my sole purpose is to convey a message without offending rules of social etiquette. Often it is not.

#### **Listening to content**

Listening for content is what most of us do, most of the time. When we listen for **content**, we are listening to the words and adding our own meaning to those words, wittingly or not. We are anticipating what we think others will say and assuming we understand without checking in to make sure. When we listen only for content, we are liable to making assumptions and jumping to conclusions.

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*When we listen for identity, we are listening for the person. We may have already understood what they are trying to say, but that doesn't mean we have fully understood the other person.*

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For example, when my friend says, *'I hope the weather works out this weekend,'* I assume she wants the sun to shine so she can go to the beach. Actually, she wants it to rain because the plants are dying in her backyard. When my colleague says *'I wish my manager would coach me more often'* I assume she wishes her manager would encourage her to think through issues for herself. In fact, she wishes her manager would tell her what to do because she hates making decisions herself.

When we listen to content, we may again be listening *intently*. We can play back every word the other person said. We are still listening intently also to the voices in our head, the voices assuring us they know what the other person is trying to say. We're working through issues, looking for solutions, quickly sifting through what others are saying – does it make sense? – does it not make sense? – making lots of assumptions along the way. Again, don't dismiss the value of this form of listening. If I'm in a hurry, working with people who I know well, when the decisions we are making are low value, low risk, then this form of listening may be perfectly appropriate. But whilst both these forms of listening, listening for noise and listening for content, may be effortful – neither constitute what Rogers meant by 'active listening'.

### **Listening to intention**

When we listen for **intention**, we make a conscious effort to understand what the other person is trying to say. This isn't easy. As Krishnamurti, an Indian philosopher once said:

*"If we try to listen we find it extraordinarily difficult, because we are always projecting our opinions and ideas, our prejudices, our background, our inclinations, our impulses; when they dominate we hardly listen at all to what is being said."*

When we are listening for intention, we are constantly checking in. Not because we have been taught to paraphrase, but because we are curious; we want to know if we have really understood what the other person is trying to say. If we are truly seeking to understand the other person then the voice in our head will be saying things like *'do I really get it?'* and *'does that mean what I think it means?'* We will find ourselves asking questions without thinking about it, seeking to clarify and understand. We will find ourselves reflecting and summarising. When we listen for intention we don't sit passively – we engage. Now we are starting to listen 'actively'.

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*When listening for identity I may get curious as to why the other person looks at the world the way they do as well as how they look at the world the way they do. I might start thinking more 'systemically', but I might not.*

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### **Listening to identity**

When we listen for **identity**, we are listening for the person. We may have already understood what they are trying to say, but that doesn't mean we have fully understood the other person. It doesn't mean we have set aside our own perspective, or that we have succeeded in accepting the speaker for who they are. When we listen for identity we seek to understand the person – who is this person? What are we learning about their values, motivations and life experiences? By listening for identity we get to know people better.

To listen for identity requires energy. It requires tuning out of content, resisting the temptation to attend only to the matter at hand. It requires that I tune into disagreement, because through understanding our points of disagreement we can develop a better understanding of each other. How often do we do that though? – tune into disagreement rather than get sucked into defending our view or debating?

We may not have enough energy, or time, to be listening to identity all the time. In which case, we again need to be purposeful. When do we choose to listen to identity? When is this useful? When is it essential?

### **The 5<sup>th</sup> way of listening – listening to influence**

These four ways of listening offer us a language through which we can be much more specific as to how we choose to listen in any given situation. Listening to intention and identity both encourage us to pay attention to the emotions of the speaker. Listening to identity encourages us to explore the world through a different worldview, someone else's perspective. It encourages us to notice our own thoughts and feelings in contrast to the other person's thoughts and feelings.

However, all these forms of listening encourage us to think individualistically, to regard others as autonomous and discrete. When listening for identity I *may* get curious as to *why* the other person looks at the world the way they do as well as *how* they look at the world the way they do. I *might* start thinking more 'systemically', but I might not. If I think strongly in terms of individual psychology, I may get curious about the other person in terms of constructs like 'personality', constructs that position the individual as a reflection of their genes, a bounded entity oblivious to their experience of others. By contrast, some systemic perspectives, in particular those emerging from theories of complex adaptive systems, explicitly recognise the role of interaction and relationship in shaping change, including individual change. Through this lens

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leaders cannot control change because change is constant and emergent. Change emerges from local interaction. Change cannot be imposed from above. Leaders cannot seek to control change therefore, but they can seek to influence change, through engaging in purposeful dialogue<sup>ivv</sup>. Through this lens sense-making is a social process. We make meaning together. We don't only make meaning of external events, but we also make meaning of internal events – who we are as people. Consider the following story ...

