

Turning off the Conversation in Your Head

Developing Life-Changing Listening Skills

by Tony Stoltzfus

Have you ever had a conversation where half-way through you realized the other person wasn't really listening? Sometimes we get the feeling that others are smiling and nodding while we are talking, but their minds are on something else entirely.

Now let's turn the tables: if you feel that way sometimes when talking to others, it is likely that *they* sometimes feel the same lack of listening when they are talking to *you*! How do you become aware of it when you aren't listening well? Here are four warning signs, along with a rationale for why each one might be happening:

- We interrupt a lot. We think our thoughts are more right or more important than the other person's.
- We are distracted by the environment. This often happens in groups: while we are listening to one person, the other half of our attention is focused on scanning the room or looking for the person we really want to talk to.
- There are no pauses in the conversation. Instead of fully tuning into the other person, we are using the time they are speaking to frame our reply. So as soon as they're finished speaking, we're ready to jump in.
- We give advice. We've diagnosed the problem, looked at options and solved it inside our head while the other person is talking, and now we're ready to dispense a solution.

The common element in all these warning signs is what I call "the conversation in our head." While we are (supposedly) listening, a stream of unrelated words and impressions are flowing through our mind. Sometimes we are interpreting what we hear: does that line up with how the business world works? Is her marriage healthy? Or we may be making associations with our own experience: the person seems to be in transition, so we start to access our own memories of transitional seasons and search for solutions we can give from our experience. Or we are busy problem solving: diagnosing what is wrong, looking at the options, developing a solution we can offer. In effect, we are multi-tasking: trying to listen with one side of our brain while thinking about what it means or what to do with it with the other half.

The problem is, our brains don't multi-task well at all on things that both involve words. If you want proof, try to sing "The Star Spangled Banner" while simultaneously reading the previous paragraph. While it sounds easy, you probably won't remember much of what you read. In the same way, our comprehension and retention go down drastically when we try to listen to someone and think about what we are going to say next at the same time.

Practical Steps

Carrying on a conversation in your head is one of the most common obstacles to effective

listening. So what can you do about it? Here are four practical steps that can help you become more fully attentive and turn off the conversation in your head:

1. Make a Listener's Covenant

It helps to set out a clear objective for how you are going to listen. The listener's covenant is committing yourself to something like this: "I choose to let go of my own thoughts and ideas to fully hear you. When you are speaking, my sole objective is to hear and understand what you are saying. When I am listening, I want to treat you like you are the only person in the world and what you have to say is of crucial importance.

2. Take on God's Frame of Reference

God is pretty good listener—that's what he's doing most of the time when you pray. You can become a better listener by practicing the art of seeing people as he sees them. Before you enter into a conversation, take 30 seconds to realign your viewpoint with God's: "This person is made in the image of God. God is already at work in his/her life: in fact, He is already speaking to this person everything they need to know to move forward in life. I am eager to see what God is up to in this person's life." You'll pay better attention if your mindset is that you are looking for God's prior activity as opposed to coming in to fix the person!

3. Work Backwards when You Get Off Course

You'll inevitably catch yourself getting into an internal conversation sometimes (I still do and I've been coaching for years.) Usually the conversation goes something like this: "Hmm—I wonder what is going on there? Sounds like a problem with _____. I was in a situation like that years ago—when I was in that place, what worked for me was _____. Now, how can I get him to take that step?" When you realize you are in that kind of diagnostic/problem-solving mode, stop the conversation, and go back to the intuition that you started with ("Hmm—I wonder what is going on there?") That's often the place where you can ask a simple coaching question that unlocks a great insight for the person you are listening to.

4. Pay Attention to Your Success Rate

When I started tracking the accuracy of my initial impressions of what was going on in a person's life; I came to a startling insight: I was almost always wrong! Nothing has improved my own listening more than this revelation: I simply don't have a very good handle on what is going on with you. So if I don't listen, I'll probably blow it. Humility is a great teacher!

For more practical hints on better listening, see the book [Leadership Coaching](#) by Tony Stoltzfus