

A LESSON ON LISTENING :by Dr Suriyakhatun Osman

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**The biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has been accomplished.**

-George Bernard Shaw

The Father who did not listen

I was watching an old P Ramlee movie. It was Nasib Si Labu Labi. In one scene , Labu and Labi had gone to see the father of a lady their boss wanted to marry. The short little man was a very pleasant man who was a great talker. He asked them what they were there for and before they could answer he had gone on to speak of other things and every time Labu wanted to say something, he would interrupt and say something else. Finally, Labi caught hold of the gentleman's head and shut the man's mouth with his hand and then Labu was finally able to tell him their mission!

I had thought this could not actually happen in real life until I met a certain Dato. My husband and myself had gone to see him about something and it was the first time we had met him. We probably know more about him , his wife and his job than he knows about us. Perhaps he has even forgotten what we came to see him for . He asked me three times what I did and I told him but he was not listening .He also could not pronounce my name even though I told him several times. It reminded me of Daren's father in law in Bewitched since he never got Daren's name right ever!

I suppose such extremes of not listening are not common but then again have we really been listening ?Trainers, counselors , doctors teachers and parents are very fond of telling people what to do and how to do it. It is a paradigm that most of us probably lived with, that those in authority do all the talking and those who are not , do all the listening.

Listening coaches

People pay a coach to listen to them !Does a coach then have the listening skills to really listen ? What does the coach do with all the listening anyway? Is it enough just to be listened to?

In my opinion, deep listening does more to move a client than anything else combined! In fact without the deep listening, none of the other skills of a coach will be effective enough! You would think such a thing as listening would be as simple as allowing the ear to hear what people are saying but the truth is , it is not so simple !

Seek to understand

When I say something, I may not mean what you think I mean . It is therefore important to clarify what is being said . So many problems result from misunderstandings! Last weekend I got on a taxi at the Wangsa Maju LRT station and told him I want to go to Taman Melawati. In my usual dreamy manner I did not pay attention to his driving and soon found myself in Taman Melati!Whoa! The taxi driver certainly did not seek to understand and was pretty sure he brought me to where I wanted to go! Many of us are like this. We assume we know what the person talking to us meant to say and based on that assumption we act.

One way I seek to understand is by repeating what the person said . I might say something like," Let me get this clear. You said this.....Is this what you mean?" How many people you know actually do this? When we argue for instance we just want to drown out the other person's argument by speaking louder than him or her!

One of the activities I am fond of when I do group coaching is to pair people up and get them to listen to each other . They have to spend about five minutes just listening and are only allowed to ask questions to clarify . They could not give their opinions and even when they disagreed with what was being said ,they were told to just listen and seek clarification. Before the activity started I asked each partner to make an affirmation. The listener's affirmation is: I will listen deeply and seek to understand what my partner is saying. I will throw the light of awareness and be a mirror for my partner so they can see what they are saying. As for the talker their affirmation is: I will tell my partner the truth from the depth of my heart. I will be as honest as I possibly can and as direct and clear as I can in telling my partner what I want heard. The topic is usually something that the person wants some clarity on.

The results of this activity is usually extremely interesting and for me it is thought provoking . The majority of talkers feel good. They feel listened to and many actually got some insight into what they talked on even for the short duration of five minutes. There was once a fellow who whispered to me after the activity that he got annoyed with the listener echoing everything he said , so one must not over do it in trying to build a rapport. Listeners on the other hand usually feel happy listening because they feel good being of help to their talking partner Once in a while however , I get a disgruntled listener! One lady said she was upset because she had to listen and therefore could not talk. Another said they got upset because they could not interject with their objections.

### Body language

In the situation I mentioned above, the lady who did not like to listen folded her arms as she talked when it was her turn to talk. I had taken note of this as I went around observing the actions and body language of the activities couples. When it was time to make comments , she remarked that she liked being listened to even though she felt the listener was forced to listen and was not sincere in listening. I also noted when it was her turn to listen, she kept her arm folded even though her partner had her arms open and outstretched in front of her as if trying her best to reach out to her listener. To no avail! Up to the end of the session this listener held back and had her arms folded and admitted to not really enjoying being a listener! In the other listening couples at the same workshop I noted there was a lot of mirroring of each other. The listeners leaned forward a little , head cocked to one side and their arm and legs sometimes matched the talker . I had not instructed them to do this but the action was pretty spontaneous. When the person is listening, it is not just the ears, the eyes, the body and the heart listens as well.

### Our filters.

This lady I alluded to previously is a treasure of examples! When she said she knew the listener was not really interested and was just listening out of politeness , she was applying a filter . It was she herself who listened in this manner and with this filter she saw others. One time when I was driving a car in the afternoon , I put on my sunglasses. It was a long drive on the highway and about an hour later it started to rain. I turned on the headlamps and wondered why it was so dark until I realised I had my sunglasses on. That is what happens when we listen through our filters. We have assumptions that are based on who

we are and how we feel about things. This is why I have said self awareness in an important component in listening. It is self awareness that allows us to notice our filter and step aside and not react.

Levels of listening

People listen on many levels.

1. Pretending to listen while actually thinking of something else. What is being said does not register and is soon forgotten
2. Listening without interest in the subject and in the talker.
3. Listening with sincerity and with intention to understand the talker, not only what is being said, also what is not being said, which means understanding the intonation , facial expression and body language.

The third way of listening can only happen when the listener is interested in people. To have an interest in people, a person has to first of all be self aware and present . These are not qualities that come easily to anyone . Most people are not present, they are more likely to be self absorbed . Deep in a thought process that involves and relate to themselves. their only interest in other people is where it relates back to themselves.

Do parents listen ?

In a communication workshop recently, I did a role play and in the role play a teenage son was playing an on line game and his mum wanted him to throw away the garbage before going to bed. When I asked for 'mothers' to respond, the third mother managed to get the boy to commit to throwing away the garbage. The reason she was able to do so was because she listened to her son. She knew how he thought and she respected what was important to him. Real listening means understanding other people's perspectives even when we do not agree with them. It is saying I hear what you are saying and I know your view point . It sets the stage for the listener to be heard. When parents adopt the authoritarian approach listening is a one way traffic, where parents do all the talking and the children do all the listening.

In a nutshell.

Listening is what most people do not do very well. In order to be a good listener one has to have develop some qualities which include

- empathy,
- an interest in people
- self knowledge and self awareness
- a focus on the present moment and what is being said
- a knowledge of body language and intonation
- a seeking to understand

All these qualities can be consciously developed through knowledge practice and increased understanding.

Each of the items I listed is a topic by itself .We will go into it some time.