

Effective listening: a cornerstone to succeeding with challenging conversations

As I'm preparing to deliver a "Succeeding with challenging conversations" workshop with a global team serving accounting firms in their global network, I thought about the challenges and what tools and processes could be helpful for them. Something on ways to approach conflicts peacefully, using Non Violent Communication (NVC) principles, developed by the late US psychologist Marshall Rosenberg. Using these tools can make a huge difference in how a heated conversation turns out. NVC is rooted in empathy and compassion, helping us to address our observations, feelings, needs and requests in a non-confrontational way.

Rather than focusing on ways to address a conflict in this Helpsheet, I'll come back to this in a later one and begin today in a place I think we can all relate to, which is to consider how effectively we listen. In our professional lives we've all no doubt heard of active listening and like to think this is what we practise, but listening is always something we can each improve. It is always within our control, unlike how well we think the other person is listening to us. So we can always choose how we listen.

Think about when you are in conversation with someone else, when you don't agree with what they are saying. How are you listening? Your focus may be more on assessing and evaluating what you are hearing, to see how closely it tallies or differs with your own views about the subject.

Listening this way becomes about determining the logic of what you are hearing, proving yourself right and the other person wrong, preparing to bring a counter-argument and so on, rather than being about building a stronger connection based on curiosity for someone else's perspective.

In certain contexts, like fact-checking, comparing the validity of different arguments, having playful fun with a friend and seeing who can outsmart the other verbally, this kind of listening is entirely appropriate and enjoyable.

If you want to build a closer connection, or need to address a conflict or disagreement, listening that seeks to prove yourself right and the other person wrong will just add petrol to the flames.

Instead, listening curiously, regardless of your own point of view, is a really useful skill to cultivate. It means you are open to hearing different viewpoints and allowing them to be valid even if you disagree with them. You are starting from where the other person is, not from where you are. If you would make it your mission to be deeply interested in what you're hearing, you may discover what excites and moves someone else, not just their words but their expression and non-verbal communication, connecting you both on a level beyond the message and whether you agree with it.

In a conflict, if you can keep listening even when you really disagree and want to argue, your listening curiously can provide the space for someone else to be heard. In turn, that sense of being heard makes them less attached to their point of view and you may experience that they are now listening differently to you too, reducing the tension in the conversation.

So as you choose your way of listening, particularly if you are about to have a challenging conversation and want to manage it effectively, stop to consider where your listening is located right now: are you at the “listening for being right” end of the spectrum or nearer the “listening with curiosity” side? Reflecting on this gives you a way to move the dial in service of your objectives.

I provide one to one and team coaching for leaders and their organisations. If something resonates in what I’ve outlined here and you would like to check what support options could be helpful for you and your team, please get in touch.