CHAPTER 14

Listening Is the Place to Start

This weekend I drove to Pittsburgh for a wedding. Cruising up the Interstate, I didn't know what was ahead for me when I would reach the city. For a stranger, Pittsburgh is a challenging maze of roads that twist around ridges and hills, crossing and re-crossing its well-known three rivers. Though I had written directions and an unwavering voice in the GPS system, finding my way to the hotel, to the church, to the reception, and back to the hotel became quite an adventure. Fortunately, when I packed for the trip I remembered to include an emergency supply of calm, an order of courage, and just enough curiosity to get me through the trip.

For a few panicky moments I lost that sense of calm when I set off in the wrong direction. Before I knew it, I was across a bridge, wandering in a strange—and not too friendly looking—neighborhood. Intentionally steadying my thinking, I took a gulp of courage and moved beyond my fears, trusting that by instinct and instruments I would find my way back. Then I activated my curiosity as I scanned each intersection for clues that I could connect with the instructions from the map guidance system.

Arriving safely home, I recognized how similar this experience was to the exploration that is called *effective listening*. Effective listening is really a journey into another person's world: what someone else believes, what someone else thinks, knows, and cares about; what makes that person anxious or annoyed or eager or excited.

Listening is the single most important and powerful tool you can use to resolve a contentious issue or repair an awkward working relationship. And it is particularly difficult to do in disagreements, arguments, and conflicts, when you may not be eager to hear the person who is disagreeing with you. The boss who *listens* to employees is held in high regard.

What Keeps Us from Listening?

How many things on the following list make listening hard for you to do? Check all that apply:

- Your own thoughts—about other projects you are working on, other problems you are trying to solve, other activities you are looking forward to.
- Your reactions to what the speaker is saying—your judgments, your opinions.
- Defensiveness—wanting to be seen as being right.
- Anxiety that others might find fault with you.
- Impatience about time—how long is this going to take? How can you get to the end of this discussion as soon as possible so you can get on to the next task?
- The topic—is boring, or it's too complicated.
- Insecurity—you don't know the answer to the question being raised.
- Difficulty hearing or paying attention—because the speaker has an unusual accent, or talks too softly, or too loudly, or too quickly or slowly.
- Biases—because you have had interactions with this person before that didn't go well.

- You don't like the person.
- You don't trust the person.
- External distractions—other conversations, the alert beep from the computer announcing new messages, other noises in the building.
- Reactions to "trigger words"—words or phrases that our brains cannot or will not process, that set us off.

Many of us, at one time or another, would check every item on that list, and maybe a few that are not listed. Sometimes certain words particularly set us off. What are your trigger words—words that block your ability to hear the content of what another person is saying? For example, triggers may be "you people," "you never…" "you always…" "the girls in the office."

Add to that list of listening challenges the bad habits we have become comfortable with over the years and we've let become obstacles that keep us from listening to what another person is saying. These habits are often easier to spot in others than to recognize in ourselves. Has anyone ever done any of these to you?

- Helping you finish your sentence when he is certain he *knows* what it is you wanted to say.
- Listening just long enough to grasp a piece of context from your conversation that she can connect to something of her own experience. Suddenly the discussion has shifted from your concern to "That reminds me of the time I…."
- Jumping in with a solution or advice, "Why don't you just …"
- Looking around the room or over your shoulder while you are talking.

These interruptions make the other person sense you are not listening. They also complicate your ability to listen to what the person is saying. Calming your own thinking sometimes requires you to catch yourself, just as you are on the edge of interrupting, and remind yourself that your first task is to listen.

Listening is not about answering. When you are really listening, you

are not thinking about what you are going to say as soon as they quit talking. When you are listening, you are not carrying on a dialogue in your own head: what he ought to think about this; what she should have done; how he is wrong about this or that; how it is her fault we got in this mess to begin with, how he talks too much, and so on.

Consider This

- ☑ In the next twenty-four hours, listen to yourself. Which of these habits do you exhibit?
- ☑ How often do you interrupt another person speaking?

Listening is a skill. It is an art. It is a discipline. It requires attention and practice. And it begins with awareness. How do you listen without being caught by the judgments, opinions, desires, justifications, and stories rumbling around in your own head? Before you learn about the tools and techniques a good listener can use, let's start where good listening starts: with attitudes and intentions.

The Three C's: Calm. Courage. Curiosity.

Being a good listener begins with having the right mind-set. First, keep your mind *calm*, then have the *courage* to step into the unknown, and then be *curious* about what the other person has to say.

