

Listening Without Ego
ADR Lunchtime Series
March 12, 2009

LISTENING WITHOUT EGO

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COMMUNICATION STYLES: LESSONS FROM THE MBTI

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) is a personality styles instrument based on the work of psychologist and author Carl Jung. The MBTI is comprised of four continua (Introversion-Extroversion, Intuition-Sensing, Thinking-Feeling, Judging-Perceiving), on which people are placed depending upon their answers to a series of questions. The resulting letter combinations make up the “psychological type” of the individual filling out the instrument.

Our interest is not in the personality styles, per se, but in the influence that different styles may have on communication. As communication problems can be considered the foundation of conflict, and appropriate communication is the cornerstone of conflict management, and conflict resolution, this is critical information.

For our purposes, I prefer different language to make it clear that I do not intend the focus of the information to be on personality but, rather, on communication. The MBTI language is often used to categorize or “pigeonhole” people and/or to excuse our own behaviors, as if our preferences were something over which we had no control. My purpose in looking at these distinctions is to inform, for the purpose of developing more self-awareness about where we need to stretch and grow – not to give us another excuse.

More important than finding one’s place on one side of the continuum of styles or the other is the strength of a particular preference. A very strong external processor will obviously have a harder time communicating with a very strong internal processor – but a very moderate external processor may actually do better with a very moderate internal processor than with that strong external. Even though the two external processors share the same “type” (preference), that is less relevant than the fact that the two whose styles are more toward the center of the continuum actually process and communicate in similar ways. Please note, also, that there is movement along the continuum in different situations, as certain responses are called for. A strongly introverted person may be a wonderful trainer, for example, but would then need some time alone to “recharge.”

I cannot emphasize enough that knowing one’s own style or preference is not a place to hide. It’s simply irresponsible to say “that’s just who I am – take it or leave it.” Instead, the information should be used as an opportunity to understand better how to communicate with other people, how to handle misunderstandings when they arise, and how to deal with the conflict that is a natural outgrowth of people living and working together.

The following is a table describing the various components of Myers-Briggs “types” showing the words that I prefer to use as I talk about these preferences in the context of communication.

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Internal Processing (Introversion - I)

- Process information internally
- Draw energy (“recharge”) from being alone, not with other people
- Prefer to participate one-on-one or in very small groups
- May appear not to have ideas or to be reluctant to share them

External Processing (Extroversion -E)

- Process information externally
- Draw energy (“recharge”) from being with other people; don’t care for being alone
- Happy to participate in large groups
- May appear not to care about the ideas of others, since they are constantly sharing their own

Visionary (Intuitive - N)

- Interested in the “big picture”
- Interested in the vision and goal, not necessarily in the details of how to get there
- Pioneers and “starters,” not implementers

Implementer (Sensing - S)

- Interested in details, the five senses
- Want to examine how you get to the end, rather than focus on the end itself
- Very good at the implementation of a plan, though not necessarily in its creation

Analytical (Thinking - T)

- Interested in analysis
- Interested in what the rules are, what the law is
- Want the analysis to be transparent

Intuitive (Feeling - F)

- Interested in values and relationship
- Interested in what seems or feels fair
- May make decisions based on “gut” or intuition

Closure-Oriented (Judging - J)

- Interested in quick decisions
- Interested in closure
- Tends to be list-oriented and appreciate order

Process-Oriented (Perceiving - P)

- Interested in gathering data and processing it; decisions come slowly
- Spontaneous
- Able to tolerate more chaos

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Listening – Key Concepts

- Listening is the fundamental underpinning of communication – as significant as what you say is how you *receive* what is offered to you
- Why do we listen?
 - For information
 - For feelings
 - For what's important
 - For what they don't say
 - Because we're supposed to
 - Because we want to
- Listening is much more than the words
 - Words 7%
 - Body language 55%
 - Paralanguage (tone, pace, inflection) 38%
- Pay attention
- Recognize your own filters
- Make space
- How do we demonstrate that we are listening?
 - By providing a summary
 - By simply receiving what is offered without judgment, advice, or interruption
 - *Listening without ego*
 - Recognizing that it's about the speaker, not about us

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- NOT by asking questions
 - This is a trap for the unwary – they lead people to talk about what we want them to talk about, and may divert them from the path that they intended to take

- NOT by inserting our own experiences
 - This is a form of “hi-jacking” in which the speaker’s conversation is transformed into one that is about us (the ostensible listener) instead

- *The goal is to move through life more gracefully*

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“To ‘listen’ another’s soul into a condition of disclosure and discovery may be almost the greatest service that any human being ever performs for another.”

