

Listening from the Dark Side 2

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I have been very involved in the contributions that quality listening can make to the positive development of communities, here I try to parse out some of the listeners that also listen well but not for such honourable purposes. I will touch on those who develop a language to sell a concept that might otherwise be seen as counter to the public good; look at a difficult listening environment where some are working for the general good and others are focused on their own concerns to the exclusion of the good for others; and then look at a variety of categories of people who generally listen well in order to manipulate those they are listening to.

An interesting web search result that prompts me to wonder just who is interested in knowing how to listen:

On December 12, 2012, when the term “listening” was entered into Google Trends, the US was only the 10th country in the list of those that found that term searched for from sites in their countries. And there were seven cites ahead of any U.S. city. Number eight was Chicago. These are the countries and cities where the search term was entered based on IP addresses. The top country was the Philippines. The top language was Tagalog. The top city was Hanoi, Viet Nam. Clearly others are more interested in this term than those in the USA, where there are actually some courses taught in the subject of listening. So I found myself wondering just what their interest in listening really was. I wondered if all their listening intentions were honorable.

Most of my professional life has focused on listening in one way or another. This has taken three threads. The first explores the cognitive processes associated with

listening, 1) what we gather for possible selection, 2) how we select what we become aware of, 3) how we organize what we select, 4) how we assign meaning to what we organize, 5) how we decide whether our assigned meanings are accurate, and 6) how or whether we should respond.

The second thread explores how listening and our values contribute to the development of community and the third explores how to help others explore their own listening.

When focusing on the contribution listening makes to community building, I have theorized that it is important for listeners to honor each other, respect each other, have positive intentions toward each other, and for really deep listening to love each other in order for the seeds of community to develop and flourish. These elements seem essential to me in order for the flow of open and honest information to take place so that trust and belief in the value of the community can become part of the experience of those participating. (Halley 1997)

However, I have found myself thinking about some people who seem to me to know a great deal about many of the others that they deal with but do not have honorable intentions for the interactions they have with these others. At the very least they have selfish intentions and at the worst they have intentions of somehow hurting or at least defrauding the people they are interacting with.

So one question became “are there a set of values or a set of perspectives that these folks need to have in order to listen well?” so that they have the information they need to hurt or defraud those they are interacting

with? Could there be a way in which they honored, or respected their interactants? Would it be possible to suggest that they loved these people? I tend to reject this last idea, but I think the others might need looking in to, perhaps with slightly adjusted definitions. I am also inclined to think that some effective listeners may have a negative intent toward the speaker but a positive intent toward the society in general.

“Honored” also seemed a bit out of line for this discussion, but “respect” has some possibilities. I am thinking if there is no respect, then these not so nice listeners might underestimate the skill or cunning of their interactants. Such underestimations might lead them to interpret what they hear in ways that undermine their purpose.

Another possibility for a perspective to help us understand might be found in another conclusion I have reached. It is critical for a listener to genuinely want to understand the other person from that person’s point of view. And finally, once the desire to genuinely understand is in place the listener must help the speaker get to a place where the speaker really wants to be heard by the listener if the speaker was not already in that mental position. (Halley 2008)

I do think that this last set of perspectives might give us some insight into how these listeners become effective. In all likelihood they will be more than able to get to a position where they genuinely want to understand even though they may want to understand for less than honorable purposes. The other perspective where they must help the speaker get to a place where the speaker really wants to be heard by the listener may be a bit more problematic. However, I do not think it is outside the scope of what these individuals might be capable of.

So who might these listeners listening from the dark side be? I have tried to make a suggestive list.

1) Those who listen for information to use in manipulating public perceptions of issues: These might be people running focus groups with less than honorable intentions for what they learn from the focus group. I am

thinking of those attempting to find a language for making a political issue sound good to those who would be hurt by it if they really understood its implications.

For example, Public Education in the USA at the national level: trying to convince folks that their positions are “data driven,” when that “data” is highly suspect both for its design and for how it is collected and analyzed. What language do they use to convince folks that their policies are appropriate? Special education students can be denied special help because the Elementary and Secondary Education Act is interpreted to mean there can only be a small percentage of the population that needs such help in any one school district for the scores to remain exempt from the adequate yearly progress required of the district, regardless of historic or economic factors known to exist. So if your school is heavily populated with a disadvantaged minority there will be a large number of children who are denied help because the numbers will exceed the percentage of the student body that can be given help. Additionally this percentage is based only on the number of students who attend the school from those eligible, not counting those students who select to attend a charter or private school. Ironically, this is called “no child left behind” (<http://www.ed.gov/esea>).

And then the school is punished financially because they cannot get their children up to arbitrary standards set on standardized tests that these children cannot read, because they did not get the special help that they needed to get better at reading.