Calm

The first step in being able to listen to others is to calm your own mind, to hit the pause button on all of the thinking that inevitably swirls around in your head. Research tells us that the human brain runs at about 400 words a minute, and the average speaker talks about 125 words a minute. Learning this was a great relief to me. It explains what most of us naturally do—insert our own thoughts into the spaces between another's words.

> *I've overflowed with my own ideas, with a variety of self-motivated feelings and I see clearly how my fullness undermines my ability to be present, how it erodes the possibility of availability.*
>
> —Sue Monk Kidd

In a disagreement, we are

often quite busy thinking about justifications for how right we are, or how wrong they are, or assigning blame, finding fault, and making hasty judgments of all kinds. Turning off that thinking takes conscious effort and attention. Slow down. If you are not calm, you will not be able to hear what the other person is saying.

Here are three steps to achieving a calm mind:

1. Fix your the intention to be calm; tell (or remind) yourself that your first responsibility is to hear what the other person is saying.
2. Take a few deep, slow breaths; this can help create that calm.
3. Consciously turn away from other thoughts when they intrude.

If all of your efforts to keep your mind calm and open are not working, do not pretend. If you *can't* hear because you are distracted or upset, find another time, or place, or way to talk. You don't have to rationalize it or explain it right here and right now. As calmly and clearly as possible, excuse yourself from the conversation. "I'll get back to you soon." "I am working on a tight deadline right now. Let's set up a better time to talk." "I need to take a break." "I can't hear you right now." Acknowledge your intention to listen, "We need to talk about this. Right now doesn't work for me."

Courage

For a manager who is receiving a complaint about a behavior or action, it takes courage to listen to a message you may not want to hear, to step into the unknown. It takes courage to admit that you may not have all the information or all the answers, or that you may be wrong. It takes courage to be willing to consider changing your mind or direction. Courage is not the absence of fear but, rather, the willingness to enter into an uncomfortable situation even in the face of fear. If someone is disagreeing with you, or blaming you, you may feel anxious, nervous, or even afraid. Having courage is being able to stay with a discussion when you may hear something you do not want to hear.

When Hal went into the boss's office to express a concern about how the new contract was being administered, he had a few ideas about ways to improve the cost tracking. Since this was the first time the office had contracted out these services, the boss was anxious about how the process might work from the start. In response to her anxiety, she stopped Hal midsentence and called the contractor to register a complaint. If she had had the courage to listen to all that Hal had to say, he would have provided the answers that she needed. In her haste to fix the problem she perceived, she did not let Hal finish his explanation and she created more confusion.

Curiosity

In a difficult conversation, becoming curious may not be your first response. However, if you calm your own thinking, and can hold onto your courage, you can listen with curiosity: What is she saying to me? Why does he think that? What is she upset about? What did she see that I didn't see? Even silence can be golden; it can allow others to gather their thoughts. Please note: There is a clear difference between *listening* to someone and *agreeing* with the person.

> *There are many benefits to this process of listening. The first is that good listeners are created as people feel listened to. Listening is a reciprocal process—we become more attentive to others if they have attended to us.*
>
> —Margaret J. Wheatley

Why bother with this curiosity thing? For one, you will probably learn a lot about what people are thinking and why. For another, they will be much more ready and able to hear you if they have had a chance to unload what is on their own minds first.

CONSIDER THAT OTHERS:

- Think their views are well grounded.
- Want to do the "right" thing.

- Can see things that you miss.
- Miss things you can see.

What Are You Listening For?

Often, what a person starts out talking about may not be what an individual really wants to express. As listener, your calm demeanor, your patience, and your willingness to hear what is said will encourage him or her to say more. Listen for the expression of needs, beliefs, and expectations—things that are often below the surface of the original statements.

What do all people need? First, we need to be heard, to be taken seriously, to be respected. We need the simple acknowledgment that, yes, who we are and what we think matters, whether we are bosses or employees, managers and supervisors or staff. As you develop your own listening skills, this is the place to start. Then you can listen further to hear and understand the needs, concerns, expectations and interests of the person you are conversing with. If you can see something from another person's point of view, it is easier to identify common goals.

HOW TO LISTEN

1. Stop talking.
2. Get rid of distractions.
3. Don't judge prematurely.
4. Listen for key ideas.
5. Ask honest questions.
6. Paraphrase to confirm that you have heard the message.
7. Suspend your own thoughts.
8. Listen empathetically. Put yourself in the other person's shoes.
9. Trust that each person is speaking the truth from his or her own perspective.

