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Listening Skills

How to Become a More Empathetic Listener

by Jamil Zaki

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Summary. When the subject of how to be a good listener comes up, psychologists often talk about the value of "perspective-taking" — that is, projecting ourselves into the lives of those we're listening to. This has been shown to make us grow

more generous and less prejudiced toward them, but it's a flawed way to understand others, because it treats empathy as a solo sport, encouraging listeners simply to try to understand what someone else is going through. What truly good listeners do, however, is work collaboratively with other people to understand them. Scientists call this "perspective-getting," in which one person uses questions and active listening to understand someone else's feelings. Perspective-getting boosts mutual understanding, improves relationships, and helps people discover common ground. In this article, the author, a professor of psychology at Stanford University, offers readers guidance on how to practice perspective-getting and get better at it over time. **close**

In 1984, the physician Howard Beckman and his colleagues recorded 74 medical conversations, all of which began with a doctor asking a patient what their concern was. Seventy percent of patients were interrupted within 20 seconds; just 2% got to finish their thought. The study was widely shared, but fifteen years later, Beckman found doctors were still interrupting just as often, and just as quickly.

Quiet, attentive listening doesn't always come naturally to professionals, which can make it harder to do their job. Doctors who talk over their patients might miss out on information they need to diagnose them. Financial advisors, tutors, or managers who don't take a few minutes to listen might waste a few hours — or months — guiding their clients, students, and teams astray. Why, then, is it so natural for professionals to dominate conversation? One reason is that many of us have the wrong idea about what it means to be socially skilled.

I’ve studied empathy for the last two decades. As scientists define it, empathy is the ability to share, understand, and care for others’ experiences. But how do *non*-scientists define this term? Over the years, I’ve asked thousands of people what they think empathy is and gotten hundreds of replies. One definition stands out the undisputed champion, nominated by far more people than any other: “walking a mile in someone else’s shoes.”

Psychologists call this “perspective-taking,” and they’ve shown that it can be a powerful tool. Research finds that when people project themselves into the lives of others, they grow more generous and less prejudiced toward them. Seeing myself in you, I might treat you better.

But even if perspective-taking helps us care, it’s a flawed way to understand. Placing yourself in someone else’s situation, you might end up with a clear picture of how *you* would feel if you were them, but not how they actually feel. After all, you would never try to figure out whether a friend was comfortable in their stilettos, crocs, or sneakers by putting them on yourself. Their shoes probably don’t fit you, and neither does their story.

Perspective-taking is riddled with biases, which are even more dangerous because perspective-takers don’t see those biases. Across 25 experiments, the researchers Tal Eyal and Nick Epley asked people to imagine themselves in other people’s situations and discovered that perspective-taking made those people more confident they had gained social insight but not any more *accurate* about what others really felt.

Eyal and Epley call this phenomenon "perspective *mis*taking," and it's everywhere. Experts don't realize what non-experts don't understand, so they use technical jargon instead of plain language. In conflict, people disagree on what they disagree about, intensifying division. And at work, individuals with power fail to understand the struggles of those who don't have it. An executive considering a return-to-office policy might imagine how they would feel working in person. They can afford a home close to headquarters, have great childcare, and command respect among colleagues, so their thought experiment paints a rosy picture — one not shared by most of their team.

Most of all, perspective-taking treats empathy as a solo sport: The empathizer should simply understand what someone else is going through. But that's not empathy. It's telepathy — which, of course doesn't exist.

In fact, no one can empathize alone. What good advisors, teachers, doctors, therapists, and friends do each day is empathize collaboratively, working with other people to understand them.

Scientists call this "perspective-getting," in which one person uses questions and active listening to get to the bottom of someone else's feelings. Perspective-getting is less famous than perspective-taking but much more precise. It helps people accurately understand one another. Research also finds that when people high in power engage in perspective-getting, individuals who don't have power feel "heard," improving relationships

between them. And when people in the middle of a disagreement stop and engage in the act of perspective-getting, they discover common ground and become more-convincing advocates for their own ideas.

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Especially for leaders and experts, it takes courage to admit we don’t understand others, and give them room to teach us. But thankfully, any of us can practice perspective-getting and get better at it over time. Here are a few places to start.

Try “looping” to understand.

Looping is a simple perspective-getting technique used by journalists, mediators, detectives, and others whose job it is to get information from people. A “looper” asks a question and gives the other person time to answer but doesn’t stop there. They then paraphrase what they’ve heard, and follow up with a phrase such

as, “Is that right?” or “What else am I missing?” The two repeat the process until both people agree on what one of them is going through.

Looping is simple but can be enormously powerful. Loopers build a precise sense of what others feel but also exert an influence on the person answering their questions. Feeling truly heard, those people disclose more. Asked to elaborate, they might find new ways to describe their experience, or even discover what they think or want in new ways. Looping also deepens conversations and connections.

Clear your mind and reset your goals.

It’s a familiar experience: We “listen” to someone else but really are just waiting for our turn to speak, mentally preparing what we’ll say. For leaders and experts, it’s easy to believe that our job is to have all the answers, including about what others need or feel. That pressure can encourage perspective-mistaking and all the damage it brings.

Especially if you are in a position of influence or leadership, try reframing your role. Instead of trying to provide answers, think about the best questions you can ask. Or do even less, and simply put all your energy into being present. Listening might feel passive, but think again. In one study, pairs of friends played the role of speaker and listener. While speakers shared stories, some listeners were told to pay close attention, and others were given a

second task that distracted them. When listeners were distracted, speakers told less fluent stories and were more likely to forget what they'd said.

If you sneakily check your email while your colleague speaks in a virtual meeting, you're probably being less sneaky than you think. People realize when you're not listening, and when you are. "Good" silence and "bad" silence feel totally different, and both shape conversations, as well as communities. Workplaces characterized by strong, active listening track performance, trust, and loyalty. To tap into these benefits, we can remember that sometimes good leadership means saying less, not more.

Run a post-conversation audit.

After talking with someone, ask yourself: What did I learn from this person? In what way was I wrong before but am a little less wrong now? If your answer is that you were perfectly accurate before, and are still that way, you might not be listening as well as you think — and this could be a great chance to give looping another try.

Too often, we treat empathy as a performance. Trying to show how well we understand people, we end up missing the cues that could help us truly connect. Perspective-getting leans into another idea: Every conversation is a joint project, done best when we make space to learn from one another.

Jamil Zaki is a professor of psychology at Stanford University and the author of *The War for Kindness*. His new book, *Hope for Cynics: The Surprising Science of Human Goodness*, will be published in September of 2024.

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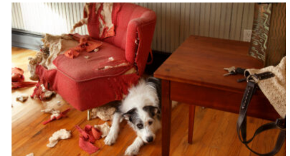

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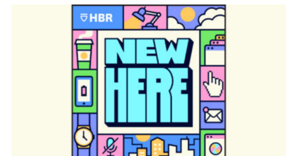

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