Another way to look at this one would be listening to voters to figure out what to claim in order to get their votes, but not to help them get their concerns met. At least one of the people working in this area calls himself a great listener. I believe many voters thus vote against their own personal interests. Perhaps Peter Hart (<http://www.hartresearch.com>), but certainly Frank Luntz (2008) and Carl Rove (<http://www.rove.com>) are famous for finding a language to sell a political idea that is contrary to a particular group’s self-interest

in a way that they will believe its implementation will be good for them. I am thinking about policies that affect the poor or disadvantaged couched in the language of patriotism or personal freedom. In the USA we have convinced the poor to fight wars that were designed to make some folks rich since the Indian wars and the Mexican war. And a person who will never be able to own his/her own business may not really benefit from a policy that reduces taxes on businesses and thus makes supporting benefit programs impossible. We have had the estate tax turned into the death tax. We have had tax cuts turned into tax relief and global warming turned in to climate change. We have seen the confederate square in the Georgia state flag turned into a reason to defeat several democrats who were worried about it's implications for race relations, just to name a few that have had significant effects at the ballot box.

I think we can easily conclude that these folks want the information they are listening to. Can we think of them as respecting or honoring these same people? Perhaps they are because these are not necessarily the people they are trying to misdirect in their thinking. Luntz can easily think of his focus group people as trying to help him understand and so his focus group people might even be seen as wanting to be heard.

2) British Tabloids wire-tapping private citizens so that they can publish a hurtful story about someone in order to sell papers: It would seem that these folks might well have a genuine curiosity about what they might hear. So their energy level as they listen is likely to be beneficial to their listening. However, It may be that listening well may not really be what they do. I am guessing that there will be biases that facilitate misinterpretation of some of what they hear. Of course, some of what they hear will be of interest to the community at large and so the effort must seem worthwhile to these listeners.

I am not so sure these folks want to understand so much as they want to hear something that they can use to create a headline. Perhaps, their interpretations of what they are hearing then could be colored by the wish for a big headline and thus lead

to misunderstanding (http://topics.nytimes.com/top/reference/time_stories/organizations/n/news_of_the_world/index.html).

3) The classic stereotype of a used car salesman or even the closer at a high volume dealership: Many of them listen hard for the issues that will trigger an eager desire to buy. If the sales person learns of such an issue while listening to the buyer and is able to move the conversation in a way that triggers that issue then there is an increased chance of a sale. Car sales closers are infamous for shifting the focus of the discussion to offset any buying resistance and they do that based on the trigger issues identified, through listening, during the sales interview. (Newnez, personal interview, 1985)

These folks clearly want to understand. It is necessary for their success. However, again their interpretations might be tainted by their desire to sell. They might then get a sale that ethically should have somehow been different.

4) A con artist who is trying to bilk someone out of part of his or her fortune: If the stories we hear about such events are true, these people listen very carefully to the wants and desires of their marks and try to provide believable, but false, answers or options for fulfilling those desires. If they are to be believed or trusted by their marks, they must be able to understand them very well.

Perhaps a variant on this type of person is the Ponzi scheme specialist. This person has to identify those individuals who are eager to make a lot of easy money and convince the mark that they are trustworthy and competent to deliver the goods.

These folks would seem to want to understand at least enough to learn how to ingratiate themselves to their mark. They certainly do not have the best interests of the person they are listening to in mind. I would also think it unlikely that they would respect or honor their mark in any way, unless they need to see them as a worthy opponent in order to be careful enough to get the understanding correct. If the con artist does not respect his mark, it would

seem to me that he might underestimate the mark's savviness and misread some of the information.

5) Passive-aggressive persons who are looking for zingers: In many families siblings seem to get something out of goading each other. In order to do that effectively surely they have to have listened well enough to each other in order to figure out what comments will have the most impact. However, passive-aggressive persons usually get several shots at listening well enough to figure out how best to design their zingers. So perhaps they are not necessarily really good listeners.

And finally a few that might not easily come to mind:

6) Mediators who listen so as to find ways to help participants view their situation inside the current legal structure rather than supporting their original point of view: (See Brigg 2007, 35-36).

Brigg hints at the suggestion "that 'listening techniques' employed by mediators and professional helpers throughout the western world can be contrived and hence that genuineness and even susceptibility can be a pretense (sic) or deception." (2007)

To be sure Brigg does not suggest that this is good or quality mediation practice, just that it sometimes happens.