*Rachel considered herself to be an energetic individual, unafraid to express her views in public, and determined to advocate for the people who worked on her team. She regarded herself as a positive force and an agent for change. She came into conflict with people from time to time, an inevitable consequence of her forceful leadership style – she told herself. This story she told about herself was reinforced by the people with who she worked. Her direct reports commended her cut-through style. Her CEO constantly encouraged her to get her message out. Her husband shared a similar philosophy of life. He commended her when she was forthright, and discouraged her from spending too much time thinking about what she should say or do. Rachel thought of herself as a strong person, without perhaps appreciating the extent to which her approach to leadership was co-created with others.*

*Then one day a new CEO came on board. He appointed new leaders and allowed others to leave. The new CEO seemed less interested in what Rachel had to say and showed less interest in her career than had the previous CEO. One day Rachel determined to find out what the new CEO thought of her. She arranged a meeting at which the new CEO gave her some surprising feedback. He told her that she was a polarising figure – some people loved her, others found her style intimidating and uncompromising. He said that she had probably got about as far as she would get in the organisation and that if she wanted to advance further, she might want to move elsewhere.*

*Rachel was perplexed and angry. So was her partner and so were some of her team. She went out and sought more feedback. Some of those people expressed sympathy, but a few said that whilst they appreciated her capacity to bulldoze through obstacles, they found her hard to approach at times, impossible to talk to if they didn't agree with her agenda. Rachel felt torn; torn between the views of her partner and loyal team members, and the views of the new CEO and various other people who clearly felt the same way. What sense should she make of it all? She went out and talked to*

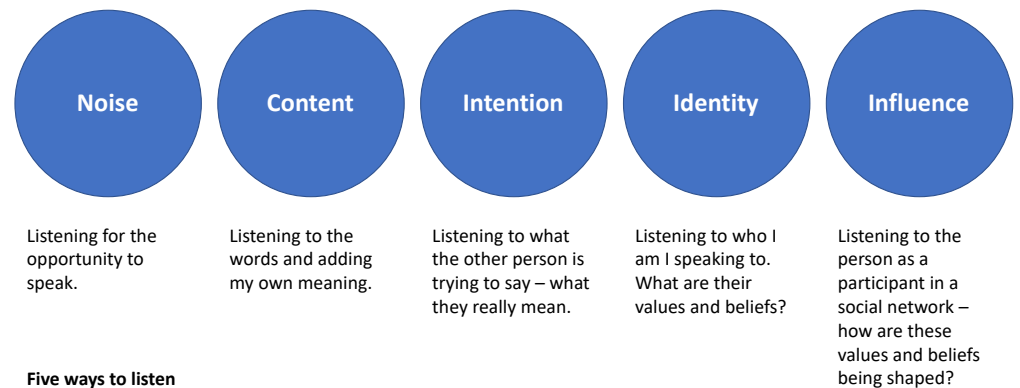
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*In seeking to understand others, to what extent am I listening to the person as a participant in a broad social network. To what extent am I trying to tune into the impact of others on the identity of the person with whom I am interacting?*

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*people she trusted, being careful to include people who she didn't work with closely, and people who had a quieter style. As she did so she came to realise that some people regarded her as a bit of a bully and questioned her capacity to empathise and understand what other were thinking. The story Rachel told herself, about herself, evolved and shifted.*

The fifth way of **listening** is based on the idea that who we are (our identity) is fluid and dynamic and is constantly being shaped through our interactions with others. We can think of this 'systemically' if we like, but we ought to be clear what we mean by 'systemic'. A systemic perspective encourages us to think more broadly about events, to consider the influence of factors outside our immediate line of sight. But a systemic perspective may also direct us to thinking about what is going on too simply<sup>vi</sup>. There is clearly a value in a systemic perspective if it encourages us to notice the social nature of change. But proponents of systemic thinking often talk in terms of sub-systems and boundaries. They encourage us to notice what is happening in our teams and our function and our organization as if these were real entities. Such a philosophy may lead us to over-privilege the extent to which we acknowledge the impact of some people with whom we interact, and underestimate the impact of others – our friends, our relatives, the man who serves me coffee every day. It may be more useful to put aside talk of systems and think simply – with whom do I interact? - directly and indirectly, including the books I read, the podcasts I listen to and the media.



As a leader and as a coach, it may help me to be more useful and impactful if I listen through this lens. In seeking to understand others, to what extent am I listening to the person as a participant in a broad social network? To what extent am I trying to tune into the impact of others on the identity of the person with whom I am interacting? As a coach this perspective may help me ask new questions, questions that may result in my coachee stopping to

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*If the way people think and behave is shaped by their experience of others, then to understand others requires us to be curious as to the nature of those interactions.*

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consider events from a new and different perspective. Through this fifth way of listening, I am not only seeking to understand – who is this person? – but who is this person as one manifestation of a broader set of conversations happening across a wide social network? My questions may elicit a new understanding in the coachee as to how change works, what influencing means, who I am as a person, and how I might become someone different.

## **Conclusions**

As the world becomes more complex and dynamic, we need to talk more about what we mean by listening. Many definitions are too vague or too transactional. In our last White Paper we said that to be an extraordinary listener is to be both more self-aware and purposeful. In this Paper we add a new dimension to the Listening Model – the capacity of the leader and coach to become more aware of the social networks in which they operate, and the ways in which our identities and behaviours are shaped by our participation in those networks. If the way people think and behave is shaped by their experience of others, then to understand others requires us to be curious as to the nature of those interactions.

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## **Notes & Acknowledgments**

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