(Author unknown)

Listening is the greatest gift that we can give another person, and ourselves, in communication. But it is clear to me that not very many of us actually focus on what it means to listen. Listening does not mean hearing the words and being able to parrot them back to the speaker. That is sometimes confused with listening, and the ability to repeat back what someone has said allows people to say that they *are* listening when, in fact, they are not. They have been a million miles away, focused on something else, and hearing the words with no more than a fraction of their brain attending to the speaker.

That is how most of us communicate in our daily lives. We sit on the edge of the pool, flirting with the surface of the water, dipping a toe in now and then, but uncertain as to whether it will be too cold or too deep for us or, possibly, whether it’s just too darn much trouble to get our hair wet, and then have to towel off and get dressed again. We are uncertain about the pay-off of diving into conversation, as if listening too deeply might force us to reveal as much about ourselves as we learn about the other person.

And that’s because listening deeply, listening without ego, is all about losing ourselves. It is precisely about getting our own stuff out of the way so that we can be fully

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present for the person to whom we are listening. I am not talking about being present through the use of some skill or technique. I am talking about a kind of listening that goes far beyond picking up enough of a conversation as it drifts past you that you can throw in an appropriate line. I am talking about a kind of listening that makes a connection between you and the speaker. The kind of listening that engages every bit of you precisely because it is *not about you*, precisely because you and your ego are out of the way and are not blocking the transmission of word and tone and feeling.

Much of what we have learned about how to be successful in life revolves around our ego. When I talk about what's happening in the world, I talk about its impact on *me*. When I wonder if it's going to rain tomorrow, I look at it from the perspective of its impact on *my* plans. When there is a need to build a new facility to take care of medical waste, I applaud the notion, as long as it's "*not in my back yard.*"

And so it is. We live in a world in which there is no sense of being joined, of living in community. We are single entities, flailing around and trying to determine what the impact is *on me* of whatever event is taking place.

So it is no wonder that our communication takes on the tone that it does. When someone speaks to us we look for a method of connecting, but that method is a clumsy one – it involves disengaging from the conversation itself to sort through our mental rolodex so that we can find something in our own experience that is similar. That is our mechanism for connection – the ability to say, "Oh, I know someone like that." Or, "Oh, something like that happened to me once." We take what we hear and ask ourselves "what does this have to do with *me*?"

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Listening without ego seeks to change the question. Instead of worrying about making the connection through the vehicle of self, it looks for a way to make the connection through

the vehicle of the other. And the question becomes, “what does this have to do with *the speaker*? Why is this significant *for him*?”

How Can We Do It?

Is the speaker someone you like, someone with whom it is easy for you to connect? If so, you will find it easier to listen, because your pathways are open; you are already receptive. Is the speaker someone with whom you have had negative experiences in the past? If so, your receptors are already blocked – you have some protective coating in place to prevent yourself from becoming irritated or hurt. That coating may have the desired effect of protecting your feelings, but it will also have the effect of blocking communication and making it more difficult for you to receive what the speaker is sending you. It will, in effect, block receptivity.

I like to think of us as a “bundle of nerves” – not in the bad way that we imagine when we think of people who are anxious, but in the good way, the bio-chemical way, of having billions of nerve endings out there ready and waiting. At least, that’s the way it should be. When we have our own stuff out of the way, when we are open and receptive to the person to whom we are listening, those nerve endings are clean and shiny, just waiting for new information, new feelings, new emotions to reach them so that they can be received and held onto, sorted and processed.

