

Learning to Listen for Understanding

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A. E. Ted Wall

I must begin this section on learning how to listen with a personal confession. I never gave much thought to the importance of listening. However, I vividly remember the incident that helped me pay more attention to it. At the end of my first term as Dean of Education, I hosted a breakfast meeting at the McGill Faculty Club for the Associate Deans and our Administrative Officer. During the meeting, we reviewed what we had done in the first term and shared our plans for the next term.

The meeting went very well and we were about to move on to the Dining Room for lunch when one of my most trusted colleagues said, "Ted, we have one other topic that we would like to discuss." I paused, thinking that they were going to thank me for organizing such a fine breakfast meeting, but to my dismay, my colleague said: "We feel that you talk too much in our meetings." To say that I was taken aback would be an understatement. We discussed the difficulties that we faced and the meeting ended in a cool yet civilized manner!

After the Holidays, one of my colleagues gave me a lovely picture of Jean Vanier, who has done such fine work with people with disabilities, in deep conversation with a colleague. Instantly, I connected the picture with my listening challenges as it showed Jean Vanier and his colleague really listening to each other. The next day I bought a small frame and placed the picture on a desk that I could readily see. The picture simply reminded me– stop talking, listen more carefully. It was the first step in my search to become a better listener. Quite frankly, my colleagues had kindly made me aware of an important leadership skill that I needed to improve!! And, I have been very grateful to them ever since that awakening!

With the above story in mind, let us consider several ideas about learning to listen that may help people who, like me, need to enhance their ability to listen effectively!

Learning to Listen and the Four A's to Mastery

Given the fact that I contend that listening is the most important leadership skill, it seems sensible to consider how one can acquire this essential skill and enhance it. To do so, I want to introduce a model of skill learning that I have used for many years entitled: The Four A's to Mastery.

Acquiring any kind of skill takes time and plenty of practice. Being aware of the five overlapping stages in Figure 2 can help in the acquisition of a variety of leadership skills, including the key skill of listening.

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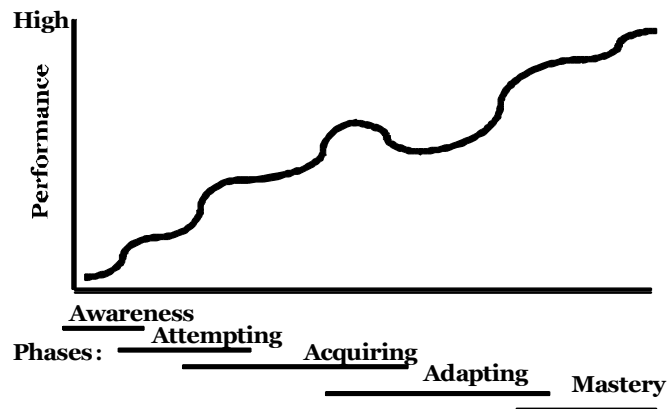


Figure 2. Stages in the Skill Learning Process: The Four A's to Mastery

As the above figure illustrates, the course of learning takes place over time and usually moves through the following four stages until mastery is reached.

- **Awareness** of the need to develop a new skill
- **Attempting** to learn or improve the skill
- **Acquiring** the skill through deliberate practice
- **Adapting** our skills by using them in increasingly more difficult situations
- **Mastering** our skills so they become relatively automatic

Let us consider how an understanding of the above of stages can be applied to learning the skill of listening for understanding.

Awareness – The Initial Stage: Becoming aware of the need to develop a new skill is an essential first step in acquiring it. Honest feedback from colleagues or friends might prompt you to become aware of the need to enhance your listening skills or the results from personally completing the Effective Listening Questionnaire might provide you with some insights related to your strengths as a listener and areas that you might need to improve. Quite simply, becoming aware of your level of competence in an important skill like listening is often the first step towards improving it.

Attempting – The Planning Stage In the early stages of learning, it is important to consider how one might actually go about learning a particular skill. For example, in the case of acquiring the skill of listening for understanding, some of the possible approaches might include:

- ✓ Watching people who are good listeners and modeling their behavior.

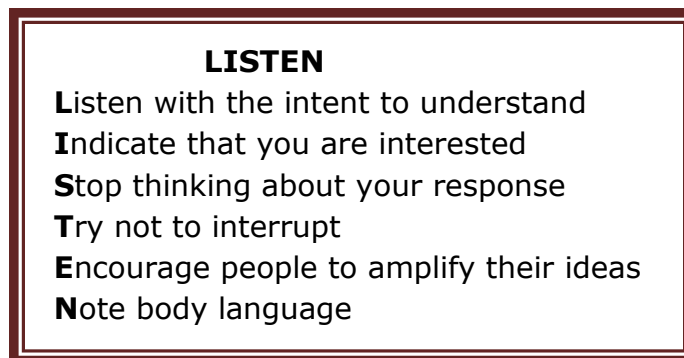
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- ✓ Taking the time to consider the items in the Effective Listening Questionnaire and asking a colleague to provide you with feedback on selected items after observing you in conversation with another colleague.
- ✓ Using the Internet to retrieve ideas on how to improve one's listening skills or reading articles or books on the topic.

The key point is to be willing to set aside some time to plan the learning process.

Acquiring – The Practice Stage When initially learning a new skill, one usually needs to identify a set of skill cues that can guide initial attempts to perform the skill. Deliberately practicing the skill in a supportive environment can help build competence and confidence. Receiving encouragement and supportive feedback from a colleague or friend can be especially valuable at this point in the learning process.

An example of a basic set of skill cues that can help improve your listening skills are included in the acronym: LISTEN.



The above acronym-based set of phrases is only one example of the types of skill cues that one can use to enhance the skill of listening. For example, reflecting on the items in the Effective Listening Questionnaire can provide other ideas on ways one can increase the skill of listening.

Adapting - The Penultimate Stage

As your competence and confidence improves, you can make further progress by using your skills in "deliciously uncertain" environments, that is, in situations that are just hard enough to provide a challenge but not so hard as to ensure failure. For example, listening for understanding can be improved by adapting one's basic listening skill during: difficult telephone conversations, meetings that address controversial topics, or tension-filled meetings. After applying one's skills in these more challenging situations, reflecting on your performance with a supportive colleague has proven to be beneficial.

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Mastering: The Final Stage

The final stage of mastery is reached when one can perform a skill relatively automatically. The path to mastery varies in length but the four stages of learning are usually involved. It is important to recognize that on any learning journey one should expect to experience some performance dips so that one is ready to deal with them in a positive and realistic manner. However, in the case of listening, based on my own personal listening difficulties, a lifelong learning perspective needs to be taken given the ongoing challenges of truly listening for understanding!