The Listener's Tools

Here is a tool kit of skills for better listening.

LISTENER'S TOOLS

- Nonverbal
- Paraphrasing
- Asking questions

Nonverbal Listening

When we hear the word *listening*, we usually think of those funny, fleshy listening instruments protruding from the sides of our heads. But we listen with our eyes, as well. Most of the time, we are unconscious of this nonverbal listening ability. You need to practice being consciously aware of the visual information you are receiving and of the nonverbal communications you transmit when you are listening.

Albert Mehrabian conducted a series of well-known studies on communication, through which he developed what is now referred to as the "7-38-55 Rule."[1] Though we give considerable attention to words when we focus on listening, Mehrabian demonstrated that, on topics where we have emotional energy, most of our communication comes through nonverbally and through our tone of voice. Since this book is focused on conflicts, emotions are of prime importance in this communication. In our context, his studies carry significant weight. Here is a breakdown of the 7-38-55 Rule:

- About 55 percent of communication is relayed nonverbally. The way that a person punches the air for emphasis, or nods his head in agreement with his own words, or lifts an eyebrow communicates to the listener what he thinks about what he is saying. The woman who stands tall sends a message that she believes in herself and what she has to say. These nonverbal signals can be so subtle that you react to them even if you don't know that you have observed them.
- And 38 percent of communication is carried in a person's tone of voice. That is, the quality and resonance of the voice—sharp, pierc-

ing, soft, gentle, or firm; in the volume—loud or soft or somewhere in between; and in the pacing of the words—slow, deliberate, or staccato. As you read this, think of the variety of voice tones you might use to say "thank you," and the various meanings that may attach to those differences. For example, it is possible to say "thank you" in a tone of voice that does not mean thank you at all.

➤ A mere 7 percent of what we communicate on matters of some emotional weight is contained in the words themselves. To clarify, if the message you are sending is the time for the next meeting, or the technical data that were in the report, these percentages do not apply. In those communications, fully 100 percent of the message may be in the words themselves. When people are discussing more difficult issues, though, the importance of nonverbal and voice tone communication dramatically increases.

Consider This

- ☑ List as many examples of nonverbal communication as you can (e.g., smiling, frowning, arms crossed, and so on).
- ☑ Which of these nonverbal communications can have more than one meaning?

Some aspects of our nonverbal communication are universal. You can read the smile on the photo of a child a half a world away and see the joy that is there. Other nonverbal communication is learned, however, or is an expression of individual personality traits. In addition, there can be several interpretations to the look on a person's face or his or her body posture. This is where the old question comes in, "What does *that* look mean?"

Most of our nonverbal listening is unconscious, automatic. When you are *not* conscious of how you perceive the moment, however, you open the way for misinterpretations. You can easily place your own assumptions on the nonverbal communication you observe. Because you are often not conscious of your interpretations, your assumptions may be wrong about what others intend. Maybe he is not making eye contact because that intensity makes it difficult for him to think—or to hear. Maybe she is laughing because she is nervous, not because she finds the

situation humorous. Maybe his arms are crossed because he is chilly. Maybe the scowl on her face is a response to the bad news she got last night. Maybe she is not smiling because she did not get enough sleep.

Eye contact—when it's appropriate, when it's not; the length of time; and all sorts of other variables—is learned within our families and cultures. Though my mother has been gone for many years, I can still hear her voice saying to a much younger me, "I'm talking to you, girl, look at me." The message was clear and repeated. Other children grew up in different types of homes and heard quite different messages about eye contact—that it is disrespectful, or rude, or suggestive. In a conversation, you may assume that another individual is not listening to you because of you own cultural assumptions. Are your assumptions accurate or not—how much do you really know?

Thirteen people sat at tables around the classroom. For the last exercise of the day, the class had a complex game designed to demonstrate cultural differences, with an extensive list of instructions. While they listened to the tape that explained the rules, I watched the group. One young woman sat back in her chair with her arms folded, her eyes at half-mast.

I thought to myself, *Okay. We only have twelve participants. She has obviously checked out.* When the instructions ended, I turned to the class to see if they understood the directions. "Could someone remind us of the rules?"

This young woman, the one I decided was "checked out," repeated the instructions almost verbatim. Her words shook me out of my automatic assumptions. She had listened and retained information by closing out the distractions of the classroom.