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Or, if you're not into bio-chemistry, picture one of those wires that comes out of the back of the cable box that you're trying to hook up to your VCR. Sometimes those wires are open and exposed, ready to make contact with another nerve ending or another piece of electrical equipment and create a connection that allows information to flow. Sometimes the wires are coated with that protective plastic stuff that you have to strip away before the contact can be made. I think about ego as the plastic stuff that we have to strip away. It's there for a reason (it protects, it coats, it keeps us from being overloaded), but it must be stripped away before we can really make a connection that works.

Another image that comes to mind is that of the battery of a car. A car runs, in part, because electricity flows between and over the positive and negative connections in the battery. Over time, however, the contacts are weakened because corrosion builds up. You have to clean that stuff off before you can make a good strong connection, before the energy that propels you forward can be found.

It's the same with communication. Over time, we build up biases and assumptions and prejudices that get in the way of perceiving information accurately and receiving communication readily. It stops us from making contact, which stops us from being able to make use of the energy that is coming our way, which stops us from going forward.

Listening without ego is about stripping away the protective coating, about getting down to the bare wires, down to the bare nerve, if you will. In a sense, it's a risky operation, because it leaves us exposed. But that is precisely what is necessary. Being exposed means that we are *available* to make contact with the speaker. It means that we are able to listen to the other person deeply and openly, without our own filters getting in the way.

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Listening well allows you to hear whatever it is that has your attention and to shut out that which is not necessary or important for the conversation – total immersion. I am convinced that the only way to get our egos out of the way and listen as we should be listening is to be secure enough in our own minds and hearts about who we are, that we are willing to take the risk. That opens the door to be accepting of how the speaker needs to express himself and what the speaker needs to communicate.

Growing up, teenagers came to my house on a regular basis. They came to see my brothers and my sister and me, but we discovered that it didn't really matter if we were home or not. If my mom was there, they would come in to the house and sit and talk with her. We'd show up a few minutes, or a few hours, later and there they'd be, chatting more comfortably with her than with their own parents or, possibly, with us. My mother was extraordinary in her ability to make those teenagers with their awkwardness and their insecurities feel good enough about who they were that they could stay and talk. They knew that whatever they said, she would be able to take it in without judgment and let it go again. They could be comfortable in the telling, because they knew that she could be comfortable in the listening.

At my mother's memorial service, many people spoke of her ability to be fully present, to make the speaker feel as if he or she were the only person in the room at that moment. And what people felt from her (that she thought they were unique and uniquely important) was absolutely accurate. In that moment, because of her ability to *be* with them in the moment, they *were* all that was important. People left conversations with her feeling that they had been touched in some way, that they had been enriched by her presence. It was not

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that she gave sage advice, although she did that on occasion, it was that she *listened* and was *present* and let

them know that she was attentive to who they were. Those were the gifts she gave, and they made her stand out.

Several months after she died, a family friend who had known her very well for over 40 years wrote a letter to my siblings and me. Here is part of what he said:

In addition to her intelligence and her great gift of language, she fed her enormous spiritual appetite with a gentle listening. Most people spend their lives in search of such listening. ... She honed listening into a spiritual experience, the steady rediscovery of the divine at work. She was seeing how the spirit moves in people... [believing that] there had to be some way in which words could convey this experience. Mary listened patiently, waiting to hear them. ...

The ego stands between mind and spirit, a protective barrier that is designed to allow spirit to operate effectively in the human realm. It protects, it keeps safe. But, like the proverbial over-protective parent, there comes a time when the protection actually gets in the way of important growth. The ego prevents risk-taking even when the rewards would be great, leading from a place of fear (“What if it doesn’t work out?” “What will people say?” “How will it look to other people?” “What if they laugh at me?”), instead of faith or trust.

What set my mother apart was that she had figured this out. With her spirit leading, she knew that listening to another person fully, openly, completely, was a gift of one spirit to another. Spirit leads, mind and ego follow. With the ego out of the way, we are able to receive that which is offered to us without looking for the connection (“what about *me*??”), because the connection is immediate and apparent and obvious: one spirit, one person, one

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experience. If I am not separate from the person who is talking, then I need not search for the connection. It simply is.