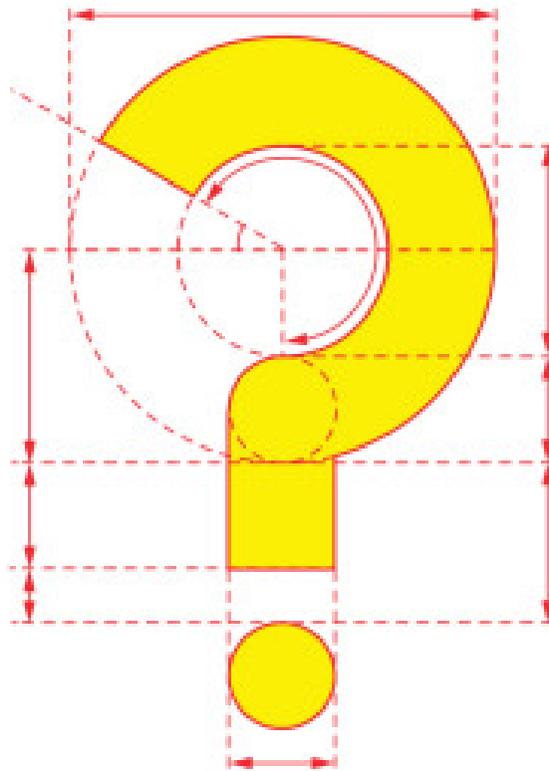


# The Power of Listening in Helping People Change

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Giving performance feedback is one of the most common ways managers help their subordinates learn and improve. Yet, research revealed that feedback could actually hurt performance: More than 20 years ago, one of us (Kluger) analyzed 607 experiments on feedback effectiveness and found that feedback caused performance to decline in 38% of cases. This happened with both positive and negative feedback, mostly when the feedback threatened how people saw themselves.

One reason that giving feedback (even when it's positive) often backfires is because it signals that the boss is in charge and the boss is judgmental. This can make employees stressed and defensive, which makes it harder for them to see another person's perspective. For example, employees can handle negative feedback by downplaying the importance of the person providing the feedback or the feedback itself. People may even reshape their social networks to avoid the feedback source in order to restore their self-esteem. In other words, they defend themselves by bolstering their attitudes against the person giving feedback.

We wanted to explore whether a more subtle intervention, namely asking questions and listening, could prevent these consequences. Whereas feedback is about telling employees that they need to change, listening to employees and asking them questions might make them *want* to change. In a recent paper, we consistently demonstrated that experiencing high quality (attentive, empathic, and non-judgmental) listening can positively shape speakers' emotions and attitudes.

## What Makes Listening Powerful?

Listening as an avenue for self-change was advocated by the psychologist Carl Rogers in a classic 1952 HBR paper. Rogers theorized that when speakers feel that listeners are being empathic, attentive, and non-judgmental, they relax and share their inner feelings and thoughts without worrying about what listeners will think of them. This safe state enables speakers to delve deeper into their consciousness and discover new insights about themselves – even those that may challenge previously held beliefs and perceptions.

For example, consider an employee who believes that she always respects her colleagues' and customers' feelings. If someone tells her this isn't true, this will likely lead her to protect her view of herself by doubling down on her belief and discounting the other person's judgment. In contrast, if someone asks her to

For example, in one laboratory experiment, we assigned 112 undergraduate students to serve as either a speaker or a listener and paired them up, sitting face-to-face. We asked speakers to talk for 10 minutes about their attitudes toward a proposal for basic-universal income or a possible requirement that all university students must also volunteer. We instructed the listeners to “listen as you listen when you are at your best.” But we randomly distracted half of the listeners by sending them text messages (e.g., “What event irritated you the most recently?”) and instructed them to answer briefly (so the speakers saw that they were distracted). Afterward, we asked the speakers questions about whether they were worried about what their partner thought of them, whether they acquired any insight while talking, and whether they were confident in their beliefs.

describe her interactions with other people at work and listens attentively while encouraging her to occasionally elaborate, she is likely to feel more secure with the listener and open up in ways she might not otherwise. She might remember incidents where she was disrespectful to costumers or got angry at her colleagues, and be more open to discussing them and ways to change.

We found that speakers paired with good listeners (versus those paired with distracted listeners) felt less anxious, more self-aware, and reported higher clarity about their attitudes on the topics. Speakers paired with undistracted listeners also reported wanting to *share* their attitude with other people more compared with speakers paired with distracted listeners.

Another benefit of high-quality listening is that it helps speakers see both sides of an argument (what we called “attitude complexity”). In another paper we found that speakers who conversed with a good listener reported attitudes that were more complex and less extreme – in other words, not one-sided.

In another lab experiment we instructed 114 undergraduates at a business school to talk for 12 minutes about their fitness to become a manager in the future. We randomly assigned these speakers to one of three listening groups (good, moderate, and poor). Speakers in the good listening condition talked to a trained listener, who was either a certified management coach or a trained social-work student. We asked these trained listeners to use all their listening skills, such as asking questions and reflecting. Speakers in the moderate listening condition talked to another undergraduate at the business school who was instructed to listen as he or she usually does. Speakers in the poor listening condition talked with a student from the theatre department who was instructed to act distracted (e.g., by looking aside and playing with their smartphones).

