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Listen  
Like Leitha



At the University of Notre Dame, I had the pleasure of meeting Ms. Leitha Lewis, housekeeper of O'Neill Hall dormitory. She took the time to introduce herself and referred to us as her babies. When we first met, I thought this was just her way of introduction and didn't think anything of it, until I saw her days later.

She would greet each student with a smile—and not just any smile, a real smile. You know how some smiles look uncomfortable? Ms. Leitha's smile radiated sincerity and understanding, two very important traits of listening. She always listened to students, not with just an ear, but with both eyes, reflecting back their feelings. She also demonstrated other skills that made her a great listener.

After graduation and reflecting on what I had learned at Notre Dame, I discovered that the most powerful lesson came from her. Ms. Leitha taught me how to become an excellent listener, someone who could be "in the moment" when listening.

In this chapter, Ms. Leitha's name is an acronym for how to become a better listener:

L: Liking

E: Eyes, empathy, encouragement (oh my!)

I: "In the moment," "I am not the focus"

T: Time and take notes

H: Head and heart

A: Another time

## Liking

Have you ever noticed when listening to someone that the more you like the person, the better listener you become? We listen better when we actually like the person; in fact, liking the person even makes it easier to remember that person's name and the conversation.

Do you remember the name of that cute guy or girl when you were growing up, the one who brought a smile to your face? For me, that girl was Brittany Dotson (hope she doesn't read this

book!). Why do you remember a certain name? It's simple; because you like that person.

When you listen with liking, you give the person respect that says, "I want to understand you," and you make a deeper connection in your mind. Say your boss, whom you admire and respect, comes by your office to chat. Since you like him, it makes listening to him more natural.

What prevents us from listening with liking? Us! We sometimes have our own preconceived ideas and perceptions about someone. Sometimes while listening to someone, thoughts flood your mind—"Can this person do anything for me?" "I probably won't like this person," or "Who likes them anyway?"—influencing how you listen.

*Nothing in this world is good or bad, but thinking makes it so.*

—William Shakespeare

Listening with liking is much like cleaning a windshield. Your view of that person is open and not obstructed by something else. Listening with liking looks like a smile:

- Lean toward the person.
- Make eye contact with him or her.
- Reflect the other person's feelings without agreeing.
- Do your best to make the person feel comfortable.

Listen to someone you wouldn't normally talk to and discover what you can learn from him or her. Focus on similarities rather than differences.

### **Leadership Tip**

When we like someone, we want to hear what that person has to say . . . and we seem to always find the time to listen.

### **Listening with Dislike**

But what happens if you don't like the person? Have you ever experienced any of these scenarios?

1. You didn't care for your neighbor at first; then one day you actually became friends.
2. You met someone and were indifferent, but then over time you became that person's friend.
3. You couldn't stand your boss, until she opened up to you and you discovered she is a caring person.

Let's say you get a call one evening. When the person on the other end says he is from the IRS, your stomach starts to turn, sweat starts running down your brow, and your blood pressure goes up. Maybe you're nervous because you just heard a horror story involving a colleague at work about her encounter with the IRS and how it ended.

Before the person can ask a question, your mood turns to dislike, your tone becomes gruff, and your mind gets defensive and your answers short.

Stop a minute. Can you guess the outcome of the conversation? What tone will you convey to the caller? How quickly will listening with dislike resolve your tax issue? In your present state, you may find yourself in some type of confrontation.

If you remember one thing that I tell you, I hope it's that your behavior is a choice. When you feel yourself behaving a way you don't want to, pause and change it.

**Eyes, Empathy, Encouragement (Oh My!)**

The eyes are vital to listening, because you see facial expressions and body posture when you communicate. Also, when you make eye contact with someone, you demonstrate your focus on that person.

Not only did Ms. Leitha listen with liking, she also listened with her eyes. It's as if she used them as a mirror to reflect the other person's feelings. If you came in and were upset about a grade, her eyes reflected it. If you were excited with good news, so was she.

Has this ever happened to you? Someone enters your office, and your head is buried in the computer. You're checking e-mails or typing. You glance up very quickly and then glance back at your keyboard, and as you look back at the keyboard you say, "Go ahead, I'm listening," as you pound away furiously on the keys.



Does the message you send to that person really indicate that you're listening? No, because you're not making eye contact.

