

# Listening for Possibility

## improving a personal and professional skill

By David Emerald

In today's gadget-filled world, many people are spending more time with their computer screens than in personal conversation with others. We run the risk of losing the art and skill of being an effective listener.

Listening is an essential skill and practice for a creator, one who actively chooses steps toward a desired outcome. Forms of obvious listening include: listening to others speak, listening to radio and television and other media, etc.

Our listening skills also go beyond the obvious in more "subtle" ways. We listen as we read everything from email to this article. We listen to our own inner chatter. We listen as we replay events and experiences in our memories. We are engaged in some form of listening almost all the time that we are awake.

As human beings, there are three ways that we are capable of listening:

**Listening for Assessment** - This is our default way of listening. The internal conversation follows some form of assessment, such as "I like that / I don't like that." "I agree with that / I don't agree with that." Simply put, we have a mental "ledger sheet" with two columns: a plus column and a minus column.

When we listen for assessment, we are listening for the perceived value of what we are hearing. In fact, as you read this you are most likely "listening" in this very way! We are listening reactively to what it is we are hearing. And here is the key point: Our prior experience is the filter we use for determining the value of what we are hearing. We run what we hear through the lessons of our experiences and the assumptions we have formed from those experiences.

**Listening for Action** - The second form of listening we can engage in is listening for action. In this listening, the internal conversation is focused on how to apply what we are hearing. "How do I/we use this?" "How can we implement this?" As we listen, we are seeking to determine reasonable and appropriate avenues for action, given on what we hear.

In many ways we are almost always listening for action — especially in the context of organizations, teams, and groups. *How* our listening for action gets informed is an absolutely critical consideration, which we will explore in more depth after we examine the third form of listening.

**Listening for Possibility** - The third way of listening is listening for possibility, which is the primary way of listening as a creator, challenger or coach.

These roles are from The Empowerment Dynamic (TED), which provides alternative responses and a subsequent escape from the Drama Triangle and its reactions of a victim, persecutor and rescuer. First defined by Dr. Steven Karpman, the drama triangle and its recognizable roles can be found in all problem-focused interactions. The escape from this often default way of reacting comes from shifting into the outcome-oriented roles of creator, challenger and coach. A person's focus defines their intention to either avoid problems, as with a victim orientation, or pursue outcomes, as with a creator orientation.

In order to listen for possibility, we must first be able to suspend our assumptions. If we can put on hold our own opinions and the filter of our personal history, we can then listen openly to the perspective, to the experience, to the intention, to the hopes, dreams and frustrations of those with whom we are interacting.

We listen for the new, the novel, and the things that, in fact, may not be consistent with our previous experience. We are asking ourselves, "What *could* this mean?" We must listen to understand others' points of view in order to answer that question. Listening for possibility is not about agreeing or disagreeing, it is about really "getting" what the other person is trying to share. You have the right and responsibility to disagree later - and first it is important to understand them.

*"A Coach is a source of knowledge, but s/he doesn't tell a Creator what a Creator should or shouldn't do. Instead, s/he asks a lot of good questions and listens deeply to what a Creator is saying as she thinks, probes, and explores. A Coach is constantly alert to possibility." From Chapter 8 "The Empowerment Dynamic" (The Power of TED\*)*

Listening for possibility is a deeper, more intimate listening. The focus is not just on the other person. It takes place within the context of the environment and situation. Vision, inspiration and true co-creating begin in listening for possibility.

**Informing Our Actions** - Being a creator requires taking action. However, we need to decide what is the most effective and appropriate action to take once we have listened and taken into account all perspectives. It is crucial to consider how we inform ourselves on what is reasonable and appropriate action. If we are in our default way of listening — listening for assessment — our options are merely informed through our assessment filters and our prior experience.

What distinguishes our listening for action is the orientation we adopt and from which we are taking in the information. In the Victim/Reacting Orientation, we listen for those who agree with us. If they disagree, we see them as a problem to which we must react, refute, or counter. If we have adopted a Creator/Outcome Orientation, we listen in the context of what it is we want to accomplish, suspend our assumptions in order to understand alternative viewpoints — even if, in the end, we do not agree with them.

Listening for possibility opens us to a deeper, more profound way of interacting with our others as creators, challengers and coaches — and leads to dramatically increasing the probability of breakthrough action!