Nonverbal communication can give you considerable information about the speaker. However, it is possible to misinterpret what you see. Become attentive to what you are observing and to what you infer from what you see. This is easier to practice in low-stakes settings, where you are not on the spot to listen in a tense situation. Observe the people around you in meetings. Watch people in restaurants or airports or at the

mall—not listening to their conversations but just observing their body language. See how much information you can gather about their emotions and attitudes. For instance, much of the humor on TV is nonverbal. Watch for it. In a restaurant, you can see the tentative communication of a couple out on a first date. You can pick up a couple's romantic interest as they look into one another's eyes and lean into one another. You can also see the couple who has been together far too long—looking past one another, looking at their plates, avoiding eye contact.

In a group, our focus is often on the speaker. Look around the room at others while someone is speaking. Nonverbal communication reveals significant information about how the speaker's words are being received.

Awareness of nonverbal communication is not only important in observing what others are communicating but also in being attentive to what you are communicating as a listener. Observe your own nonverbal communication. Do you lean forward? Make eye contact? Sit back with your arms folded? Look at your watch or your cell phone? Do you keep one eye on the computer monitor or someone else walking down the hallway when a colleague comes into your office to talk? Ask yourself, *Am I communicating what I want to communicate to this person about my willingness to listen?*

To listen fully to another, listen nonverbally. Turn away from the computer to face the person speaking. Make eye contact—not staring the individual down, but showing calm interest in who he is and what he is saying. You can hear better if you also attend nonverbally.

Graduate school for me was two nights a week—Tuesdays and Thursdays, from 4:30 to 10:00 P.M. This made going to school possible while working a full-time job. By the time the last class on Thursday night rolled around, most of us were exhausted and listening was a daunting task. Our ability to listen was further challenged by sitting in a classroom where the world's most boring professor delivered the lecture.

One Thursday night, a friend told me before the class, "I'm just going to look like I am listening." As I sat in my usual seat in

the back of the room, I observed her. She sat in the front row, opened her notebook, made eye contact, and nodded at various points.

After class she said, "You know, the darnedest thing happened—he actually had something to say!"

Listening with your body and mind signals to the speaker that you are, in fact, listening. And it can actually help you hear what is being said.

Paraphrasing

Paraphrasing, also known as mirroring, or reflecting, is restating in your own words what you have heard the other person say. This can be a powerful tool when emotions are running high. When you are sincerely trying to hear and understand what another person is saying, paraphrasing communicates that intention.

Paraphrasing well begins with time spent listening well: listening for content, feeling, meaning, and context. It is *not* simply repeating everything that the other person has said. It is hearing what is being said, distilling it, and identifying to the best of your ability the key points of the message, and then asking as a question, "Is this what you mean?"

Paraphrasing can also be useful in turning off your own thoughts. At the beginning of this chapter, I compared how fast people think to how fast they talk. If you commit to yourself, "Before I respond, let me make sure I've understood what she is saying," it will help you to push the pause button on your own thinking. It can help slow down your judgments, rebuttals, opinions, or justifications.

As soon as Art set his tray on the table in the cafeteria, he launched into a tidal wave of words. "I can't believe that new schedule you posted this morning. I haven't had a day off in two weeks. I have been here weekends. When I think I am going to get a day off, something comes up and I've got to come in to cover for someone else. Give me a break!"

Jan's first thought was to tell him how short staffed they were, how the home office hadn't approved hiring any new staff for the last two months, how everyone was going to have to pull their weight until they could see daylight again. Fortunately, she caught herself midstream. "Before I respond, let me slow down and just listen to what he has to say."

When it sounded like Art was done, Jan paraphrased, "Wow. It sounds like you are really exhausted. And the new schedule doesn't give you any relief. Is that it?" Art's response was not what she expected. He then told her about the trouble he was having at home. His wife was sick and his son wasn't doing well in school. He acknowledged the difficulties the team had with staffing. "Everything just seems to pile on at the same time, you know?"

Jan realized that Art was not looking for an answer, for her to fix anything. He was, in fact, just blowing off some steam. Her paraphrase told him that she was willing to listen.

Paraphrasing takes thought and practice. There is no cookbook answer about how you do it. There are, however, some helpful do's and don'ts.

Some Do's of Paraphrasing

➤ Do keep your voice tentative. "So, it sounds like you are concerned about when the decision will be made?" Ask if you have understood. If you *ask* a person about your understanding of what you are hearing, she will often tell you more. If you are wrong, she can easily clarify what she has said or what you have heard. "No, I don't think I provided enough information when I submitted my application." If you have captured what she has said, she will often tell you more. "Yes, I really want that position. There is another opportunity in another department I wonder if I should apply for." Or she may simply state with relief, "Yeah. That's it."

