

ARTICLE REPRINT

Listening With Empathy

Last month I talked about superb listeners who I know about or know personally. This final article on listening focuses on what some superb listeners do that distinguishes them from all the rest.

If you carefully watch some superb listeners you will see that while they exhibit all the characteristics of superb listening, they also listen with empathy. This ability makes them a rare breed.

In his book, *How The Mind Works*, Professor Steven Pinker of Harvard reveals that “The body is the ultimate barrier to empathy. Your toothache simply does not hurt me the way it hurts you.” Yet somehow superb listeners who listen with empathy transcend this limitation and give the impression of feeling the pain from another’s aching tooth.

Listening with empathy seems to come naturally to some superb listeners. They don’t rehearse, and they don’t prepare to listen with empathy – they just do it naturally. It’s involuntary, like that certain involuntary look that appears on your face instantaneously, advertising your ancestral connections to your siblings, your parents and your grandparents.

Making a conscious effort to convey empathy and sincerity while listening doesn't work. That effort telegraphs your intentions to the speaker, and it loses the sense of spontaneity and genuineness conveyed by those who naturally listen with empathy.

So, can anyone learn to listen with empathy? I think anyone can, but the process I recommend will appear counterintuitive to many people. To become a superb listener who listens with empathy first requires that I acknowledge that I do not listen with empathy. I may not like this reality, but it's a fact.

Once I've accepted this fact, I can then remain constantly aware of how I am listening during conversations. It's in that awareness, that attention to what I am doing, and not doing, that can bring about a transformation in the way I listen.

Those few among us who listen with empathy are somehow able to exude joy, excitement, sadness, anticipation, appreciation, acknowledgment, gratitude - whatever is appropriate to the conversation. In conversation, it doesn't get any better than being listened to by

heard by someone who is genuinely interested in what we are saying, and who listens with sincere empathy.

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