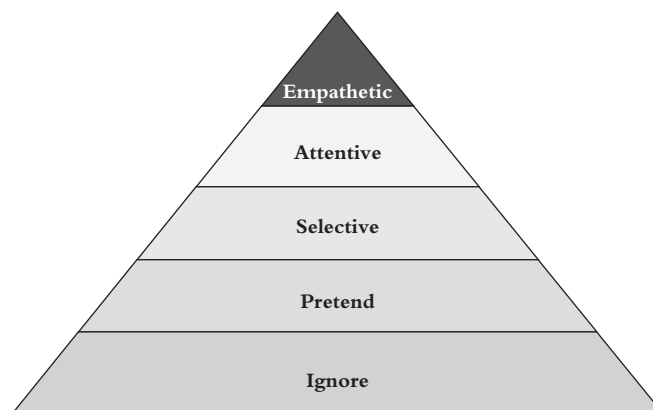
Do you ever wonder if people are listening to you, if they are truly excited to see you? Would you like to find out? One way

is called the “eyebrow test.” The next time you greet someone, watch the eyebrows. If they go up, that person is happy to see you.

Put the eyebrow test to use. When you’re greeted by relatives at the next holiday gathering, watch their eyebrows when they answer the door. If you’re greeted by a warm “It’s so good to see you” and their eyebrows go up, it’s a good sign, because it means they are generally interested in you.

*The most important thing in communication is to hear what isn’t being said.*

—Peter Drucker



Referencing a Dale Carnegie instructor, the five levels of listening are:

1. Empathetic
2. Attentive
3. Selective
4. Pretend
5. Ignore

The first and highest level of listening is **empathetic**. Empathy is demonstrating that you are aware of others’ thoughts and feelings

and trying to understand them. To listen with empathy usually involves you asking a lot of questions to really understand someone or something.

The next level is **attentive**. At this point, you are paying attention and maybe able to memorize and repeat back what was said. An example is a student who gets a good grade on a test. But just because she gets a high grade doesn't mean she understands the material.

The third level is **selective** listening: hearing what you want to hear. For example, a wife tells her husband, "Go to the store, fix the door, organize your office, and you can watch the game." What the husband hears is, "I can watch the game."

The fourth level is **pretend**. This level of listening is common at networking functions and parties. Someone pretends to listen to someone he or she doesn't know, only to be searching for someone else to talk to.

The fifth level is **ignore**. We all have probably been guilty, at some time or another, of completely ignoring someone who is talking. A friend of mine named Chris learned how to ignore his mom while he was growing up. One day she needed a ride to work. Chris, listening on the lowest level, completely forgot, resulting in his mom having to walk three miles to work.

You have probably heard the expression, "to walk a mile in someone else's shoes." In other words, you get a feeling for what it's like in another person's situation, a concept related directly to listening. When listening to someone, look at that person's shoes to help you remember this point.

When we fail to picture ourselves in other people's shoes, often we "advice dump." We just dump our advice on them about what they need or should do, or question them without trying to fully understand their position. Remember, "their shoes" will help you empathize with them.

Do you remember your middle school days? Did you ever get into trouble? I once did something that landed me in the principal's



office. I remember it still because the entire time I was talking to Sister Irene, it felt like she was casting judgment on me and not listening to my side of the story.

Have you ever felt that someone was judging you while you were talking? It's not a comfortable situation. People can tell if you are listening to them or judging them in a matter of minutes. Leave judgment to the courts, and do your best to understand the person you are engaged in conversation with by giving your full attention.

Here is an example of how understanding history can help us all become better listeners:

"The Kennedys stayed here. Matter of fact, a lot of famous people have stayed at this hotel," Paul, the bellhop at the Radisson in Lackawanna, Pennsylvania, said as he took my luggage to my room.

I was fascinated at how much Paul knew about the hotel. There was an obvious history about the place, and learning it gave me more of an appreciation of the building. As Paul continued, I thought of how this example relates to us all.

I've always been a fan of history, respectful of people who have gone before and paved the way in our own country, as well as in just about every industry and city.

How well do you know the history of your company? Do you know the pioneers in your profession or who had your job before you? Have you ever listened to their stories?

History teaches much on many levels. By understanding and appreciating the past, we can better connect to the present and the future. Knowledge of the past fosters clarity that allows us to focus on the future, and in this cyclic process our ability to listen is enhanced.

### ***Encouragement***

Encouragement enters our conversations, sometimes with great impact.

I was running on the track at the gym one day when I saw a young girl who was overweight and making an effort to get in shape by walking “It’s good that you’re walking,” I said to her.

“What?” she asked, as she pulled her iPod from her ears.

“It’s good that you’re walking; keep it going,” I repeated as I passed by her.