What a relief it is to finally be understood. If there were a disagreement hanging in the air, the energy for an argument often dissolves in that moment. The genie named and seen melts back into the bottle. The

wind drops out of the sails. There are lots of metaphors here for this moment of magic. Once she knows that her message has been received, her mind is clearer. She now has room to hear what you are saying.

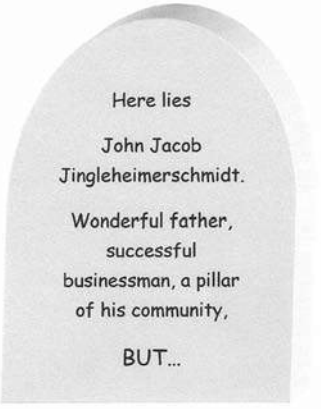
➤ Do include facts *and* feelings. "It sounds like you were disappointed you didn't get that assignment. Is that it?" The fact in this case—the person didn't get the assignment; the feeling was disappointment. It may be that the person never used the word *disappointed* but as you listened and watched him talking (the nonverbal communication), that seemed to be the emotion he was feeling. When you manage to paraphrase both the facts and the feelings, the speaker hears a powerful message—that you really have heard and are trying to understand what is being expressed. Often, you have helped the speaker understand as well what they are trying to express. Here are a few other feeling words that may capture negative emotions: *frustrated, anxious, upset*.

Some Don'ts of Paraphrasing

➤ Don't repeat everything the other person has said. Parroting back is not paraphrasing. Rather, paraphrasing is *distilling* what you have heard into the essence of what is important.

A student recently told me about her frustration with paraphrasing. Here is how she described the incident: She was facilitating a high-level meeting at the Department of Defense. At each statement the general said, this student said, "So what I hear you saying is…." She repeated this time and again. The general in the meeting finally exploded: "Quit repeating every [expletive] thing I say." "Where did I go wrong?" she asked. Rather than paraphrasing a few key points to clarify her understanding, she was parroting everything the general said.

➤ Don't simply say "I understand." "I understand" conveys nothing. You may think you understand, but what you understand may be totally different from what the speaker intends. "Oh, yes … I understand." When someone says that to me in the middle of a disagreement, my



immediate reaction is, "You have no clue what is going on with me." Sometimes I hear this remark as simply a way to dismiss the topic. If, on the other hand, the other person takes the time and thought to say, "Here is what I think you are saying …" I hear and appreciate the effort.

➤ Don't insert the word *but* at the end, as in "So, it sounds like you're disappointed that you didn't get that assignment, *but* you really don't have the skills that Joseph has." No longer are you trying to hear what the other is saying; you are now disagreeing, giving your side of the story, arguing your own point. The first task is to listen—to hear and understand what she is saying, before you respond to anything. *But* in the middle of a sentence negates everything that comes before it. *However* or *on the other hand* are just fancy ways of saying "but."

A word of caution: Using paraphrasing as a "trick" you learned in a communication class will often be heard as just that—a trick. People lose patience with someone who is toying with them, who is not sincerely trying to understand what they are saying.

Consider This

How would you paraphrase the following statements?

- ☑ *Situation*: The supervisor has passed on a change in work priorities from the top office.

  Employee says: "This is the third time this month you have changed your priorities. I never know what you are going to want tomorrow. It's pointless to get started on this if you are just going to change it again."
- ☑ *An employee says to you*: "I wish I had *your* job. Every time I come to your office you are on the phone, while we have to do all the work."
- ☑ *Situation*: The employee is not implementing a supervisor's ideas.

  Employee says: "I was on this job long before you came here. I don't need you to tell me how to do it."

Reflect on your paraphrases: Have you accurately captured the speaker's concern (content *and* feeling)? Did you include both the facts and the feelings they might be expressing? Did you avoid judgments or advice?

Asking Questions

The third skill in the tool box, Asking Questions is all about curiosity. I wonder what she is upset about? What happened? Why is he so mad? What made her smile? Why is he in such a good mood today? When we are listening with curiosity, we are listening for answers. Even if we have not verbalized a question, we are waiting to hear an answer.

