

The Awesome Power of Listening

How to Stand Out in the Crowd and Build Healthy Relationships

By John Kuypers

If relationships are paramount to your success, then listening more effectively is an untapped opportunity. In contrast to the thousands of courses that exist on getting others to listen to you, there are few courses on how to *receive* another person's message. For that reason, learning to be a powerful listener can dramatically impact your career and personal success, for the simple reason that so few people are skilled at it.

I first developed my listening skills with my two-year old son, Jared, who proved to be an excellent teacher. I would take him to church, for example, and he would suddenly cry out in a loud voice, "Daddy! I want to go home now!" While this brought understanding smiles from the entire congregation, I found that if I tried to "talk" him out of wanting to go home, he would get even more insistent and more emotional. Naturally, I would begin to feel uncomfortable, and even embarrassed at not being able to control his noisy, intrusive behavior.

At that time, I was on a personal journey. I was learning how to live more fully in the present, true to myself without being emotionally run over by the external events happening around me. I embraced the idea that other people's emotional reactions to my words and deeds were about them, not about me. This gave me the courage to consider changing my reaction to Jared. Instead of trying to talk him out of wanting to go home, I began to stay with his wants and his emotions. I did this by *mirroring* his words back to him, using the exact same tone of voice that he was using, only more quietly.

"You want to go home now," I responded to his initial outcry.

"Yeah, let's go home, right now!"

"You want to go home, right now!"

He piped right back. "Let's go home, Daddy."

I waited longer this time before responding. "You want to go home, don't you Jared?"

Within four to five times of mirroring him like that, he would settle down without any direct "response" by me to his demands. He would let go and start focusing on something else, like watching the baby in the row behind us.

When Jared turned three, this no longer did the trick by itself. Even if I mirrored him, he would dial up his anger and his crying, though mirroring always seemed to reduce the intensity of his feelings. I began to add a second step in how I listened to him in those moments. I began to deeply *empathize* with him.

"You're angry," I would say.

"Yeah, I'm mad! You're not getting me something to eat!"

"I'd feel angry too, if I was really hungry and no one would give me something to eat," I soothed back to him.

"So then get me something to eat!" he would exclaim in exasperation.

I would immediately mirror that. "You want me to get you something to eat."

"Dad! I'm really hungry, so get it!"

This might happen several times, back and forth.

Finally, I would add a third step. I would *assert* myself.

"I know you are hungry and that you feel upset about it, but I am not going to get you something to eat."

Then I would *do* what I said I would do, which in this case was to do nothing.

Amazingly, he would accept my response almost every time. He felt heard by me. He felt understood by me. With those two needs met, he became receptive to hearing and accepting my response. Importantly, I owned my response. I did not attempt to say that I can't get it, that I was in the middle of a church service and that I had no food in the car. Blaming the lack of food for those reasons would simply move the argument to whether I could leave the church, go to the store and get some food. Those arguments would be valid, so it was crucial that I took the hit for disappointing him on my own two shoulders. "I don't want to leave and get food for you." My choice. My decision.

I was role-modeling for Jared a concept that I now call *Listening in the Present*. This is a type of active listening that is more structured than the way I learned it in my Organizational Behaviour classes in business school. *Listening in the Present* works when a listener is capable of being fully present with another person. The listener must be capable of letting go of their own wants and desires. They must step fully and completely into the shoes of the speaker without judging them. This is a tall order for most of us.

I work with business managers, senior executives, and sales people. I work with people on their personal relationships. I even work with people in the caregiving business such as caregivers for the sick and the demented. I have also been a client with a number of therapists as well, people trained to listen empathetically. Few people are able to stay fully present with another person. Sooner or later, all of us want to fix, explain, re-direct or nudge the speaker towards an answer. In that moment, we are no longer present with that person. Instead, the conversation has become about us, and the other is no longer feeling heard or understood.

When I teach this subject in seminars, I illustrate this point by asking one of my students, "How are you?" They always respond, "I'm fine. How are you?" I stop the conversation and ask the class, "Did she listen to me?"

"Sure she did," they respond.

"Really?" I ask. "Who was her response all about – me or her?"

They stop to think for a moment. "Well, she's being polite, answering your question and asking you about you. What's wrong with that?"

"There's nothing wrong with it. I'm not casting judgment here. I'm just asking, who is her response all about?"

Finally, someone sees my point. "It's about her."

"That's right," I say. "She is saying that *she's* fine. Her response is about her. She wants to know how *I* am. That's what *she* wants to know, not what *I* want to know."

They groan. I carry on. "I know it seems silly in such a simple, every day example but I want you to notice what the difference is between listening and responding."

Then I ask them, "What would she say if she was mirroring me?"

"How are you?" someone shouts out.

"Is that mirroring?" I ask.

"No." Someone else is starting to get it. "That's repeating."

"Exactly," I say. "I call that tape recording. That is not mirroring and it's actually quite offensive because it's like you are mocking the other person." Then someone comes up with the answer. "How am I?"

