

Barefoot Guide Toolbox

Listening at the Three Levels

A group exercise to enable deep conversation and further develop listening skills.

Goal

- To improve our active listening skills.
- To develop listening levels.
- To discuss how we could apply this in practice.

Time Required

- Short introduction on listening and exercise briefing. (see the reading “Listening at the Three Levels – head, heart and feet” 30 mins (steps 1 and 2 and briefing for step 3)
- Individual prep 5 minutes (step 3b)
- Four sessions so that each participant gets a turn. 60 to 80 minutes (steps 3c to 3h)
- Debriefing, group discussion 45 to 60 minutes (step 4)

Materials Required

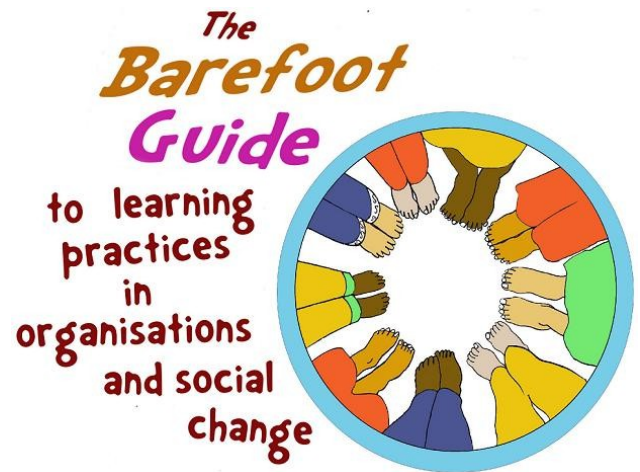
Paper, pencils and flipchart. Handouts (see below)

Physical Setting

Plenty of space so that there will be no interference of noise from the other groups.

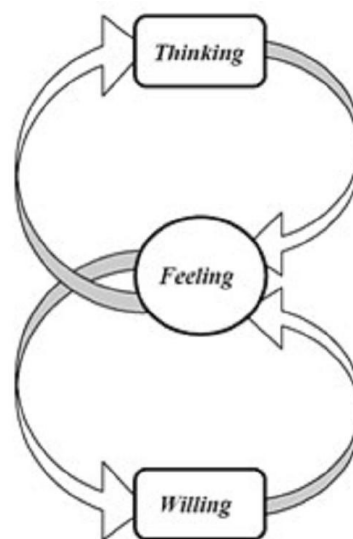
Process

1. You can begin by asking each person to pair with a neighbour, as they are sitting, and to tell each other what they did, say, last weekend. *However they must both speak at the same time!* After a minute or so (and some laughter) ask them whether this ever happens in life in some way. Draw out some observations and lessons. Elicit responses and add you own.
2. Give a little presentation on the three levels of listening drawn from the handout /reading attached below.
3. Brief the group on the exercise exactly as follows:
 - a) You will be divided into groups of four, one speaker and three listeners at a time. Each person will get a turn to be a speaker for 15 minutes or so and each person a chance to listen at each level.
 - b) Begin by giving 5 minutes for the individuals in the group to do a little preparation for their input. Each speaker should choose a question they are struggling with. For example “What can I do about the conflict on the Board?” or “How do I develop more



fluid planning?”

Once this is done each should then recall an experience or the experience out of which the question arises. It should be real and preferably have some human interest that is of concern to the speaker and also for the listeners. It could be drawn from a question or theme relevant to the process you are running, e.g. “My experience of working with this team” or “An area I am struggling with in my practice”. Any area of interest can be accommodated.



- c) The first speaker takes their turn and gives their story in 5 minutes. The listeners (call them A, B, and C) have to listen to different aspects of the story.
- A tries to listen to the content of the story. (Head level - to the thoughts, facts, concepts, arguments, ideas and the principles behind these)
 - B tries to listen to the speakers feelings during the story. (Heart level - to the feelings, emotions, mood, experience and the values behind these)
 - C tries to listen to the speaker's intentions, motives and what lies in the will of the speaker. (Feet level)
- d) *They do not interrupt the speaker* but let her/him continue the story to end. Sometimes a speaker will take less than 5 minutes – but you may want to challenge the group to sit in silence for a while to enable the speaker to summon up more thoughts. Often it is after a silence like this that really valuable thoughts/feelings/intentions emerge.
- e) After the speaker has finished, each listener takes a turn to reflect back to the speaker *what they heard of interest from the level they were listening at, head, heart then feet* – what struck them. The speaker should listen carefully and then comment on how correct or perceptive the feedback was and what they are learning. These reflections should take 5 minutes together.
- f) The group then has an open dialogue for 5 minutes on any issues that emerged - this is often a very productive dialogue.
- g) Then it is the turn of the next speaker with new roles (head, heart, feet) being assigned on a revolving basis. So that each person gets their 15 to 20 minutes of focus. You can give 30 or more minutes if the issues are complex.
- h) Before returning to the plenary, the groups or individuals could be asked to draw, from the process, learnings or questions, about “listening” itself to feed back into the larger group or plenary. Any “content” learnings or questions could also be fed back if appropriate to the purpose.

4. Debriefing back in plenary - depending on where the focus is, each group can speak about their experience of listening and what they learnt and any content learnings or questions that emerged.

