

Elite level listening: Why we underestimate the power to listen

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Do you know how to listen? A simple question and yet more difficult to answer than you might think. Having recently addressed one of Collas Crill's dispute resolution events, hostage negotiator and lead trainer at Scotland Yard's National Hostage and Crisis Negotiation Unit, [Richard Mullender](#), discusses why listening can be so difficult.

When giving talks and training, the first thing I do is ask my audience to describe to me what they think enables them to listen effectively. Sounds simple doesn't it? These are some of the answers I get:

- Maintain eye contact
- Ask open questions
- Summarise back what you have been told
- Talk about something interesting
- Nod your head, make a noise to show you are interested
- Mirror their body language
- Watch their body language
- Concentrate
- Listen carefully

What might surprise you is that I believe none of these have anything to do with listening. They are all important skills that have an important part to play in communicating your message or eliciting information, but they are not listening.

It has been said that, to listen, you have to use your ears, eyes, emotions and your whole body. This is a myth. You listen with your ears and you interpret what they say with your brain. You listen for facts, emotions, motivators, values and beliefs, levers and solutions.

Maintaining eye contact is important but it's looking, not listening. It may show the person you are paying attention and may help you to keep them talking but it is not listening. Asking open questions - again it gets the person talking but it is not listening, particularly if you ask too many questions. When you ask a question you tell me what is important to you and you lead the conversation. The best communicators let the other person lead the conversation.

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The same can be said for body language - if you don't know the person really well then you cannot read their body language. Often when people try too hard to read the body language in a situation they end up forgetting to listen.

Elite level listening is the identification, selection and interpretation of key words before turning this information into intelligence. Anyone can pick up facts, it's much more difficult to pick up the emotion and then use this to control a situation. Before you are able to persuade anyone, you need to get a better understanding of them; something you can only get by truly listening and understanding them.

As humans, we often interpret situations based on how it affects us. We think about the personal consequences of what we're listening to – what effect does this have on my life or can I compare this to a situation I have been in? In order to develop true listening skills, we need to strip back to this urge to identify with what we're listening to and hear it for what it is – what are they saying, what words are they using and what tone are they conveying in order to understand what it is that they mean.

Listening is hard work but here are my tips for elite level listening:

1. Know your outcome – before you start to listen, know what you want to happen from the situation
2. Listen for the key words – these will ensure you achieve your outcome
3. Ensure you understand exactly what they mean. Get clarity – don't make assumptions
4. Use your understanding of their words to reach your chosen outcome

Knowledge is not power; the application of knowledge is power – only once we have truly listened and understood a situation can we understand what action to take and regain control.

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