A sort of confused, happy look came over her face and then she replied, “Oh, thanks.”

I finished my run and then began walking to cool down. I suddenly wondered, “What happened to my new friend?”

Looking around, I saw that she wasn’t walking anymore; she was now running and almost out of sight. It was a struggle for her, but she persisted. I felt a huge grin creep across my face; she had made my day. Some days I go to the gym and lift heavier weights simply because I’m influenced by the atmosphere and encouragement of someone else there.

You may never know the impact of your words, but you can offer encouragement to others, including total strangers. Encouragement builds people up and empowers them, so be bold and start encouraging people today.

### **Leadership Tip**

There are two types of people in this world; those who push you up and those who hold you down.

### **“In the Moment,” “I Am Not the Focus”**

Most people are not good listeners because they aren’t fully present in the moment. Physically they are there, but their minds wander. For example, during a meeting, they might be thinking: “What

time is this meeting going to end?” “I wonder what’s for dinner tonight.” “I wonder what’s on television.” “Oh, that’s right; I’ve got to pick up my dry cleaning today.”

They don’t pay attention to the presenter, because they are not in the moment. When you listen to someone, make sure you are in the moment both physically and mentally.

*Well-timed silence hath more eloquence than speech.*

—Anonymous

I once worked as a personal trainer in a gym. It was a great experience to help people achieve their fitness goals, which came about by listening to the clients and understanding their current condition, setting goals, and deciding what type of plan was best for them.

C.J., a nice guy who made himself presentable and cared about people, was another trainer at the gym, but he wasn’t very busy. I didn’t know why at first, until one day while talking to him, it occurred to me that he wasn’t successful because he didn’t know how to listen. The conversation was always about him.

Any time you told him a story, as soon as you finished, he immediately told you another story on the same subject. It usually started with, “Oh yeah, well let me tell you about . . .,” “That was nothing; one time . . .,” “Wait till you hear this . . .”—like he never cared about what you said.

It was annoying at first, and soon you didn’t want to talk to him. It was almost like he was playing the one-up game. Whatever you told him didn’t matter; he had a story that was one better.

Do you ever catch yourself trying to one-up someone? Have you ever had a one-up game pulled on you? How does it make you feel?

When listening to someone, say to yourself, “I am not the focus.” When listening to someone else’s story, ask questions and comment on it. Don’t launch into your own story.

*We talk little if we do not talk about ourselves.*

—William Hazlitt

***Egoitis***

Imagine you are speaking in a meeting and everyone is paying attention except your boss. So you think to yourself, “What gives? Why isn’t he listening to me?”

Your boss could be suffering from *egoitis*. Although I made it up, this egotistic, self-centered concept has been around for many years. Egoitis blocks your ears and prevents you from listening to anyone below you on the corporate/social ladder.

Often the best ideas come from people on the front lines, not just those in the boardroom. It is important to remove the egoitis and listen to people on all levels rather than be blinded by their titles or positions.

Eliminate the “I” in biographical listening. An example of “I am not the focus” is biographical listening after talking to someone who tells you what he or she did. For example, a kid comes home from school and is upset about a bad test grade he received. His parents are paying big bucks to send him to this private school, and at the dinner table he is greeted by his father asking, “How was your day, son?”

“Fine,” he replies.

Detecting something is wrong, Dad starts to investigate. “What’s the matter, son?”

“I got a bad score on my math test.”



The boy opens up and begins the dialogue, and then Dad goes into “I” mode. “What do you mean you got a bad grade? When *I* was your age, *I* was good in math. *I* would have studied harder. *I* was a good student. *I* had to work, and *I* even played football. *I* just don’t understand how you can get a bad grade.”

Does this sound familiar? Does this make the boy want to open up and share more or talk about his issues? Probably not. So as much as possible, avoid the “I” approach in conversations.

### ***Calling People by Name***

Knowing someone’s name is important and can be beneficial in most situations. As I purchased a book one evening, I was greeted at the counter by a 19-year-old cashier. I was within seven inches of laying down my book when I quickly glanced at his name tag and said, “Hey Jack, how ya doing?”

Jack, the cashier at the local bookstore, grew two inches taller as he stood proudly ready to take my order. Then he did something out of the ordinary. He asked, “Sir, would you like 25 percent off your purchase today?”

I quickly responded, “Absolutely!”

Jack reached below the counter and scanned a coupon for my purchase, and I thought to myself: “What caused Jack to ask me that? Was there a system for that? Did he do it to every third customer? Did he do it for all the customers?”