If the practice of listening itself is the important focus the group then asks itself what implications their new learnings and questions (about listening) may have for their practice.

The handout could be used here as a resource.

5. This exercise can be used in many ways. It can be used to explore questions of any nature. It is often useful near the beginning of a process to help people to find their voice and to build relationships. It can also be used to help to bring closure.





Listening at Three Levels: Head, Heart and Feet

Listening, like questioning, is a foundation skill for any social development practice. This reading reveals a very useful model for listening and observing and includes some ideas on the helps and hindrances to effective listening.

We need to listen to thoughts, to feelings and to intentions.



"**Listening for the Head**" - **the Thinking Level** - to thoughts, facts, concepts, arguments, ideas and the principles behind these

"**Listening for the Heart**" - **the Feeling Level** - to feelings, emotions, mood, experience and the values behind these.

"**Listening for the Feet**" - **the Will Level** - to intentions, energy, direction, motivation, the will.

Inasmuch as we are challenged to **listen at** these three different levels we are also challenged to **express** ourselves more clearly **from** these three levels.

The Thinking Level

This is the most obvious way to listen - it appears to be "objective" - but it is not as effective as we imagine. Can we truly follow with our own thoughts, the thoughts of the speaker? We think much faster than he/she speaks - how do we use this extra mental time - to build a picture and digest what we are hearing, to listen more deeply, or to think our own separate thoughts or to construct hasty replies?

How often do we have to call ourselves back from a day dream or a rehearsal of what we are going to say next in reply to the speaker?

Hindrances

In listening we therefore have problems of attention and accuracy, but difficulties also arise from the different frames of reference held by speaker and listener. Our knowledge, concepts, vocabulary and way of thinking derive from the past - our own, individual past education and experience.

If we do not allow for the fact that the other person has his own, perhaps very different, frame of reference, it is all too easy to get our wires crossed, or to assume a level of understanding which is not real. We continually run the danger of over-complicating or over-simplifying what we hear.

We have all had the experience of talking to someone and then hear them say, "I know just what you mean" and then go on to describe something unrelated to your conversation.

Help

The listening process is supported on this level by the cultivation of a genuine interest in where the other person is coming from - an open-minded approach which does not judge his/her words according to my preconceptions, by listening non-judgementally.

The Feeling Level

Listening to feelings can give us important clues about what really matters. Strongly expressed or strongly denied feelings can provide fruitful entry points to key issues that lie behind experiences.

Listening on this level means penetrating a step deeper into the speaker's experience - apparently rational statements may be covering feelings of distress, anger, embarrassment, etc. These may be "heard" more through the tone of voice, facial expression, gesture, etc. than what is actually said.

Eyes are also useful tools in the listening process!

Even strong emotions can be hidden, especially if we are not used to, or are shy about, expressing feelings openly and honestly.

Silences are also important to "listen" to. They are very powerful in expressing the feelings of the speaker - sometimes silence expresses feelings of disagreement or inadequacy, boredom or anger.

Hindrances

When we listen, the message from the speaker does not land on untilled ground. Certain people, situations and issues cause a strong reaction in us, against the unresolved feelings we have from our own experiences which can block our ability to listen to the meaning behind the words spoken and to the feelings of the speaker.

Help

When we calm our own reactions and stop them overriding our sensitive listening we can develop the quality of empathy.

This means putting ourselves in the speaker's place and understanding "from their point of view" what they are saying. Social sensitivity which is an essential skill for successful negotiators relies on the ability to empathise.

The Will Level

If the will does not shift nothing will and so our ability to read a person's or group's will is a prime enabler of our ability to work effectively, in a real way.

To sense the real intentions of another person, what they want, why they are telling you this or that, can be one of the hardest aspects of the art of listening. Often, speakers are themselves only dimly aware of what they actually want in a situation. Skilful listening can help to discover, "behind" the thoughts and "below" the feelings involved.

These hidden levels are the real sources of potential energy and commitment. This will often involve sensing what is left unsaid.

The future lies asleep in people's will-forces.

Hindrances

One impulse of the will which is only too quick to awaken is the urge towards power and conflict, to impose our own will and resist the other person's. Resistance at the level of intention is often rationalized into arguments which can never be resolved, because the basic will to reach agreement is not present. If we allow these conflicting forces to arise in us whilst listening, we create an immediate barrier to a creative future work relationship.

Self-protection may be deep-rooted and lie behind defensive listening.

Help

If we can hold back "my way" of acting in the situation, and continually look for elements of common direction, understanding and experience, we may be able to open the way towards future co-operation.

Ineffective Listening

<u>SPEAKER SAYS</u>	<u>BARRIER/LISTENER HEARS</u>
Thought	Closed mind Fixed frame of reference In-attention
Feeling	our own likes and dislikes distrust
Intention	"my way" "Conflict ridden habits" "Rationalization"

Effective Listening

<u>SPEAKER SAYS</u>	<u>LISTENER HEARS</u>
Thought	interest open minded understanding of the past
Feeling	empathy sensitivity to the present
Intention	cooperative attitude to the future skilled in understanding behaviour

ACTIVE, EFFECTIVE listening (and expressing) on these three levels will be a substantial, creative contribution in many areas of social and professional life.