

From Tolerance to Caring: Listening Alert #2
A 2 page, short read, bound to improve your attention!
by Frank Topper

“How do you know when you know too much psychology? You can’t get mad because you understand everyone’s reasons for doing everything”

Recent anonymous Facebook post

I was in creativity training for two hours and could barely tolerate the speaker. He was loud and I didn’t like his looks. His ideas, however, made sense. To stop the complaining voice in my head I began to alternatively doodle (to offload energy) and take notes. He delivered valuable content that I applied immediately to my teams, which was much better than walking out. How often do I find it hard to tolerate the words of others? Every time someone other than me is speaking.

Another realization miracle happened about a decade ago. It was about bringing out the best in people using positive reinforcement, but only using punishment for a short time to achieve the desired behavior. I learned that whatever people do, how they act, and what they say makes complete sense from their perspective. I felt the truth of this lesson when I applied it to myself. Oops...does this mean that the people I have ignored and denigrated for not making sense were really making sense? Yikes! How could it have been otherwise. Do you do things that don’t make sense to you? I don’t.

I created and delivered diversity training for a large group of managers at a prestigious University - scientists, engineers, and administrators. I was shocked by my bias, prejudices, and habituated judgments. From Prius owners to teenagers, the homeless to politicians, low-talkers to screamers; put me in a room and I would wait to give my opinion while dismissing theirs. How was I going to train others when I was so intolerant? Listening provided me with the answer. Listening took me from dismissing and ignoring to tolerating, and then to acceptance and actively encouraging others to offer their perspectives and ideas. It took a few years to get there but I’ve found anyone can get there right now, today. The need for listening becomes more obvious in video and teleconferencing where people have to work harder to listen thus tend to more intentionally engage.

People may seem like aliens to me, and they are because they are not me. There are numerous studies on the power of diversity. People may be quiet, effusive, or logical and I need to tolerate all variations. Myers Briggs, Standout, Gallup, Hogan Development, and other personal assessments demonstrate where we differ and where we are the same. Different or the same can be highly annoying and evoke intolerance. However, more problems are solved by listening than by intolerance.

A team decided that having exquisite relationships would be their key strategy for accomplishing a \$130 million dollar project. They listed and assessed their top obstacles that prevented them from listening (interrupting, criticizing, and defensiveness) and knowing when a conversation was failing (tense feelings, silence, doors slamming, blame, redundant?). In order to learn about the needs of each team member, they were given high-stress scenarios to role-play worst and best behaviors, then come to an agreement on the values and behaviors to guide meetings and personal interactions over two years. Now, they listen to each other with respect and curiosity, acceptance

and encouragement using the meeting ground rules 1) one person speaks at a time; 2) check-in mid-meeting – Are we on track? Is everyone feeling heard? 3) people speak out their idea or concern real-time vs. post-meeting lobbying or back-pedaling; and 4) end the meeting with a quick debrief – what worked well and what needs to improve at the next meeting.

Another project team wanted to improve relationships half-way through the project, but it was too late. They were beyond the point of no return respect-wise. No one felt like they owned the problem together. Blame, intolerance, rigidity, misunderstanding, and judgment led to multi-million dollar lawsuits. Everyone felt their position was the correct one, unable to hear or understand anyone else's perspective. I tried but was not able to help them.

I find people nearly panic or give up if they feel that they won't be heard. I do. I love Martha Stout's insight in her book *The Sociopath Next Door*. "We are almost never really listened to. I am reminded everyday of how infrequently we are heard, any of us, or our actions even marginally understood. In many ways each of us ultimately remains a mystery to everyone else." P141.

Genuinely caring about people – asking for their view, pausing after they speak, understanding their perspective before telling yours – makes everyone confident that they are being heard with tolerance, acceptance, and encouragement. That's when understanding and progress happen.

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