We engaged in small talk, and then Jack delivered the line of the night. He looked at me like we had been friends since kindergarten and said, “Have a great night, Eric.”

What the . . . ? How did he know my name? Ah, he must have looked at my debit card while we were talking. I thought to myself, “Good one, Captain Jack, you’ve got the importance of knowing a name down pat, and that principle will serve you well in business and in life.”

When I called him by his name, I recognized him and made him my focus, which prompted him to memorize mine and call me by my name.

In a society full of texting, e-mails, BlackBerrys, and crackberries, how quickly we lose sight of calling people by their name. Call people by their name and you put the focus on them by silently saying, “You matter.”

*The sweetest sound to a person’s ears is their own name.*

—Dale Carnegie

When I gave public seminars, I had an audience of anywhere between 40 and 80 people. I would make it a point to memorize and say all their names within the first 10 minutes of my introduction. People were stunned and didn’t know what to think—until I explained the importance of knowing someone’s name. We remember what’s important to us.

The next time you buy gas or groceries, call someone by his or her name and put the focus on that person. When you talk to someone, make the conversation about him or her. Ask more questions, close your mouth, and open your ears and eyes. See if you can listen 80 percent and talk 20 percent during the conversation.

### Time and Take Notes

Many of us are rushed these days, either coming from a place but don’t know where we were or running to a place but don’t know where we’re going. We have so many distractions, and sometimes it can cause us to forget something when we are listening.

A great tool to help us is a notepad. When you’re engaged in a conversation, just write down notes on a notepad. Having a notepad handy demonstrates that you are willing to go the extra mile when listening and not relying solely on your memory. Taking notes demonstrates a higher level of listening and your actions say “What you say is important and I don’t want to forget it.”



*People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care.*

—Anonymous

## **Head and Heart**

It is important that as a leader you listen with your head and your heart. It is essential that you understand what is on people's minds and in their hearts. Great leaders able to do this were Abraham Lincoln, Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Teresa, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and many others.

Listening with just your head can make you appear cold and immune to someone's feelings. Listening with just your heart you risk becoming emotionally hijacked, where your emotions get the best of you and you tear up in the conversation or have an emotional outburst.

I fly all over the country giving speeches and doing training and naturally, I spend time on airplanes. Southwest Airlines is an airline I've noticed that listens both with the head and the heart. They do a great job of appealing to what's on a customer's mind (money) and listening with their heart (service).

You can tell when a company listens to and likes their customers by their happy employees, always calm and cheerful. By listening to their customers, they know that price and service are important, so they keep costs down and services high.

### Another Time

We've talked about what it takes to become a great listener, now let's see what happens when you apply it. The real test of whether or not you have succeeded in becoming a great listener is if people return to you for future advice or counsel.

Ed Mack is the rector at O'Neill Hall and knows Ms. Leitha Lewis. He is also a great listener. As rector of the hall, he serves as the father figure for 275 young men in the dormitory. Ed is the type of listener that, when the conversation is over, you want to start a new one.

Do you know anyone who inspires you to come back another time, someone in your office who might be the "office shrink"? How do you claim that skill? People with that quality usually have good memories of their conversations with you, and having a good memory of the conversation will make people want to come back to converse with you.

My formula for having a great memory and bringing people back to you is DAC: *d*esire, *a*ttention, and *c*oncentration.

When something is important to you, your desire goes up, and when desire is high, memory is high:

$$\uparrow \text{Desire} = \uparrow \text{Memory}$$

When desire is high, you begin to focus and your attention grows, and when you are attentive, your concentration improves. These progressive steps promote better listening skills, because you actually focus on what someone is saying.



*Six Pitfalls to Avoid*

1. **“I know what you’re going to say.”** Being familiar with someone, we assume we know what that person will say and often miss much of what is actually said.
2. **“Here’s what I would do.”** We advice dump, giving solutions rather than understanding the content of what is said.
3. **“Talking is cool in our society.”** Being a professional speaker is cool, but no one becomes a professional listener. In school we spend hours learning to read and write, to speak and communicate effectively, but we never learn how to listen properly.
4. **“Can you do anything for me?”** In our society, we sometimes don’t listen to someone if they can’t do something for us.
5. **“Just text it to me.”** We have short attention spans and are constantly distracted.
6. **“We have bad models.”** Maybe we grew up in a household where nobody listened and everyone was a “Chatty Cathy.”

*If listening to another person is an art, become an artist.*

—Anonymous

