

ATTENTIVE LISTENING

THOMAS J. WILTZIUS, PHD



One of the most critical components of an executive's leadership brand is the axis point where relationship management and communication skills are joined. It is at that point where a leader's listening skills are exercised. It is also at that key point where a leader's effectiveness and leadership character are both defined.

Communications experts tell us that 7% of a message is content and 93% of the message is context and affect. To acquire the full value of a message, attentive listening is required.

A leader who is not effective at attentive listening will miss a substantial amount of any message being conveyed. Over time, continuing to miss the complete message will likely erode the leader's relationships with direct reports, peers, customers and even a boss. And ultimately the leader's leadership brand...

CONCEPTS AND EXERCISES

Many leaders find themselves missing the complete meaning in conversations they have with other leaders and key contributors. While communications experts acknowledge that there are many factors that contribute to less-than-ideal communications, all agree that a common means of enhancing the value of any communication comes with an ability to listen closely...a concept called **attentive listening**.

Attentive listening means more than listening and remembering the contents or factual information portion of a conversation. While such content listening may be important, it is incomplete at best and requires only a portion of our full listening capability.

Every conversation or message has three meaningful components: content, context and affect.

Full and complete listening, also called attentive listening, means that the listeners go beyond content to add their attention to the **context** and the **affect** of a message. Such listening is almost always interactive and requires a higher level of concentration and verbal exchange. Once the skills for attentive listening are learned and used, conversations become more meaningful and useful. Importantly, when attentive listening conversations are used, the decisions arrived at will be more effective, and the relationship of the speaker with the listener will be enriched.

LISTENING FOR CONTEXT

Context has to do with the **relevance** of the conversation. Context is always the “why” within a message and sometimes it is also the “where”. Today, to young adults who are attentive, a message that comes to them without context is quickly labeled “random.” A generation before, an out-of-context message was often met with the question, “Where is he coming from?”

While a prepared speaker may provide context to a message, in many conversations the context is assumed by each speaker and each listener. These assumptions can be reasonable in many circumstances, just like assuming a light switch will always work when entering a dark room. Flip the switch and the lights will go on. However, many individuals have been misled by assumptions, and in critical discussions, such assuming context can prove disastrous.

If we **as listeners** attend to the context of a message as well as the facts, we can say we are seeking the relevance of the message. In other terms we can say we are listening for the justification for, the reason for, or even the purpose of the message. Simply put, we are looking for the purpose...the “why”...of the message.

In many business circumstances, messages are actually running dialogues. A conversation one day is simply a continuation of a conversation from a previous day, week or time. But on many occasions, there may be a break or pause or lapse in the message for some one, and as a consequence, relevancy is lost.

On other occasions, a person may be new to an ongoing message and not have a foundation of relevancy. And, at other times, a messenger may have an intervening experience or outside message that alters the content useful for an ongoing dialogue with someone, and the ongoing conversation loses relevance unless re-connected. There are skills that can help the listener overcome the context challenge, regardless of how it may have come about.

CONTEXT LISTENING CLUES AND CUES

While the responsibility to provide context within a message belongs to the speaker, it is also the responsibility of the listener to acquire context or to confirm context that is assumed. Regardless of the reason for context being absent from a message, as a listener we need to be prepared to ask for it.

It is often a “feeling” that tells us context is missing. Feelings of confusion, impatience, or frustration are often signs that a message is missing relevance. In attentive listening, paying attention to one’s feelings often provides the “clue” that one needs.

Labeling that feeling and owning it is the most effective means of positioning to gain context. Here is a quick example:

Mary and Joe had been working on a project together for several weeks and had been making progress at an agreed-on pace. They would meet every other day for two hours, aggregate their independent work, determine and allocate next steps, and move on. As Mary and Joe met today, Joe presented information that was outside the scope of what they had agreed to the last time they met. The information was important and revealing, but Mary began to feel she had missed something in their last conversation. Her feeling of uncertainty started to grow as Joe asked her what she thought.

“I feel a little confused right now, Joe,” she said. “I thought we had agreed that I was to gather sales data from the previous model and you were going to get information on customer satisfaction for that model.”

“What you are telling me,” Mary went on, “may be important, but I don’t see how it fits our assignment. Can you enlighten me?”

Mary’s quest for clarification was a request for relevancy and a desire that Joe frame the context of his information. Mary labeled her feeling of uncertainty as “confusion.” She presented and owned the feeling as her own without blaming Joe. She asked for help and Joe provided it.

“Oh jeez, I’m sorry Mary. I ran into Pete yesterday and he indicated that our project was being watched closely due to some competitive intel suggesting that Horwitz might be exploring a change to their models next year,” Pete revealed. “He asked me when we were going to meet next and if I could add some competitive insights to my customer analysis.”

Common feelings reveal the need for context by the listener. Overlooking the feeling may lead to missing important information by devaluing or dismissing it as irrelevant. Key feelings to watch for in attentive listening are:

- Uncertainty
- Confusion
- Frustration
- Distraction
- Feeling lost
- Impatience
- Mild anxiousness

Another determination for the absence of context to a message is what some refer to as a “hole in the logic” of a conversation. It is the realization that something is missing...the “why” of the message is not there or it is incomplete.

