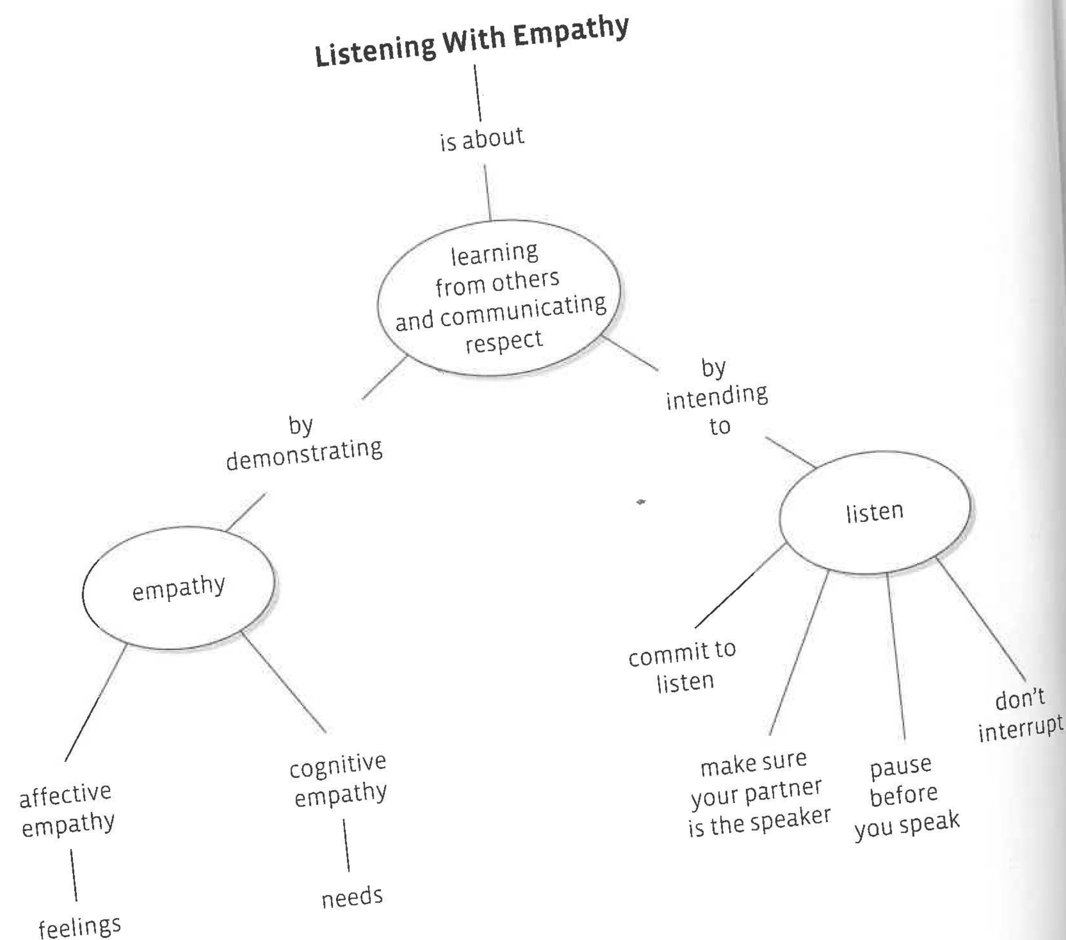

LISTENING WITH EMPATHY

Empathy withers and dies when we fail to acknowledge the humanity of other people—their individuality and uniqueness—and treat them as beings of less than equal worth to ourselves.

—Roman Krznaric (2014, p. 75)

I always thought of listening as something passive and too slow . . . something that happens as you formulate what next to say. Now I see listening as an art form—a lost way of communicating our humanity and kindness.

—Maria Furgiuele,
Teacher, Saskatchewan, Canada

Demonstrating Empathy

It is not by chance that the first habit in this book is demonstrating empathy. So much of communication, whether we are presenting to a large audience or consoling a three-year-old, depends on our ability to understand what our conversation partners think and feel. Before we design a beautiful slide or ask a probing question, our first thought should be, "What are my conversation partners thinking and feeling about this topic?"

We demonstrate empathy by using our imagination to see the world through others' eyes and feel the world

through others' hearts. One example of empathy is described by Alexis Wiggins in a column published on her father Grant Wiggins' blog.[1] In her column, Alexis described how she experienced empathy by shadowing students for two days to see what it would be like to "be" a student.

"My task," she wrote, "was to do everything the student was supposed to do: If there was lecture or notes on the board, I copied them as fast as I could into my notebook. If there was a chemistry lab, I did it with my host student. If there was a test, I took it. The experience," she wrote, "was so eye-opening that I wish I could go back to every class of students I ever had right now and change a minimum of ten things—the layout, the lesson plan, the checks for understanding. Most of it!"

Alexis identified three insights. First, "students sit all day, and sitting is exhausting . . . I could not believe how tired I was after the first day . . . We forget as teachers, because we are on our feet a lot . . . But students," she wrote, "move almost never. And never is exhausting."

Her second insight was that students sit passively and listen "during approximately 90% of their classes." The teacher wrote, "It was not just the sitting that was draining but that so much of the day was spent absorbing information, but not often grappling with it. I was struck," she continued, "by . . . how little of their learning they are directing or choosing."

Alexis' third insight was that "you feel a little bit like a nuisance all day long. There was a great deal of sarcasm and snark directed at students, and I recognized, uncomfortably, how much I myself had engaged in this kind of communication." As a teacher, she knew how frustrating it can be to "have to explain things five times," but when she was a student, she saw things differently. "I was stressed. I was anxious. I had questions. And if the person teaching answered those questions by rolling their eyes at me, I would never want to ask another question again. I feel a great deal more empathy for students," she wrote, "after shadowing, and I realize that sarcasm, impatience, and annoyance are a way of creating a barrier between me and them. They do not help learning."

