

# Mindful Work

## Good listening and mindful conversations

When we hold a conversation, whose voice do we listen to most; those of the person we're talking to, the words we speak, or the narrative in our own head? How fast do we jump to conclusions, make judgements or form opinions, find answers to someone else's problems, or just get bored and drift off?

Mindful listening is a key skill for coaches and other 'listening' professionals, but it's also a core workplace skill for all of us. Mindful listening helps nurture better interactions and work relationships, and speeds up the process of understanding other points of view, which leads to more effective solutions and productivity.

The core skill in getting this right is selfless attention.

The 'selfless' part of this approach is critical, and may require a real change of stance on our part. Most of us react and respond quickly and automatically to things we hear, either interrupting verbally, or in our heads. As humans we're programmed to be very sensitive to what we think is bad news or a threat, and we therefore react quickly to anything that seems like a challenge to 'me' or my views. Our own emotions and reactions hold us back from focusing fully on what the other person is saying.

The 'attention' part is about being fully attentive and receptive what is being said and how it's being said. This means tuning into with all our receptive skills; feeling how reactions are forming in the body and using our intuition, as much as logical cognition. These other ways of tuning in are to pick up cues from body language, and nuances of reading the other person's emotions, or what's not being said; or as Peter Drucker has put it: *"The most important thing in communication is hearing what isn't said."*

This is now an opportunity to apply some of the core mindfulness skills. In particular, learning to focus and concentrate (use mindful breathing), and listening with non-judging awareness (use mindful hearing exercises). We also tune in to the body's wisdom (use the body scan), recognising the signs that are personal to each of us such as tightening of the throat.

When we hold a mindful conversation, we give the other person as much space, time and attention as they need to communicate fully with us. Nothing we do should

stop their flow of thought or speech; in fact, we should aim to develop active listening skills with the kind of feedback that encourages the other person to express themselves unreservedly, and think on their feet.

In fact the most potent tool we can employ in mindful listening is to do nothing, be patient, and wait silently. Silence seems to be awkward for many of us; yet what may feel like a gap to us, may be exactly the most creative and important moment for the other person. If they're forming an insight, time stands still. When they are ready to articulate what's been forming, they will. Our job is to give them the space for this to happen. This is not a passive role for us; by creating this space, the other person is given permission to make a creative leap in their own understanding.

A further key skill, which promotes creative thinking in the other person, is non-directive questioning. This is probably the most fundamental skill for coaches, but it applies in informal conversations too. We won't dwell on it too much here – there are great explanations in coaching books (eg Nancy Kline) – but the essence of it is to encourage the other person to explain more fully, to you and to themselves, what they are starting to articulate. We should not offer our own view, or help them with suggestions (that's consultancy), it's simply to probe more deeply so that they get a better understanding for themselves.

One of the most useful words in this approach, is 'if'. For example:

- 'if you could change one thing, what would it look like?'
- 'if you trusted your own intuition about this, what would the answer be?'
- 'if you put aside the costs and practicalities, describe an ideal solution'
- 'if I asked you to make this 'impossible' thing happen, how could you approach it differently?'

To become more effective as a leader, team member, or coach, mindful listening is probably the most useful skill you can learn. Just by keeping quiet, and offering your selfless attention, people will thank you and think you're brilliant (even though they've done all the work!).

*"You cannot truly listen to anyone and do anything else at the same time." – Scott Peck*