
Empathic Listening and Challenging Perceptions

A few more words about the role of the *mediator as a listener* are necessary. Two of the most critical skills needed by a mediator are those of *empathic listening* and the ability to *challenge* a stakeholder to look at possible blind spots. There is no hope for the latter, of course, until a stakeholder feels heard.

EMPATHIC LISTENING

Empathic listening seems to be very much of an acquired skill. And even when it is acquired, it requires setting aside sufficient time to put it to work. Empathic listening is incompatible with being in a hurry. There are no shortcuts to listening, at least not any reliable and effective ones.

Most of us naturally gravitate towards listening with understanding not as an end in itself, but rather, so *we* can solve a person's problem. Empathic listening, instead, allows those who own the problem to begin to hear themselves. And as they hear themselves they become equipped to solve their own challenges. Effective mediation requires a belief in the inherent goodness of people, as well as in the effectiveness of the process. In the case of deep-seated interpersonal conflicts, each party will have to go through a difficult voyage towards light and hope, one that is often dark, cold, and discouraging. Each party will have to draw on the confidence of the mediator when things seem impossible.

So what does it mean to truly listen with empathy? In empathic listening we need to give the person a chance to tell us how she really feels. Avoid the desire to come to the rescue and "make it all better" with such platitudes as "next time you will do great," or "you need to worry less." Telling a person that with time a certain disappointment will hurt less is not very comforting at the moment. An important part of listening is allowing people to get some weight off their chest. There is great therapeutic value in being able to think aloud and share a problem with someone who will listen. Through that process, we can begin to

better understand our problem and ourself. The good listener has enough confidence in himself to be able to listen to others without fear.

One of my favorite examples of empathic listening comes from Alfred Benjamin: "When Lucy said, 'I'll never get married now that I'm [disabled],' what did you do? You know you felt terrible; you felt that the whole world had caved in on her. But what did you say? What did you show? Did you help her to bring it out; to say it, all of it; to hear it and examine it? You almost said: 'Don't be foolish. You're young and pretty and smart, and who knows, perhaps ...' But you didn't. You had said similar things to patients in the hospital until you learned that it closed them off. So this time you simply looked at her and weren't afraid to feel what you both felt. Then you said, 'You feel right now that your whole life has been ruined by this accident.' 'That's just it,' she retorted, crying bitterly. After awhile she continued talking. She was still [disabled], but you hadn't gotten in the way of her hating it and confronting it."¹

How does one know if the listening was empathic? Gerald Egan says, "If the helper's empathic response is accurate, the client often tends to confirm its accuracy by a nod or some other nonverbal cue or by a phrase such as 'that's right' or 'exactly.' This is usually followed by a further, usually more specific, elaboration of the problem situation."² And when one is off the mark, sometimes they will tell you, or just as likely, they will be quiet and avoid eye contact.

Part of being a good listener may require consciously fighting to keep an open mind and avoid preconceived conclusions. A mediator may want to continually assess her listening style in a given situation. For instance, she may ask herself: Am I ...

- Allowing the person with the problem to do most of the talking?
- Avoiding premature conclusions based on my life experiences?
- Assisting the stakeholder in solving his own problem, or am I being overly directive?
- Permitting the person to retain ownership of the problem?

Perhaps a good way to explain what empathic listening means, is to show what it is not.

Non-Empathic Listening

When a person is not listening we can often see it in his body language: "The automatic smile, the hit-and-run question, the restless look in their eyes when we start to talk."³ Some advice givers may come across as experts even though they have used no direct statements. For example, they may use questions such as, "Don't you think ...?" or, "Have you tried ...?" Listeners will want to avoid being direct while trying to come across as an open-minded.

I observed a speaker, a therapist by training, who freely used the line, "I can see you are hurting," with those who were asking questions at a conference. I was the conference interpreter and was in a position to observe the audience. An older man told his sad story, and the speaker used his line at the right moment, it seemed. The participant leaned back and stopped talking. I could see in his eyes and body posture that he had felt empathy from the therapist. The man had been touched and now felt understood. I was impressed. It seemed to me, however, that with each subsequent use of "I can see you are hurting," the catchy phrase became increasingly artificial. Fewer people were convinced of its sincerity and the line soon meant "be quiet, I want to move on." The process seemed mechanical and hollow, rather than based on true empathy. If we do not have time to listen at the moment, it is better to say so.

Often people begin with the intention of listening, but get derailed along the way, but not necessarily because they do not have time. There is a natural but unfortunate tendency to switch from a listening to a directive approach in the course of a counseling session. The listener may want closure, or forget that individuals tend to have their own problem-solving styles.

People often say things like, "If I were in your position, I would have" Maybe so. Perhaps we would have solved the problem had we been in her place. Different personality types may approach specific challenges in predictable ways, with likewise foreseeable results. For instance, some people would not dream of complaining to a friend that something the other is doing was bothering them, but instead would let it fester inside. Others might have trouble keeping their opinions to themselves. Finally, when we hear a problem from another person's perspective we may assume we would solve it in a given way. Yet, when we find ourselves in the same situation, we may feel just as unsure about how to proceed.

Often people listen and ask questions with the idea of confirming their own observations. A much more effective approach is to be moved by a spirit of curiosity. Such an approach has been called a stance of "deliberate ignorance." Instead of assuming that a certain experience is the same as another we have lived or heard of in the past, we listen with interest and curiosity. Inquisitive listeners "never assume that they understand the meaning of an action, and event, or a word."⁴ Our effectiveness as a listener is often lost if we solve the problem before the person we are attempting to help does.

