



How to Listen so People Will Talk: Lessons Learned from Ninja Training!

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Introduction

Have you ever felt heard? Like someone else was truly listening to you? Completely accepting who you are in that present moment, so you knew you can open your heart and soul to the person you're talking to? Have you ever felt that? Take a moment now, and think about it. Now, can you remember a time when you felt unheard? Again, please pause to reflect. I'll bet you are nodding your head for the latter one. When I ask about a time when people felt heard, they can maybe come up with a situation or two. But when I ask about feeling unheard, story upon story comes out of the many times people feel "unheard" from a boss, a colleague, a teacher... When the other person's just waiting for you to shut up so they can say "Yeah, uh-huh, well I think that..." I've heard hundreds of these stories over the years.

If you think about it, we're all a bit guilty of not listening at times. But it's okay. We haven't really been taught how. It's not really part of our culture to listen, to be present in a conversation, to express empathy. In school,

we're trained for one specific way of communication: only speak when you have the answer, and when you are the fastest to say it. I call this the "I know! I know" complex. And this carries on into our adult lives, too, so instead of listening, we're in our heads, waiting to speak as soon as possible. But communication is not just about speaking. Listening is almost as important, if not more. Communication is an art: it's a gift for both speaker and listener. So how do you go beyond that spontaneous conversation that comes by so rarely, and how do you actually create environments where you can be both a genuine speaker and a genuine listener?

Ninja Story Part 1: The Why

For me, the need for listening and empathy in communication is not a recent fascination. It actually comes from early in my life. To be precise, it comes from my *ninja training*. And by ninja training, I mean my brother Chris and I sneaking out every night when we were kids, so we could "train" in a variety of secret ninja techniques, like climbing trees, hiding in dumpsters to avoid bullies,

stealing coins from coin trays to buy food, or packing stealthily in the night. You see, my mom, my brother and I had been living on the road for years, sleeping in our car for months at a time, moving from truck stop to truck stop, state to state. As a single mother struggling with mental illness, our mother loved us, and we loved her, but she couldn't be there to listen. She was too tangled up in her own problems. So to learn how to get by on our own, we played ninja - a fun fantasy as much as a way to cope.

Ninja Story Part 2: The Jump

One evening when I was nine years old, I was standing on the roof of the furniture store we lived above at the time. There was a three-story drop onto the parking lot on one side, and a one story jump into the grass on the front side of the building. The goal: master the ninja jump and land safely on the grass. But I couldn't do it, so I sat down. Soon enough, Chris returned with a bed sheet. "Ninjas use parachutes," he said. I stood up, grabbed the sheet on both ends, readied my stance, one, two, three, jump! Bam. Hard landing. Ninjas don't give up. They just need better parachutes. So I tried again, now with a garbage bag over my head. Bam. No good. Finally, for the third try, I experimented with a technique from the "Mary Poppins School of Ninja." I went back to the roof, this time with an umbrella. I got into the "hold the umbrella stance," closed my eyes, squatted a bit, counted "one-two-three," and jumped!

I didn't fly. I crash landed on the grass, right onto my ankle and sprained it, and then began to wail. Then Chris jumped down, picked me up, carried me up three flights of stairs, and told me to stay quiet or mom would wake up.

Ninja Story Part 3: Barbie's Demise!

After hurting my ankle, I crawled up to my room, all alone in the world, looking for solace. I picked up my Barbie doll that we got from the Salvation Army. You know Barbie's long blonde silky hair, by the time you're the second kid getting it, the hair is half cut off and frizzy because some other little girl dreamt of becoming a hairdresser. I cried to her, "I hurt my ankle, Barbie! It hurts so bad!" Barbie gave me her huge idiotic Barbie grin. You know the quintessential Barbie grin, fixed onto her face? That's all I was getting. "No, you don't understand, my ankle hurts and I can't tell anyone!" Barbie just sat there grinning at me, like an idiot. That was it. I threw Barbie in the back of the closet, never to play with that doll again. I knew that she would always just project her fake grin on me never listening to what I had to say.