Psychiatrist Bob Mauer says, "The mind can't refuse a question." What does the mind do with a statement? The mind can refuse to let a statement in, with a simple, "No, that is not the way it is." But a question causes the brain to stop and think, "How do I answer that?" When you are listening to someone and want to make a statement, pause and think, "How can I ask a question instead?" Often, asking a question may help open the dialogue. "How does that relate to our previous approach?" "Can you please help me understand?" "Would you be interested in my experience/perspective/thoughts?"

Practicing asking powerful questions enhances your ability to listen. Some questions give people an open invitation to share their thoughts; other questions are likely to put people on the defensive. "Why did you do that?" "Why did you think that was a good idea?" Questions that begin with *why* often leave people feeling that they are being grilled. You need to ask questions that encourage a person to open up, not questions that evoke an interrogation room.

Questions generally come in two categories: close-ended and open-ended. Closed-ended questions ask for a yes or no response or a specific, short answer. "What time did you get to work this morning?" is a closed-ended question, requiring a simple answer, as is "Did you call in sick?" There are times when close-ended questions give you the information that you need and may be appropriate. On the other hand, open-ended questions invite the responder to answer with a broad range of information. "What do you like about your job?" (an open-ended ques-

tion) will give you more information than "Do you like your job?" (a closed-ended question).

In general, questions that begin with *what* or *how* or *why* invite more full responses. Questions are also embedded in your tone of voice. A lift on the end of the sentence can turn a statement into a question: "You thought I was disagreeing with you?" Be aware of the words you use, as well as your tone of voice when asking questions.

To open the conversation as much as possible, choose questions that are open-ended and use a nonconfrontational tone of voice. Then, to avoid the interrogation mode, ask yourself, "How would I react to the question I am about to ask?"

When you ask a question, wait for a response. Give the other person time to think, time to form an answer and to tell you. For some of us, this goes against our natural rhythms and responses. Our fear of silence is pounding in our ears. As soon as we ask the question, uncomfortable with any silence that may be hanging in the air, we rush to fill the void with our own answers, or maybe another question. The more comfortable you become with silence, the more apt you will be to practice listening and allow people to talk.

Types of Questions to Ask

- Clarifying questions: "I didn't understand what you meant by that phrase, 'loaded for bear.' Could you tell me more, please?"
- Digging deeper questions, to get more information: "What else happened that made you feel this way?"
- Questions that create doubt in the other's mind as to the viability of their positions. If we were to implement that suggestion, where would the money come from?

Yolanda wanted to take several vacation days the following week. The company policy required that vacation days be requested at least two weeks in advance. When she asked her boss why he wouldn't bend the rules for her "just this once," he asked her a question, "How would the other staff feel if you didn't have to follow the rules and they did?"

If you want to be a better listener, be curious. Consider: What do you know? What do you *think* you know? What do you know *really*? What do you not know? What would you like to know more about? Then think about asking questions that will help you to understand more.

Hearing a Complaint

Sometimes in a difficult conversation, the conversation comes around to the other person's views of you. She may have concerns or criticisms of actions you have taken. How do you respond? First, you listen. Consider what she is saying—give yourself time to mull it over. If you decide, after giving yourself a reasonable amount of time and energy considering her point of view, that the criticism is unwarranted, you may say so. If, on the other hand, you recognize that the criticism is fair, acknowledge it. Apologize, commit to improving, and even say "thank you" for giving you feedback that you needed.

Have the courage to hear a complaint. Begin by opening your thinking:

- Take a deep breath and remind yourself there may be something to learn here.
- Turn your back on win-lose thinking.
- View criticism as an opportunity for growth.
- Hear out the criticism without interrupting.
- Resist the temptation to launch a counterattack.
- Let the person know you understood by restating criticism in your own words. (This is *not* agreeing with the criticism but, rather, acknowledging what you heard.)
- Pay attention to both feelings and content.

Then, clarify what you have heard:

- Clarify what are facts and what may be perceptions.
- Clarify for yourself what harm was done and the emotional impact of your actions.
- Ask (with sincerity) what you could have done differently, and how it would have been better.

Most important, avoid:

- Shifting the blame for your actions to someone else.
- Justifying your actions.
- Making light of the situation.
- Attributing negative motives to the critic's actions.
- Distorting the complaint so you can dismiss it.

Listening takes energy, effort, and attention. There are no shortcuts. Learning to listen and to listen well takes practice over time. With patience, your skills will improve and your ability to resolve conflicts more easily will be remarkable. The rewards will be well worth the investment.

Note

1. Albert Mehrabian, *Silent Messages*, 1st ed. (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1971).