

Controlling Ego to Connect and Comprehend: Listening Alert #3

A short read that will divide your attention.

by Frank Topper

Eight of us sit in a small conference room figuring out what to do next for a non-profit – create a new organization, conduct a needs assessment, or supercharge an electronic newsletter. Usually I am paid to run meetings as a neutral facilitator. In this case I was invited to facilitate and contribute my perspective. As everyone begins to take their turn talking I find I have a strong opinion about the options and final decision. I involuntarily drop my typical neutral role, interrupting each person when “I” feel like it to shape their decision – why shouldn’t I? I know best.

When I observe my thoughts behaviors I see the detrimental ego aspects to my relational life: not listening fully to others, judging what they say as good or bad, and forcing others to listen to me because I “know better.” I catch these ego aspects and self-references in my thoughts such as:

“Jen had a good idea! Amazing. What’s really amazing is that I recognized her good idea.”

“Kathy is getting it wrong again. Sheesh!”

“Tone it down, Chuck. You don’t know what you’re talking about and it’s embarrassing.”

Whether others are right or wrong doesn’t matter. What matters is my own opinion. My ego. The irony is unmistakable: whether I listen to others or myself, I am listening to something all the time. Mostly that something is my inner thoughts. If you are like me, why is it that we find listening to ourselves better than listening to others?

Our ego and sense of self-importance has us feeling better about ourselves, dismissing others and what they may have to say. Whether it is good or bad, everyone I’ve talked to likes the pseudo-self-esteem boost our ego gives us. Here’s an example of my ego voicing inner thoughts, imagining myself better as I sit in a leadership presentation:

“The speaker has it all wrong, I would never do that. I would plan all of this better. He isn’t even using the right tone of voice to deliver leadership plans. That’s a pointless question, of course he isn’t getting good answers. His ego is getting out of hand. I hope he sees how bad this is going and tells himself to wrap it up.”

And the list of sarcastic, painfully bored inner thoughts continue. Judging every phrase the speaker uttered came naturally to me – or rather, to my ego. My ego judging his ego.

So the question that comes up is: why? Why is it so hard to listen to others, allowing ourselves to accept that others may teach us something useful or new? The answer: I don't want to lose my imaginary feeling of control or give up the self-esteem boosts my ego so willingly offers. With that status quo my ego runs the show.

The ego serves a positive purpose, too – it keeps us confident, gives us the self-esteem to operate and deliver our viewpoints to the world, and enables us to express our love through words and actions. But, when it comes to listening to others, we have to control it or we can't hear, comprehend, or connect. Isolation being the consequence.

The most important person in the room is not me or you. It's not even the speaker – it is the listener. Think about it: would you or a speaker be speaking if there weren't any listeners? Listening is necessary for relationships. Without relationships we emotionally die. It is important to quiet that droning voice in my head, making snarky remarks and sarcastic one-liners. If you struggle with the same problem I do and want to change, here are a few ways you might consider controlling your ego when it comes to listening to others:

- After a meeting ask the others to relate what they heard. Getting their perspective of the speaker's message widens your perspective.
- Focus on the process of listening to others rather than too quickly ending dialogue to get to your idea of results.
- When you hear that voice inside judging others, ask if those remarks are your ego speaking or ways to contribute to the discussion.
- Take notes. It sidesteps ego and helps comprehension.
- Accept that people rarely think or say things like you do. Would be frightening if they did.
- Don't interrupt. Your opinion matters but no more or less than anyone else unless you are the owner of the decision or otherwise the big boss.

As per Evelyn Miccio, a neuropsychologist, focus on WAIT (Why Am I Talking?). Are you talking because everyone else is and you want attention, or because you have something important to share and feel like you need to communicate? If it is the latter jump in and yak it up. If the former, keep listening and shoot for understanding.

You and I are not the only ones with ego in the room – to help everyone control theirs, focus on discussion. Allow everyone to express their thoughts and viewpoints, comment on them and let the discussion flow. This way, everyone gets a say, the inner ego voice is appropriately regulated and everyone works together better. Listening is an act of discovery. Your ego may be set but the future is not.

For more information, visit: topperfacilitation.com