Ninja Story Part 4: The Hello Kitty Revelation

Perhaps this realization was what started me on the journey that led me, as an adult, to Japan to teach communication at university. At the same time, on a long shot, I auditioned for the English voice of Hello Kitty. I was just fascinated by this personification of a cat. How could this simple figure be loved around the world not just by children but grown women, who wear Hello Kitty accessories and buy Hello Kitty toasters and drive Hello Kitty Ferraris and fly in Hello Kitty airplanes? I was trying to figure out this character, I got all the VHS tapes - again, this was 19 years ago - and I studied them for two weeks solid. It hit me.

What's the main difference between Hello Kitty and Barbie? Barbie has that massive grin, whereas Hello Kitty has no mouth. Hello Kitty has no fixed expression. This is deliberate. Hello Kitty mirrors back exactly what you feel. If you feel happy, Hello Kitty feels happy. If you feel sad, Hello Kitty feels

sad. Hello Kitty does not judge you, she does not talk back, and you feel heard. When you feel heard, you feel loved.

Ninja Story Part 5: Ninja Lessons Into Practice

I'm going to share a method with you that I teach my university students as well as my clients. I developed it after spending half of my life in America and the other half in Japan. I call it *How To Listen So Others Can Talk - or Hello Kitty Listening*. It has three simple practices: *listen with genuine curiosity*, *acknowledge*, and *create space*

Practice #1: Listen with genuine curiosity

Practice number one is called *listen with genuine curiosity*. For example, dogs, everyone's best friend, listen genuinely. They cock their heads to one side, right? Now cats, best friend to only you, listen only to what you have to say. They'll never tell anyone else. They can't. My cat Nadia, every day she listens for me to come home, and she runs downstairs to meet me at the door. I say, "I need to cook dinner!" Nadia responds, "Meow!" leading me to the kitchen. When I say, "It's bed time!" She says "Meow!" leading me upstairs. Every time I speak, she always replies in kind. She is listening with genuine curiosity. I feel truly loved.

It's not just Nadia, by the way. A group of researchers from Cornell found that cats meow in secret code that only their owners can understand (Nicastro & Owren, 2003). How do we do this as humans? It's actually quite simple. You don't need to tilt your head or meow. Every time you engage in a conversation, you can consciously decide to listen with genuine curiosity. You can silently ask yourself: What does this person have to share? What makes them work? What makes them tick? Start to get curious about them. You can even breathe into what they are saying. Think of it as

mindful, meditative listening. This is how you listen with genuine curiosity. "Meow?" - Okay, let's move on.

Practice #2: Acknowledge

The second technique is called *acknowledge*. I love Japanese department stores, especially in the morning. It's not because I love shopping, actually I don't. It's because they make me feel like royalty. Before a store opens, the managers come out, passing out candy, greeting the waiting crowds. The pretty greeters make announcements in Japanese and Sign language in the most polite way thanking the patrons. Then, at 10 o'clock on the dot, the staff and managers open the doors, bowing 45 degrees. This bow is acknowledgment, direct feedback that you are listening to what the other person is saying. You clearly express that they are being heard - without interrupting them. In Japan, when you bow, you acknowledge the other person by humbling yourself and showing respect.

In this department store case, of all the things you could do that morning, you went to their store to shop, so they acknowledge that - clearly and wholeheartedly. But it's not just Japanese who bow - we all do a version of this, across the cultures. Do you know what that is? It's nodding! A nod is actually a mini bow. Nodding 3 times at regular intervals, people will speak and share 3 to 4 times more (Rosenfeld & Hancks, 1980, p. 194). Simply by acknowledging someone and letting them know they're being heard by nodding, you're giving them space to open up and share more.

Another way to acknowledge a speaker is with something Japanese call *aizuchi*. Simply put, *aizuchi* are frequent interjections that show the listener is actively listening. It's nodding along saying things like "Yes, I see." "Oh, really?" "Uh-huh" among other sounds. While it's not uniquely

Japanese, Japanese use *aizuchi* 2.6 times more than English speakers. Without *aizuchi*, someone might think you aren't paying attention. It doesn't mean "I agree with you in principle." It's essentially empathizing and saying, "Yes, I hear you."

