

# T Confident Listening

**TECHNOLOGY FACILITATES CERTAIN KINDS OF** connection. Let's say you are giving an important proposal to a customer. Before 1973, you mailed it and waited about two days for the customer to get it; then FedEx came on the scene, and your customer got the proposal the next day. A decade later, the fax revolution hit; the lag time between transmission and reception was reduced to minutes. Now, of course, communication is instantaneous via e-mail or shared files using Internet technology.

Sure, we're "plugging in." But are we connecting? Or are we so caught up in the flood of information that we're missing a simple but essential element?

One area in which technology fails miserably is rapport. The basic currency of human connection, rapport is a routine part of Sales Theory 101: Before conducting any business—phone call, meeting, presentation, performance review—establish rapport.

Whether we're selling a product or service, an idea, or even ourselves, we were taught to spend perhaps 20% of the time building rapport, 70% giving our pitch, and then about 10% getting feedback. Better models suggest that the first 30%-40% of a conversation be devoted to rapport, 30%-40% to giving the pitch, and the last 20% to feedback.

Best of all, however, is a conversation that isn't a straight line but a sphere with three levels. On the outer

ring, "pitch" and feedback run in a continuous give-and-take. Supporting that ring is another: rapport. And at the center of it all is something we call confident listening.

Traditional rapport-building techniques fall short because the emphasis is on the wrong pronoun. It's all about making sure that you are comfortable with me. So I ask about the family, talk about last night's sports event, tell a joke to demonstrate that I'm "just one of the guys."

Far more powerful is a mode of listening that allows the other person to feel comfortable and confident in *himself*.

How do you practice confident listening?

Remember that each person brings his or her own set of expectations, perceptions, and perspectives to every conversation. Too often we assume that if someone disagrees with us, they must be stupid, uninformed or insulting—or any of a number of uncomfortable adjectives. We take disagreements personally. Since what we think is "real" to us, surely the other person must see it our way. Why are they

being so stubborn? There we are in the middle of a conversation, distracted by confusion, frustration, and resentment.

The simple fact is that the other person is just operating from a different viewpoint, a different way of looking at things, a different set of thoughts that look *absolutely real to her*. Even if her words sound like a personal attack,



the root of the problem is an ordinary fact of life: We are all doing the best that we can to communicate from a perspective shaped by what looks real to us and that is uniquely ours.

Consider how Shirley dealt with a breakdown in rapport. Shaken after a difficult conversation with her largest customer, she told us she was angry because he had complained about her team. They were all working so hard; how could he be so unfair? We talked about what was going on for that customer. What pressure was his boss putting on him? What were his customers demanding? What was making him feel insecure?

Shirley stepped into her customer's shoes and looked at the possible influences on his mood—on the factors shaping his “reality.” Without knowing the specifics and merely staying calm and curious, she was able to feel compassion for his insecurity. And she realized that she could re-establish connection just by letting the customer sense that she was listening with a desire to understand.

To develop this kind of listening skill, adapt the “Left-Column Conversation” exercise described in Peter Senge's *Fifth Discipline*.

- Draw a vertical line down the center of a piece of paper.
- Recall a recent difficult conversation. On the right side of the paper, write down everything that was said—by you and by the other person.
- On the left side, write down all the things you thought but didn't say. Notice how busy your brain was while the other person was talking. Were your thoughts so loud that they interfered with your ability to listen to what was actually being said?

- Finally, review what you wrote in the left-hand column. How much of your mental dialogue reflected assumptions—about what the other person was thinking, about her motives, intentions, expectations? How much evidence did you really have to support your assumptions?

The road to hell in communications is paved not with good intentions but with assumptions that set up us/them, right/wrong interactions. When you catch yourself making an assumption, switch to a stance of curiosity. “How interesting that she would say that. I wonder what she sees or feels that I don't?”

Graceful managers know that the key to powerful connections is to attend to their own mental well-being. Focus on feelings of kindness and compassion. See the other person—not as an adversary or as an obstacle and not as a problem or as the person giving orders. Instead, see that person as a human being, trying to do the best she can, trying to overcome insecurities—just as we all are.

When we presume evil intent, we easily succumb to our own negative reactions. That narrows our view of possible solutions and resolutions. We expand our options as we become curious about why someone took certain actions or made certain statements.

Acknowledging that everyone is doing the best he or she can doesn't mean we condone bad behavior. Neither do we become a doormat. Seeing how thought leads to behavior helps us keep balanced. And that gives us a responsiveness in the moment—the key to confident listening.

Warm feelings are contagious. It's hard to remain upset very long when someone else is calm. Our mental

resilience helps the other person feel secure. The more secure he is, the more his own insight is accessible, and the easier it becomes to resolve even the thorniest issue.

Whatever is going on with the other person, we must find even the tiniest spot in ourselves that respects his thinking. That commits us to true rapport and gives others the space they need to have a new thought.

Remember these three steps to confident listening:

1. Recognize that we're all doing the best we can, based on our different realities.
2. Instead of assuming expectations or intent, be curious in the face of defensive or offensive behavior. By asking the most obvious questions that get to the heart of what the person is communicating, clarity and, occasionally, new insight will emerge.
3. Be patient, kind, and compassionate to *yourself*. The calmer you are, the easier it is to hear what the other person really means—because your own head isn't cluttered with old answers.

With rapport grounded in well-being, listening becomes a dance of confidence. ■

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