Whether the listener recognizes an absence of context because logic is not complete, or the listener simply recognizes discomfort or confusion, seeking context is a critical initiative to effective listening.

EXERCISE

While most discussion and conversations will seem to be in clear context, and probably are, the feelings of the **listener** are most often the clues to confirming or clarifying context.

As a listener, practice paying attention to **your** feelings at the onset of discussions during the next several weeks. Keep a journal of the times you may have felt one of the feelings on the list while listening to others. If you are comfortable, in a circumstance when you note a context feeling arising, try labeling and owning the feeling, and asking for help or clarification.

Avoid being accusatory, such as saying “I don’t know where you are coming from,” or “You are confusing me. Stick to the point.” Such comments will derail the conversation quickly.

LISTENING FOR AFFECT

Affect, also known as emotional attachment, has to do with the **motives and values** of the speaker within a conversation. The content and context of a discussion can often mask or minimize the emotions attached to a conversation. If listeners do not seek to discover or clarify the motive(s) and values the speaker owns in a conversation, the true intent of the speaker may be missed by the listener. Good listeners separate and confirm the difference between the cognitive or “thinking” portion of the message and the emotive or “feeling” part of the message.

The information and context a speaker conveys are always offered on a stage that is relevant to the speaker, and hopefully, to the listener as well. However, every message also has a degree of meaning and purpose that may be outside the scope of content and context.

Listening for affect essentially means that the listener is meeting two objectives: first differentiating the thinking from feeling, and second, separating process from outcome.

We have all been witness to a time where one presenter can speak with balance and calm, while another speaks on the same topic with passion and purpose. Every speaker brings his/her personal experience, beliefs, knowledge and values to every conversation. Even if two speakers agree unequivocally as to content, a listener can come away with two totally different perspectives.

While we can sometimes assume that flipping the light switch will result in the lights going on, we can also suggest that there are several hidden assumptions when we turn on a light. In addition to the assumption that the light switch is working, we assume that there is power in the electrical system and that the light bulb is functional. In speaking, conversely, the listener may assume that the content, context, motives and values of the speaker are apparent. Often, they are not.

Within the personal realm of each speaker lie the emotions and convictions they attach to their discussions. As such, they constitute the feelings attached to a conversation. Their feelings are the energy that pulses through the light bulb that joins with the switch to provide light. And the intensity of the feelings, determines the brightness of the light from the bulb.

If the conversation burns brightly, we can attribute the intensity of the conversation to the level of emotional engagement of the speaker. However, the energy or intensity of the speaker may **not** be apparent, and still the affect carries a separate message or meaning that should be important to the listener.

AFFECT LISTENING CLUES AND CUES

Just as it is initially the responsibility of the speaker to provide context within a message, and becomes the responsibility of the listener to seek context when it is lacking in the conversation, **it is the same dynamic when it comes to affect in a message or conversation.**

However, we must also recognize that in most cultures, the demonstration of affect is not encouraged, and as a consequence, the responsibility to find affect shifts to the listener. Regardless of the reason for affect being absent from a message, as a listener we need to be prepared to ask for it.

Speakers will **always** have feelings attached to their message. In attentive listening, paying attention to a speaker's feelings often provides insights that prove invaluable. In any given message, the speaker's feelings can range from positive, to ambivalent and neutral, to negative. In any given conversation, the speaker's feelings may be consistent with his/her message, or wholly inconsistent.

Attentive listeners explore key questions to ascertain the speaker's affect within the message:

1. Is the affect of the speaker being acknowledged and/or demonstrated and verified?
2. Is there consistency across the message between content, context, and affect?
3. If there is inconsistency between content, context, and affect and if so, what is the best way to get alignment?
4. If there is inconsistency between content and affect, and alignment can be reached, what implications for action exist?

Having a speaker label and own his/her feelings is the most effective means of positioning the listener to gain insights as to affect. There are several techniques that a listener can use to draw out the affect a speaker attaches to their message. Among them are:

- **Reflection**...stating what you perceive or observe the speaker's feelings seem to be at the moment and without judgment or conclusion:

"Joe, you seem to be a little nervous right now." Or

"Mary, you seem to be quite happy at the moment."

- **Summary**...a short restatement of the content of the message without drawing a conclusion:

“Joe, you have indicated the project has some challenges.”

“Mary, you reached the conclusion that we will win the Horwitz account.”

- **Projection**...stating how you might feel about the content and conclusion of the message as if you were the speaker:

“Joe, if I were recognizing that we were about to close the Horwitz deal, I would be feeling pretty happy.”

“Mary, if I were coming to the conclusion that the project was in jeopardy, I would be feeling pretty frustrated.”

- **Silence**...using a word and a pause after the speaker makes a content statement, or, after the listener makes a statement trying to draw out affect:

“And...?” or “Therefore...?” or “So...?”