After the conversation, we asked the speakers to indicate separately the extent to which they thought they were suitable for becoming managers. Based on these answers, we calculated their attitude complexity (whether they saw both strengths and weaknesses that would affect their ability to be a manager) and extremity (whether they saw only one side). We found that speakers who talked to a good listener saw both strengths and weaknesses more than those in the other conditions. Speakers who talked to a distracted listener mostly described their strengths and barely acknowledged their weaknesses. Interestingly, the speakers in the poor listening condition were those that, on average, reported feeling the most suitable for becoming a manager.

We tested the relevance of these lab findings in three field studies conducted among city-hall employees, high-tech workers, and teachers (180 workers, in total). In these studies, we asked employees to talk about their colleagues, their supervisor, or about a meaningful experience at work, before and after participating in a listening intervention known as a listening circle. In the listening circle, employees are invited to talk openly and honestly about an issue, like a meaningful experience they had at work. They're trained to listen without interrupting, and only one person talks at a time.

We replicated all of our lab findings. Namely, employees who participated in the listening circles reported lower social anxiety, higher attitude complexity, and lower attitude extremity regarding various work-related topics (e.g., attitude towards a manager) in comparison to employees who participated in one of the control conditions that did not involve trained listeners.

In concert, our findings suggest that listening seems to make an employee more relaxed, more self-aware of his or her strengths and weaknesses, and more willing to reflect in a non-defensive manner. This can make employees more likely to cooperate (versus compete) with other colleagues, as they become more interested in sharing their attitudes, but not necessarily in trying to persuade others to adopt them, and more open to considering other points of view.

Going back to giving feedback, of course we do not claim that listening must replace feedback. Rather, it seems that listening to employees talk about their own experiences first can make giving feedback more productive by helping them feel psychologically safe and less defensive.

## **Listening has its enemies**

Our findings support existing evidence that managers who listen well are perceived as people leaders, generate more trust, instill higher job satisfaction, and increase their team's creativity. Yet, if listening is so beneficial for employees and for organizations, why is it not more prevalent in the workplace? Why are most employees not listened to in the way they want? Research shows that a few barriers often stand in the way:

1. **Loss of power.** Research from our team has shown that some managers may feel that if they listen to their employees they are going to be looked upon as weak. But at the same time, it's been shown that being a good listener means gaining prestige. So it seems managers must make a tradeoff between attaining status based on intimidation and getting status based on admiration.

2. **Listening consumes time and effort.** In many instances, managers listen to employees under time pressure or while they're distracted by other thoughts or work. So listening is an investment decision: managers must put in the time to listen in order to see the future benefits.
3. **Fear of change.** High-quality listening can be risky because it entails entering a speaker's perspective without trying to make judgments. This process could potentially change the listener's attitudes and perceptions. We observed several times that when we trained managers to truly listen, they gained crucial insights about their employees – they were stunned to learn how little they knew about the lives of people they'd worked with for many years.

For example, several managers reported that when they tried listening to employees who they'd confronted about poor attendance, they learned that these employees were struggling with supporting a family member (a wife dying of cancer, a sibling with a mental disability). This realization threatened managers' attitudes and views about themselves – an experience called cognitive dissonance that can be difficult.

### **Tips for becoming a better listener**

Listening resembles a muscle. It requires training, persistence, effort, and most importantly, the intention to become a good listener. It requires clearing your mind from internal and external noise – and if this isn't possible, postponing a conversation for when you can truly listen without being distracted. Here are some best practices:

**Give 100% of your attention, or do not listen.** Put aside your smartphone, iPad, or laptop, and look at the speaker, even if they do not look back at you. In an ordinary conversation, a speaker looks at you occasionally to see that you're still listening. Constant eye contact lets the speaker feel that you are listening.

**Do not interrupt.** Resist the urge to interrupt before the speaker indicates that they are done for the moment. In our workshop, we give managers the following instruction: "Go to someone at your work who makes listening very hard on you. Let them know that you are learning and practicing listening and that today, you will only listen for \_ minutes (where the blank could be 3, 5, or even 10 minutes), and delay responding until the predetermined listening time is up, or even until the following day."

The managers are often amazed at their discoveries. One shared, “in 6 minutes, we completed a transaction that otherwise would have taken more than an hour”; another told us; “the other person shared things with me that I had prevented her from saying for 18 years.”

**Do not judge or evaluate.** Listen without jumping to conclusions and interpreting what you hear. You may notice your judgmental thoughts but push them aside. If you notice that you lost track of the conversation due to your judgments, apologize to the speaker that your mind was distracted, and ask them to repeat. Do not pretend to listen.

**Do not impose your solutions.** The role of the listener is to help the speaker draw up a solution themselves. Therefore, when listening to a fellow colleague or subordinate, refrain from suggesting solutions. If you believe you have a good solution and feel an urge to share it, use a question, such as “I wonder what will happen if you choose to do X?”

**Ask more (good) questions.** Listeners shape conversations by asking questions that benefit the speaker. Good listening requires being thoughtful about what the speaker needs help with most and crafting a question that would lead the speaker to search for an answer. Ask questions to help someone delve deeper into their thoughts and experiences.

Before you ask a question, ask yourself, “is this question intended to benefit the speaker or satisfy my curiosity?” Of course, there is room for both, but a good listener prioritizes the needs of the other. One of the best questions you can ask is, “Is there anything else?” This often exposes novel information and unexpected opportunities.

**Reflect.** When you finish a conversation, reflect on your listening and think about missed opportunities – moments you ignored potential leads or remained silent versus asking questions. When you feel that you were an excellent listener, consider what you gained, and how you can apply this type of listening in more challenging circumstances.

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