One way to practice *aizuchi* is through a listen & repeat style. By repeating part of what your conversation partner is saying back to them, it enhances your acknowledgment and their feeling heard. You might be thinking "listen and repeat?" What is this? Language class?! But have you ever asked for directions? If you just stand there and nod, you forget the information you got by the time you actually need to use it. But when you are truly listening, you repeat after each short phrase.

A: Take a right.

B: Ok. A right.

A: Then go down Happy Street. Take a left.

B: Happy Street...left.

You memorize, but you also signal back to your partner that you're listening. Now, how can you apply this to your conversations? Here's an example conversation you might have with a friend or family member:

A: I had a bad day.

B: You had a bad day.

A: Yes, and... I missed the train.

B: Oh, you missed the train.

My Japanese partner, Yuji, really embraced this practice for when we speak English, maybe because he speaks English as a second language, and he doesn't want information to get lost in the process. We now use this in all aspects of our communication now including texting. Practice makes perfect, and over time, he's gotten amazing at it. Repeating makes sure both of us get our messages through and both of us feel heard.

Practice #3: Create space

The third and final listening practice is called *create space*. When you think of creating space, you might be thinking physically, and you can. When Tatsuya Yoshioka, Nobel Peace prize nominee in 2008, founded Peace Boat, he created a space for those who normally cannot meet under peaceful circumstances - in this case Japanese and Chinese veterans and survivors (Yoshioka, 2015). It is not only the participants on the Peace Boat that benefit from these interactions, but the other passengers who are witness to this unique dialogue. Looking out together at the seas surrounding these neighboring countries brings a new perspective to shared issues.

Maybe you don't have a Peace Boat, but you can still open up room for a dialogue and add space verbally by asking open ended questions or using phrases such as "Tell me more." This is a magical phrase. Saying it allows you to open up more space for your partner, but also, it gives you the space to figure out what your partner truly wants. The "Uh-huh" is, again, a great encouragement to let them tell you more.

Conclusion

You may be thinking, "But what about our own personal need to express?" Boy, do I know that one well; it can be so frustrating to not be able to say what is on your mind, especially when in conflict. So, how is just listening going to help you? Buddhist monk and activist Thich Nhat Hanh says, "Listening is a very deep practice... When you have shown your capacity for listening and understanding, the other person will begin to listen to you, and you have a chance to tell him or her of your pain, and it's your turn to be healed. This is the practice of peace" (Nhat Hanh, 1987).

Listening is the basis for any true conversation. In order to speak so others will listen,

you first have to listen, so others can speak. At the end of the day, I'm not a communications expert, I'm a communications practitioner. The reason why I went into this field is not because I'm awesome at communications, or even that it's easy for me, in fact, far from it. It's a challenge. I want to raise my hand and say, "I know, I know!" We pursue things that are our Achilles heels. Maybe as children, a lot of us experienced the trauma of not feeling heard - as the adage used to go "Children should be seen and not heard".

I often wonder about my mom. Maybe she wouldn't suffer so much mentally if maybe someone had truly listened to her as a child. What if by listening with genuine curiosity, acknowledging the other person, and creating an open space, we could create better relationships with our families, friends, colleagues, and maybe even achieve world peace? Listening is love. From that little girl who wasn't listened to and the woman whose article you are reading now, you've given me the greatest gift of all. Your love. Thank you for listening.

Epilogue

September 2015, I gave a talk on the TEDxFukuoka global stage, on *How to Listen so People Will Speak*. I talked about my mom's mental illness. I thought, "My mom, she's gonna be so angry if she knew I told the world that she's crazy!" I know she's 84 years old and she'll never hear this talk because she can't use the internet. However, I need to be in integrity to tell her what I said. So I called her up with no expectations of her saying I'm sorry, It's okay, or I love you. I told her, "Mom, I gave this talk on how to listen and I talked about your mental illness. But it's not your fault. In fact, I have a theory, and tell me if I'm right. The reason why life has been such a struggle for you because as a child no one listened to you."

She started to cry. I gave her space. She opened up and talked about as a child growing up in the Great Depression, an age when girls should be seen and not heard, and how she was full of vivaciousness, curiosity and creativity -- that people called her crazy. Her whole entire life, she's been called crazy. She told story after story. I just listened for hours. At the end of that call, she said, "For the first time, I feel truly heard." For the first time in my life I felt truly connected with her.

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