

Bonus Resource: Three Barriers to Effective Listening*

Inclusive and engaging leaders appreciate the connections between different people and their unique situations. They seek to check their level of understanding of the overall picture. Inclusive leaders realize that working independently, they will never be able to understand the entire system completely. They realize they need to engage and connect with others to inform their understanding.

However, our perception of reality is often colored by our own biases, judgments and fears. These three elements negatively impact the quality of our listening. The following is a useful exercise to help leaders and employees become more sensitive to the quality of listening.

Resources needed:

- Cardboard eyeglass frames, with empty spaces instead of glass. Have one frame for each participant. (Note: *these can either be constructed from cardboard using templates easily available online; or else purchase inexpensive 3D eyeglass cardboard or paper frames online and remove the lenses.*)
- Set of three kinds of plastic filters (1 set for each participant): red, yellow and blue. Each filter, apart from having a different color, has a pattern, e.g., red with waves, yellow with stripes, and blue with spots. Essentially, the filters allow the participants to see only portions of reality. (Note: *these filters can be constructed using colored cellophane and marking pens. You can be as creative as you want.*)

Instructions:

1. Ask participants to define what they think is effective listening versus ineffective listening. Summarize key qualities of both. What are the dangers of ineffective listening (in the context of diversity and inclusion, innovation, change management, or any context you want them to apply the exercise to)?
2. What prevents us from listening better and learning from others? Introduce participants to the three barriers to effective listening. These barriers are what Otto Scharmer calls the three enemies of listening. These barriers represent inner voices that prevent people from more deeply exploring any particular situation they are in.
 - ***Voice of judgment.*** This voice prevents our minds from being open to new information and ideas. It seeks to confirm instead our current worldviews or automatic assumptions about how the world should be.

- **Voice of cynicism:** This voice prevents our hearts from listening and trusting other people. It arises from the belief that we can only trust ourselves, not the intentions, abilities and potential of others.
- **Voice of fear:** This voice prevents us from taking a leap of faith, and going into action. It seeks to hold on to the past, unable to let go of fears whether these be real or imagined.

For additional information, here is a video of Scharmer describing the 3 enemies of listening:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pbnfpUAi_lk&list=PLEZdosXj25BV_lqtXTy7J9iNWjSoyNhNK&index=3&t=146s

3. Introduce the experiential exercise. Distribute the paper frames to participants. Participants put the paper glasses on. Give them the filters one by one.

Part 1: Give participants the red filter to hold over the eyeglass frame.

This is the voice of judgment. What can you see now? Does the world around you look the same as normal? Participants share comments (3 minutes).

Part 2: Give participants the yellow filter. They put it over the red filter.

This is the voice of cynicism. What can you see now? Does the world around you look the same as normal? Participants share comments (3 minutes; the difference is greater since they are now wearing 2 filters).

Part 3: Give participants the blue filter. They put it over the 2 filters.

The blue filter is the voice of fear. What can you see now? Does the world around you look the same as normal? Participants share their comments (3 minutes: the difference is very large; participants will likely not see anything through the 3 filters).

Alternative to using paper eyeglasses with filters: Have participants listen to a short recording of someone making a presentation (30 seconds); then add 3 levels of sounds (e.g., music, noises, other people talking) on top of this recording. Ask them what they can hear, after each additional sound layer.

4. Group discussion: moving from the metaphor to reality

What does this activity signify to you about how we view the world, or listen to people?

What are the outcomes when we listen to others with these filters? (e.g., what is the impact on inclusion, performance, innovation, etc.?)

Describe an experience when you had a distorted perception of reality. What possible conscious or unconscious barriers interfered with your perception and interpretation of your world? (Alternatively, working in small groups, invite participants to share instances when they experienced the 3 barriers to effective listening at work or in their daily lives).

Mention the importance of breaking old habits and building new habits. Listening without the 3 barriers (separating facts from interpretations) would require us to develop a new competence through conscious action.

Encourage participants to self-reflect and pay closer attention to their tendencies to apply these 3 barriers to effective listening (filters of perception) especially when working with diverse groups.

*Adapted from the "Inclusive Leadership Manual for Trainers". The manual was originally prepared by the School for Leaders Foundation, along with valuable contributions from the project partners, in particular from Irene Rojnik and Angelica Paci from alp activating leadership potential in Austria and from Michael Kraack, Heike Kraack-Tichy and Anna Sharapova from the EU-Fundraising Association e. V. in Germany. The manual can be downloaded and used free of charge by any company to improve their resilience under the terms of the Erasmus+ Programme. <https://inclusiveleadership.eu/inclusive-leadership-manual-for-trainers/>
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