



January, 2020 In The Know Summary

The Zen of Listening

Mindful Communication in the Age of Distraction

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[The Zen of Listening](#), published in 2003, is a workbook with an assessment and activities designed to help us listen more deeply in the “age of distraction.” Shafir advises that we need do inner groundwork in order to become better listeners. The book is inspired by Shafir’s training as a speech pathologist and her husband’s experience as a Martial Arts instructor, where she observed how students of Martial Arts “listen” to each other and adjust movements accordingly. For example in Tai Chi, which translates to “supreme ultimate skill,” you learn you must first take a moment of pause to get grounded. Similarly, taking a moment of pause before a conversation is an important step toward becoming a better listener. As we discussed at this month’s book club, the concepts in the book are not new, but thinking about listening with the analogy of physical body/Martial Arts movements and philosophy helps spark insights into how to become a better listener.

Listening to Others

- First we must consider what the distractions are...We are distracted by *internal* thoughts such as our to-do lists, thoughts about what we did not get to do, or re-runs of past conversations. There are also *external* factors why we may not listen well. For example, an email pops onto your screen while you are on a conference call.
- If we are going to be mindful listeners, we must find a way to focus, take a moment to relax, and have a desire to understand and learn about the other person’s perspective. (This relates to the mind-body connection that is prevalent in Martial Arts.)
- Activity:
 - Watch the Fantasy Orchestra [Video](#)
 - Listen to the concert. Try to focus on one sound for as long as you can. Then shift back to listening to the whole concert.
 - Debrief: What did you notice? To what extent is it easier to listen if you close your eyes/remove visual distractions?
 - How do we balance all the elements that we receive (audio, visual) that contribute to the message? The author talks about being able to “absorb” all the elements that come in. This is different than tuning in to one element or tuning out other elements.

Listening to Ourselves

- “When in stillness, one listens with the heart. The ear is worth ten eyes.”
- To what extent does how much we “like” the sound help us listen? Do we have an affinity to the speaker or to the message? And if so, how does this help/hinder our listening?
- When talking, try to avoid making the conversation about you. Enable the other person to do more of the talking. Then identify: What did you learn that you did not know before?
- Create a sticky note with the words “Are you sure?” to help you get away from jumping to assumptions. In conversation, ask questions to enable your own understanding.
- Concept of “Getting into their Movie.” – The author describes the experience of watching a movie at the cinema. You go into a theater, settle down, relax into your seat, lean back, enjoy a soda/popcorn, the lights come down, it’s dark, and the movie plays. We start getting into the story and getting to know the characters. For that couple of hours we suspend disbelief. We get into the theme or emotions of the movie—excitement/joy/sadness/comedy. The movie alters our perspective. Then we step out of the movie theater. At that point, we decide whether we were agreeing with what was in the movie or not.

- This is an analogy for “getting into the flow” of a conversation and what the speaker is saying.
- Activity suggestion: (1) Go to a movie (2) Listen to a podcast or program on NPR. For each, think about the experience and how often you were able to listen fully vs. shifting focus to your other thoughts.
- There are a lot of opportunities to listen well—or not!
 - **“Listening Stoppers” – Denial** (“It’s not that bad” or “You’re making too big a deal of it”), **Interrogation, Giving Advice.**
 - Anecdote: A grandmother puts her grandson to bed. He says there are monsters in the closet. She does not go into denial. Instead, she reassures him and inquires... “Tell me about the monster. Where is the monster? Let’s get rid of him together.”
 - **“Listening Encouragers”** – Using Silence, Providing Reassurance, Paraphrasing.
- English is a very vocab-rich language. There are 800,000 words in the English language, of which we use 800 on a regular basis. There are 14,000 meanings for those 800 words. (That’s 17 meanings per word.) In terms of listening, are we hearing the right meaning? As we listen to ourselves, have we chosen the right word, and are we using it appropriately?
- Activity Suggestion: Eavesdrop on a conversation. See if you can identify “stoppers” and “encouragers” and then notice the impact on the conversation.
- Potential application with coaching clients – encourage them to get more curious. You may not necessarily know what someone means when they use a certain word. So, find out. “Dig in” and “get curious.”
- One participant shared: WAIT – “Why Am I Talking?”
- Another participant shared: She was struggling to focus at a meeting on a topic that she was not interested in. A reporter friend offered a tip: Pretend you are responsible for reporting on the topic. That mindset will help you listen deeply.
- The book was written in 2000—so there is not discussion of Smart Phones and other electronic distractions.
 - From author Celeste Hadley: Having a cell phone between two people is a distraction even if it does not belong to either of the people! Solution: Call it out! Acknowledge that it’s hard to do. Share this fact with people, and put phones away.
 - In a classroom/training setting: Encourage participants to do a “digital detox” or ask for a block of time (60 min or 90 min) vs. the whole day without a smart phone/laptop.
 - The famous 1970s marshmallow experiment was recreated with adults—but with [smart phones](#) vs. marshmallows.

Listening Under Stress

- Learning to listen to ourselves will help us become better listeners. Under stress...Borrow the “deflect that” concept from Martial Arts. That is, learn to take the momentum from your “opponent,” i.e., the energy that is coming at us, and redirect it. This is particularly important for high-stress situations.
- In a conversation, remember that the “Opening Remarks” are often the tip of the iceberg. The real issue comes out later—and requires listening to get there.
- One participant commented that it’s easy to say, “Tell me more” when you are not in conflict. Identify, when you feel you are under attack, what is the script that goes through your head? (“Are you kidding me?”) When you hear “Are you kidding me?” in your head, then you can say out loud, “Wow, I see things differently. Tell me more.”

Resources

- Laura Mendelow’s [blog](#)
- [Maryland Career Development Association](#) Conference (April 2020, Columbia, MD)
- [Career Thought Leaders](#) Conference (April 2020, Philadelphia, PA)
- Book: [Indistractable](#) by Ni Eyal – Quick read, tips to identify distractions and attractions

*The Chesapeake Bay Organizational Development Network (CBODN) Book Club is a monthly session, open to all learners. Each month, a presenter shares highlights from a book related to leadership, business, or coaching. There’s no obligation to pre-read the book. The session summary is intended to provide a recap of the conversation at Book Club, rather than serve as a thorough book summary. [Register here](#) for upcoming events. For a listing of Book Club summaries, [click here](#).