"Right on!" I exclaim with a smile. "You want to know how I am?" I say, playing it back to them one more time. "Do you really want to know how I am?" That always gets a laugh. Few of us really want to know the answer to that question. Therein lies the risk of effective listening. Someone might begin to tell you things you don't want to hear. They might begin to take up time that you don't want to share. You have your to do list that you want to get done, and listening might just get in the way. That's precisely why listening is so powerful. So few of us want to do it.

The first step in becoming an effective listener is to learn how to naturally mirror the words of another person back to them. Many people find this to be an uncomfortable experience at first. They often feel they are being condescending. Therein lies the magic in this first step to *Listening in the Present*. If you feel condescending about what the other person has just said, that judgment will emerge in your mirroring. If I felt judgmental about Jared speaking out loudly in church, there would have been no way that I could have effectively mirrored him. My tone of voice would have captured my annoyance at his intrusive and embarrassing behavior. His defenses would have shot up instantly, or he might have submitted to what I wanted because he would have sensed that he was in danger. I would have been blaming or shaming him into "being good."

We fail at mirroring because the situation has become about us. If I felt that I was failing as a parent in the eyes of the church congregation, I could not mirror effectively. However, if I was at peace with what other people thought of my parenting skills, then I could step into Jared's shoes, let go of my desire to quickly quiet him down, and be present with his words and feelings. Experience taught me that this would get me the

result I wanted far more quickly than trying to *force* him to be quiet.

In order to *Listen in the Present*, you must be able to completely let go of what you want, in order to be with the other person. You must follow their words, no matter where they go. You must be willing to stay with them for what can feel like an interminably long period of time, even when that is as little as two minutes.

Two minutes can seem like a lifetime if you are the one being accused. Yet you must stay with them anyway. Let's say your spouse lays this one on you.

"You make me so-o mad! You didn't do what you promised. You always screw up. If I could just depend on you, I wouldn't have to get mad at you so much!"

This is what I call a Red Light situation. It's hot! Yet, if you are able to stay present, you can mirror that back to them too. You don't need to reflect back every word. You might say, "You're saying that I make you mad, that I screw up and that you can't depend on me." Again, you have to be at peace with who you are and what you've done, in order to be able to go there. If you can, you will reap rewards that will blow your mind.

Suddenly, your relationships will elevate themselves to an entirely new plateau. Your clients, friends and family will feel heard. They will begin to trust you and open up to you. Core issues will get dealt with, rather than swept under the carpet to be left simmering in a resentful way. Anger will be toned down, and the true underlying issues will emerge, allowing both of you the opportunity to resolve them. Whether you do or not will depend on how well you are able to do the remaining three steps to *Listening in the Present*.

The Four Steps to Listening in the Present

1. Mirror – their words
2. Empathize – their feelings
3. Assert – your position
4. Do – what you said you would do.

When intense emotions like anger and fear emerge, you must develop the ability to be empathetic towards that person's feelings. You must genuinely

acknowledge how they feel and that you accept those feelings as their right. Doing so when you are the one being accused can seem nigh impossible. Yet it is possible, and this is when the awesome power of being fully present with them will continue to work for you. You can say, "Well, I can imagine that it must hurt a great deal to have someone not deliver on their promises, especially because in this case, you're certain that I made promises and didn't deliver!"

Notice that at no time are you admitting that you did what your accuser is blaming you of doing. This is one of the greatest benefits to you of *Listening in the Present*. Along with giving the speaker the warm feeling that they are being heard and understood, you are giving yourself a few moments to get clear on what is the right response for you. Did you break a promise? Should you take ownership of it and humbly apologize? Or was there a miscommunication of some kind that needs to be clarified?

When you separate your response to another person's emotional outbursts, you become capable of responding with wisdom. Your response is likely to lead to a fair and just settlement of the issue at hand. Both of you will walk away satisfied, even if neither of you quite got what you wanted.

When you are capable of being fully present, listening in the present is effortless. Your mind is empty of thoughts and judgments about what the other person is saying. You are with them, fully and completely. They can see it in your eyes, and feel it in their bones. You are not distracted. You are not trying to do two things at once. You are not even *wishing* you could be doing something else. Tasks aching to be done are not on your radar screen. Solutions that have worked for you in past similar situations are not on the tip of your tongue, anxiously waiting to burst out in a show of your smarts. Most importantly, you are not feeling defensive. Your only focus is on this person in this moment, wanting to hear their words accurately, understand their feelings empathetically and discern what, if anything, they want from you. My experience is that most people want very little from us, except to be heard and understood empathetically.

All of us have an emotional three-year old within us. When you are able to demonstrate that you genuinely care about the other person more than you do about winning the battle, fixing their problem, getting them to do it your way, or getting your own desires met, you will be healing some of their hurts and wounds. They will reward you with better communication, a healthier relationship and more cooperation in whatever it is that you want from them.

No one is a “self-made” man or woman. All of us depend on other people to get the results we want in life. The more effectively that you can be present while listening to others, and still do what is right for yourself, the more you will experience the joy that comes with having healthy, caring relationships in your work life and in your personal life. ♣

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