I have participated in mediation training and some of the examples during my training included the mediator suggesting what a court outcome would be if a resolution were not reached. There are several problems with this approach. One might be that the mediator cannot know in a particular case what a court would decide. But the effect might be to encourage that participant to waver on what they want to get out of the mediation. Another might be that if this suggestion is made in front of both parties it might give one party motivation to remain stubborn in the process and insist on a solution that is mostly beneficial to him or herself. In either case I believe that the focus of the participants is taken off of looking for solutions and focused on getting

it over with or getting more than is fair from the solution. In order for this approach to succeed at getting a participant to agree to modify their position, a mediator has to listen well enough to determine when the participant might be vulnerable to such a suggestion. If done too early in the process I would assume that the participant would view the mediator as in the camp of the other participant and resist changing the original position (Decker, personal interview, 2012).

The real concern is that some mediators are focused on getting to a settlement or agreement to the exclusion of helping each participant understand the position of the others in the conflict. Such a focus is likely to concentrate the energy of the mediator on finding anything that might get that settlement. Selective attention will then act to increase the probability that the full meaning of participant messages will be missed in favor of noticing settlement criteria (Halley 2008) The result can be a settlement that does not account for all of the concerns of all parties involved.

A story told in an interview with a long time mediation trainer, with extensive legal and judicial experience might help demonstrate the potential here. This story was told as an example of how finally really listening to a participant in a mediation completely changed the direction of the settlement this mediator thought they should be working toward (Berlin, private interview, 2012).

The example was a divorce mediation. The wife in this case was claiming responsibility for purchasing a ranch for \$15,000,000.00 while they were dating before getting married. The husband was claiming that she was only able to do so because he had taught her how to do it. He was a professor of real estate at a local college when they met and she was in one of his classes. The ranch was in the wife's name. The wife was offering \$1,000,000.00 to the husband to get him to go away and they were at an impasse. After a long and drawn out session which included the mediator encouraging the husband to take the deal, the mediator was in a private session with the husband and ready to call

an impasse and send them back to court, but in desperation he turned to the husband and asked if the husband could think of anything that would get them to a solution. The husband said he was sure he did. He then said that if the wife would agree to go to three different mental health counseling sessions that he would pay for, he would agree to the divorce. The mediator said, "and then you will take the \$1,000,000.00 and sign off on the agreement?" And the husband said, "No, forget the \$1,000,000.00. The only requirement is the counseling sessions." After a stunned silence, the mediator checked with him again and then took the proposal to the wife. She agreed and they got their divorce. So, staying focused on getting the husband to agree to the \$1,000,000.00 was keeping them from getting an agreement. Listening to what was really important to him produced an agreement.

This example illustrates the need for mediators to stay open to hearing alternative points of view. It was offered in contrast to the following. As a young lawyer this mediator had convinced a judge to award his client \$900.00 a month in alimony and child support. And his colleagues had patted him on the back for a job well done. However, the husband in the case only earned \$1500.00 per month. The result was that the husband skipped town and the wife never received any of that support. This experience changed his view of the process and helped him to learn to listen until there was a fair solution available that both parties could agree to and live with (Berlin, private interview, 2012).

7) Law enforcement officers trying to determine when a suspect is lying: The officer certainly does not have positive intentions toward the suspect. In fact s/he is listening precisely to catch the person in a lie and thus develop a legal case against the suspect. Such an orientation might bias the officer's listening in a way that misinterprets what is said. However, the officer could have very positive intentions toward the society in general since convicting perpetrators would be seen as a positive value. One might also think of lawyers conducting deposition interviews might fall into the same category.

Interviews indicate that officers often pay a great deal of attention to non-verbal behaviors in such interviews. It could be that this focus might lead them to incorrect assessments. Research by Vrig (2008) indicates that listeners who concentrate on what is being said are better at detecting lies than those who concentrate on non-verbal behaviors. He also cites several others whose research supports this position. I think it interesting that many people teaching communication tend to suggest that it is the non-verbal behavior that is most important in detecting a lie and that this position may not be completely accurate (Anderson et. al. 1999, Feeley and Young 2000, Vrig and Mann 2001, and Porter et.al. 2007 all cited in Vrig, 2008).

Officers probably listen reasonably well, however, since they are legally permitted to lie during these interviews in order to press the suspect to reveal something that will get them convicted, it is possible that many times such manipulation produces less than complete information and perhaps not always even accurate information from the suspect.

8) Listening done to develop a comic (ironic?) approach to an issue. Should we think of Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert as people listening from the dark side at least part of the time? How else would they locate the missteps of those they discuss on their programs? They have to listen effectively in order to determine when some public message can be interpreted differently than was probably intended by the speaker. They are certainly not respecting or honoring those they listen to because the aim is to embarrass in order to produce the joke or the laugh.

9) Perhaps some communities are dark, the oft mentioned honor among thieves. It would seem that such individuals must listen well at least some of the time in order to maintain their communities.

Conclusion

I have come to the conclusion that many people listen rather effectively even though they do not listen with the values I find so

very important. I still believe that if one is interested in a positive relationship those values are very important. However, it would seem that those values are not all necessary for those who would want to defraud us in some way.

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