There are many ways we discount the needs of others, even when we think we are being good listeners. For instance, we may attempt to share our own story of loss, disappointment, or of success, *before* the individual has had the opportunity to be heard in his story. We may feel that sharing our own story is proof that we are listening, but instead, the

other person feels we have stolen the show.⁵ This is not to say that there is no room to share our story with others, but rather, to make sure that they have actually finished sharing theirs first. We encourage others by empathic listening, by showing the person with body language, or by a “hmm,” “go on,” or “tell me more,” that we are still listening and interested. Sometimes our body language⁶ may be sufficient to let the other know we are listening.

Reconciling empathic listening with your belief system

Over the years I have read numerous books about empathic listening. One of the most powerful books I have read on the subject is Carl Rogers' *Client-Centered Therapy*⁷ which is about listening to people in the schools, in the workplace, as well as those who are under great duress. My challenge, however, was to reconcile Rogers' approach, the lack of any sort of absolute truth, on the one hand, with the incredible results he obtained, on the other. For instance, Rogers would not moralize to his clients, no matter how horrible a thing they said. Nor did he patronize people who felt troubled and tell them it was normal to feel a certain way. When a client said she really hated her mother, and would be glad to see her dead, Rogers would listen. Soon, his client would say, well, actually I do not hate her totally, I also really love her, and I would not want her to be dead. Through the several transcripts provided by Rogers, this pattern repeated itself over and over. Each time, the client making good decisions, and backing away from hurtful destructive approaches.

From experience in observing how poorly people listen, I suspect most people would benefit from reading Rogers. But returning to my dilemma, how should I reconcile morals, a belief in good and evil, as well as in the existence of absolute truth, and being a good listener. Or, how about those situations when someone is blind to the most basic common sense? For instance, a person who says he is starving for the affection of a family member or former friend, yet is doing everything in his power to reject that person?

I spent months reflecting on this matter, and have come to two conclusions. (1) When people are truly heard, they will often come to their own correct conclusions. But if their assumptions are still faulty, (2) by the very process of truly listening, the helper will earn the right to challenge blind spots. Frequent good-will and listening deposits are required of the helper before people may be effectively challenged.

When I have taken the time to truly listen first, I can then calmly present my own concerns and perspective, if needed. A troubled youth approached me one day.

“I hate life, it has treated me terribly,” he said. The comment was bitter and the loud tone filled the room.

Oh, how I wanted to moralize and tell him that his own actions had placed him in the present predicament. But instead, I calmly stated, *a la Rogers*, "Right now, you are hating life." I was trying to truly comprehend and letting him know that I was listening.

"Oh yes," he continued, but the anger reduced enormously, "life right now is terrible" With every exchange the voice tension and loudness subsided. This same youth soon recognized that he was not in the right path without my having to say it.

In the process of being listened to, people begin to hear themselves. And then the light goes on, and the person often realizes what needs to be done. This will often happen during a pre-caucus session, when in the midst of the darkness the individual will begin to see how he may have contributed to a problem. Much in this business of listening and mediating, once again, has to do with having faith in the goodness of people. That individuals, when they can reflect and reconsider, will often see their way back out of obscurity and into the lighted path.

There still will be times when a helper may need to share her perspective on life. Mediators should not suggest that people violate their own principles or belief systems, nor should anyone expect a helper to be amoral. Often, people will seek your opinion because they respect your values. One of the leading experts on empathic listening and challenging, Gerald Egan, further suggests that living by a value system may well be a pre-requisite to properly challenging others.⁸

CHALLENGING PERCEPTIONS

Those we are attempting to help may have developed blind spots, as was the case with a young woman who could not see how giving a former friend the "cold shoulder" was not only hurtful but also feeding the conflict between them. Blind spots prevent us from seeing our own faults. We do not always see how our actions may be contributing to our difficulties. As long as blind spots exist, we tend to blame everyone but ourselves for our predicaments.

In mediation, there are times when stakeholder blind spots need to be challenged. "At its simplest, confrontation is an invitation to examine some form of behavior that seems self-defeating, harmful to others, or both, and to change the behavior if it is found to be so."⁹ Not everyone can challenge these blind spots. A listener must earn the right to do so,¹⁰ by showing empathy and true concern. Only after the stakeholder feels heard, can a mediator introduce challenges.

It helps to "deliver challenges *tentatively*, as *hunches*."¹¹ One example of a challenge, is for the mediator to ask the stakeholder to share some positive qualities about the contender during the pre-caucus. Another example of a challenge may be to ask a stakeholder to examine

possible reasons why a person may be reacting negatively towards her.

The ideal is to challenge stakeholders in the pre-caucus, rather than in front of their contender. This way the individual does not lose face and the mediator avoids the appearance of favoritism. Sometimes, opportunities are missed during the pre-caucus and mediators will need to challenge one of the stakeholders in front of the other. This is only done, however, if the stakeholders do not effectively challenge each other. Part of the role of the mediator, is to prepare stakeholders in the pre-caucus to effectively challenge and be challenged by each other in the joint session.

SUMMARY

Two of the most important skills a mediator needs to acquire are a good listening ear and the ability to challenge blind spots. While both skills are crucial, being a good listener is overwhelmingly more important in this approach to mediation. Along with much practice, the chapter references below are excellent resources for beginning to understand these key principles.

CHAPTER 3 REFERENCES

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