“Mary, you reached the conclusion that we will win the Horwitz account. And...”

“Joe, if I were recognizing that we were about to close the Horwitz deal, I would be feeling pretty happy. So...”

- **Assertion**...stating expectations for full disclosure while giving reasonable assurances of safety:

“Joe and Mary, this is a safe harbor for discussion, and in fairness, I would expect you to share what’s on your mind.”

- **Open-ended Questions**...instead of stating observations or conclusions, ask how and why questions (...frequently)

“Joe, thanks for your insights and conclusions. Please let me know how you arrived at the outcomes you did?”

“Mary, can you share with me why you seem so excited about the Horwitz deal and how you came to this?”

Using techniques to determine affect and differentiate thoughts from feelings comes with

practice. Reading the transcripts of conversations can allow us to find ample opportunities to use any number of techniques. Here is a quick example of a fictitious exchange:

Joe and Mary completed a project they had been working on for six months. They had attained the desired outcomes, exceeded the expectations of key external customers, and both had received significant recognition from each of their bosses and from the division President.

Three months later, Joe and Mary found themselves assigned to work on another project. This project was larger and had two more people assigned to it. When they met with the VP assigning the project, the two new people and Mary were in the project conference center with the VP when Joe came entered.

Joe was on time, but when Mary noticed his entry, Joe did not seem to be quite the same as she anticipated.

The VP welcomed each member of the project team and asked them to introduce themselves to each other. Mary started, introducing herself by mentioning her education, time with the company, her role, and ended with a comment about her last project with Joe.

“We were assigned to develop, assess and position a new model for introduction to the market. It was a pleasure for me to work with Joe. I learned a lot from him and from our work together. I look forward to working with Joe and all of you on this new endeavor.”

Then Joe commented, “I’m Joe. Mary and I did work together and together we delivered a great model that our customers love. I hope we can attain similar results.”

Before the next project members could introduce themselves, the VP, seeking affect from Joe, commented, “Joe, I hear your words of recognition and hope, but I sense there is more to your thoughts than this. (Pause) We are here to work effectively together. This is a safe harbor for discussion, and in fairness, would you share what’s on your mind?”

Mary had sensed something was not consistent between Joe’s words and his commitment or feelings. Did he really want to be here? Was there something going on personally? Why wasn’t he as cordial to her now as he had been in the past?

While receiving factual and seemingly relevant information can evoke thoughts appropriate to the content, there are often mild emotional clues that allow a listener to seek insights to bring added value to a conversation. Joe’s response to the VP is telling.

“I accepted this assignment because I had to...I was forced to. Mary, I liked working with you very much on the last assignment, but to be truthful, when you were promoted in your division and I was not promoted in my division, I was upset. And when my colleagues began to give me a hard time, the thought of more project work and working with you again became a hard pill to swallow. I don't want to be here because of what I may face if we are successful again, which we will be. There you have my 'safe harbor' answer.”

EXERCISE

Again, while most discussion and conversations will seem to be in context, and probably are, they may not reflect the full intentions or values of the speaker. The feelings or affect of the **speaker** are most often the clues to their motives and values. A listener is likely to have to pursue getting this information through various techniques.

Seeking affect in this sample dialogue is opportune from the perspective of all listeners.

- Can you think of ways the VP could respond to Joe?
- Can you think of ways Mary might respond to Joe or the VP?
- Can you think of ways that other members of the project team might respond?

This short example uses a negative feeling that had evolved for Joe. In this case, the negative feeling, unrecognized and unaddressed could have derailed the project and fostered animosity on the project team. With Joe and the project team now recognizing Joe's reservations and reasons, they have become empowered to work through an obstacle and the VP has neutralized an impediment to project team alignment.

Assuredly, there are positive feelings that can be expressed, too. And while such feelings are usually justified, such feeling can also reveal an opportunity to leverage an asset or a false sense of security surrounding an initiative or relationship.

A listener is best advised to check for both positive and negative affect without judgment and reach a conclusion regarding the legitimacy of the feeling and the resulting impact of the feeling in relationship to content and outcomes.

As a listener, practice paying attention to the feelings of the speaker at the onset of discussions during the next several weeks. Keep a journal of the times you are able to clarify the speaker's feelings while you are actively listening to them.

BARRIERS TO ATTENTIVE LISTENING

Evidence of barriers to attentive listening is often seen within the context of negative labels assigned to an executive's leadership brand. A leader may carry a label such as:

- Impatient
- Disrespectful
- Inattentive
- Judgmental
- Detached
- Pompous
- Defensive
- Arrogant
- Self-righteous
- Distrustful

The assignment of such behavioral characteristics is a sign of a leader who is not fully using attentive listening skills.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Any leader who wishes to enhance the value and outcomes of conversations should be encouraged to learn and practice attentive listening skills. By adding the communication dimensions of context and affect to the content, a listener gains deeper insight as to the motives and intentions of the speaker. Such insights contribute to better decision-making.

There are residual benefits to attentive listening as well. Relationships are enhanced and the leadership brand of the listener is enriched.