



## The Three Levels of Listening

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“When people talk, listen completely. Most people never listen.” Ernest Hemingway

**Have you ever talked with someone who was so present with you that it unnerved you?** Someone whose full attention was locked on you, their focus so completely yours it made you feel as if you were the only person in the world? Someone who made you feel really seen, and really heard, in a way that was both wonderful and a little unsettling?

**If you have, then you’ve been in the presence of a skilled listener.**

**Listening is a skill that seems much easier to do than it actually is. Most people think they are good listeners; but few of us really are.** Consider: How many times in your life have you really felt fully seen and heard by someone else? It’s a rare gift. Frankly, I think most of us are starving for it on a daily basis. We want someone to really listen to us.

**Not surprisingly, the skill of listening is essential to good leadership. Leaders who don’t listen well, don’t lead well.** After all, how long will someone follow your lead if they never feel their voice is heard?

**But what is it to listen well? How do you do it?**

**In my coaching, I’ve found it helpful to divide listening into three different categories, and have leaders focus on developing each as a skill unto itself. I call them the 3 Levels of Listening.**

**Listening Level 1—I also call this “Listening to ME.”** Level 1 listening involves simply noticing everything that’s going on inside you during a conversation. How is the conversation affecting you? What thoughts or feelings are you having in the midst of it? What opinions or reactions are provoked in you as you converse? What are you chomping at the bit to say next? Level 1 includes even random thoughts about how hungry you feel right now or what you’re going to do later tonight. As you might expect, anytime you’re absorbed in Level 1 listening in a conversation, the exchange will typically not be very powerful for the other person. It may be powerful for you, but not so much for them.

That said, Level 1 listening is vitally important for leaders, as it builds self-awareness and helps leaders avoid reacting without forethought to people or situations that trigger them. But if this is the only kind of listening you’re doing in a conversation, others will often leave frustrated or disappointed, feeling neither seen nor heard.

**Listening Level 2—I also call this “Listening to YOU.”** Level 2 listening involves focusing your full attention *100 percent* on the other person. In Level 2,

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you practice shining a single spotlight of attention on the other person so that they are the only thing you see. It's the meticulous awareness of what they are saying and how they are saying it, as well as noticing all their nonverbal cues: where they're looking, their facial expression, the way they're holding themselves, even how they are breathing. It is the skill of being fully absorbed by the person in front of you, to the exclusion of all other things, including anything in Level 1. This doesn't mean that Level 1 thoughts don't come into your awareness. Of course, they do! Rather, it means *managing* your Level 1 thoughts and reactions by quietly noting them and quickly setting them aside to keep your focus and curiosity on the other person.

Level 2 listening is a very *present* kind of listening. In Level 2, you're never thinking ahead to what you want to say next or what you're going to ask. You stay with the person in this present moment, and trust that the conversation will take on a powerful flow of its own without you having to control it in one direction or another. This requires faith (that you'll have something to say when it's your turn to speak), humility (letting go of the need to look or sound smart or to have the right answer), and practice.

**Listening Level 3—I also call this “Listening to US.”** Level 3 listening is the practice of noticing what's happening in the space between you and the person or group you're talking with. It involves noticing the vibe of the conversation, the ebb and flow of the relational connection between you, and even the background noise that's present in the dynamic as you talk. Is there tension in the air? Is the conversation flat, or full of resonance? What are the primary emotions hanging in space between us? What's hanging out there in the space between us that's not being said?

Many times, Level 3 is also the space where you're likely to notice the Spirit of God and sense His leading. As Jesus said, “For where two or three are gathered in my Name, there I am in their midst.” Level 3 is where intuition and insight often live. It's where new awareness often first shows up, and the possibility for profound change. If you think about it, it makes sense that Level 3 is often the most powerful kind of listening a leader can employ because the transformational potential of any conversation is typically not just about what's happening in me or what's happening in you; rather, it's about what's happening in us.

**Once you know the three levels, incorporating them into your life is simply a matter of practice.** I often have leaders practice intentionally “changing the channel” of their listening in different conversations throughout the day, and notice the result. Which conversations were most powerful? Which ones were most effective at finding solutions or moving a project forward? Which conversations produced the deepest sense of connection and teamwork? In time leaders learn to employ the 3 Levels of listening in ways that are both strategic and transformational, opening their leadership to greater learning, creativity and deeper connection.