[1] https://grantwiggins.wordpress.com/2014/10/10/a-veteran-teacher-turned-coach-shadows-2-students-for-2-days-a-sobering-lesson-learned/

There is a good chance you have read this blog because it became a viral sensation, getting more than 1,000,000 hits since the year it was published. No doubt people were drawn to the column because they were interested in the ideas the writer shared, but I also think they read it because it so clearly illustrated the power of empathy. People saw that by understanding others, they could learn to be better.

Alexis' experience is an example of one way we can demonstrate empathy in our schools, but there are many other ways. What if professional developers spent two days understanding everything teachers face by shadowing teachers? What if teachers spent two days learning everything their principals or superintendents face by shadowing them? What if a governor, intent on cutting funding for special education classes, spent a day teaching a middle school class of 20 students who have been diagnosed as having severe emotional disorders, and then spent another day following one of the students from the class?

Demonstrating empathy, despite its importance, is not very highly valued today. Frequently, people are reduced to stereotypes, and whole groups of people are labeled based on politics, gender, race, religion, sports preferences, or even the type of smartphones they use. When we reduce people to types, we stop seeing them as the unique people they are and start to see them as categories with common—usually negative—traits; for example, all conservatives are only concerned with themselves, all Yankee fans are arrogant, and all Apple users are sheep doing whatever Apple wants them to do. Those stereotypes become much worse and more destructive when people start to talk about gender, race, or religion.

We can even embrace stereotypes as we reject them. For example, left-minded people can stereotype all right-minded people as narrow-minded at the very moment when they argue against stereotyping based on race, and right-minded people can label all left-minded people as immoral at the very moment they argue that the unique freedom of each individual must be respected. The way to fight for equality, or freedom, or respect is to see all people as fully human, not to dehumanize them by reducing them to a stereotype. And the way to do that is by demonstrating empathy.

In his book *Empathy: Why It Matters, and How to Get It* (2014), Roman Krznaric elaborates on the meaning of empathy:

> [E]mpathy is the art of stepping imaginatively into the shoes of another person, understanding their feelings and perspectives, and using that understanding to guide your actions. So empathy is distinct from expressions of sympathy—such as pity or feeling sorry for somebody—because these do not involve trying to understand the other person's emotions or point of view. (p. 8)

When we really understand people, we see them differently, and our broader understanding of them creates the opportunity for better conversations. We see others as people instead of objects. Martin Buber explains this distinction in *I and Thou* (1970). Buber refers to the objectification of others as "I-It." As Daniel Goleman (2006) has written, "Buber coined the term 'I-It' for the range of relations that runs from merely detached to utterly exploitative. In that spectrum, others become objects: we treat someone more as a thing than as a person" (p. 105). Goleman offers an anecdote that captures how it can feel when we experience an I-It conversation:

> A woman whose sister had recently died got a sympathy call from a male friend who had lost his own sister a few years before. The friend expressed condolences, and the woman, touched by his empathic words, told him poignant details of the long illness her sister had suffered, and she described how bereft she herself felt at the loss.
>
> But as she talked, she could hear the clicking of computer keys at the other end of the line. A slow realization dawned: her friend was answering his email, even as he was talking to her in her hour of pain. His comments became increasingly hollow, perfunctory, and off point as the conversation continued.
>
> After they hung up, she felt so dejected that she wished he had never called at all. She'd just had a gut punch of the interaction that the philosopher Martin Buber called "I-It." (p. 105)

One starting point for empathy is to see people as subjects rather than objects. This requires thinking carefully about how we see others. One major challenge may be that we simply do not want to hear what others are saying. We are usually drawn to those messages that confirm our hopes or affirm our assumptions about ourselves. Even after years of communication training, for example, many find it easier to listen to praise than criticism. David Bohm in *On Dialogue* (1996) describes what can happen when someone examines the way they listen:

> If one is alert and attentive, he can see, for example, that whenever certain questions arise, there are fleeting questions of fear, which push him away from consideration of these questions and of pleasure, which attract his thoughts and cause them to be occupied with other questions . . . can each of us be aware of the subtle fear and pleasure sensations that block his ability to listen freely? Without this awareness, the injunction to listen to the whole of what is said will have little meaning. (p. 5)

We struggle to listen with empathy because our ways of making sense of events can interfere with our ability to see the world as it is. For example, an instructional coach from an eastern part of the United States wrote about how her personal experiences with others could interfere with her ability to listen. After she left a meeting frustrated with how she interacted with others, she wrote, "I really need to not try to figure out motives of people and instead just think about what they are saying."

Many volunteers who participated in our global communication study wrote about how they find it much easier to understand people they like compared with people they don't like. A coach in Singapore wrote, "I had to remind myself that what the other person said was important, even if I don't like his personality. I need to remind myself that his words are important, and since we work in the same place, I have to learn to understand what he says."

> Empathy is the very means by which we create social life and advance civilization.
>
> —**Jeremy Rifkin** (2009, p. 10)

In *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High* (2002), Kerry Patterson, Joseph Greeny, Ron McMillan, and Al Switzler describe how the "clever stories" we tell can

interfere with our ability to demonstrate empathy. One way we do this is to tell ourselves that someone else is fully responsible for the problems or difficulties we experience, and furthermore they are doing this because they have some character flaw—they are selfish, insensitive, bull-headed. Patterson and his colleagues call this a villain story. When we adopt a villain story, it can obscure our vision of reality.

One volunteer in our study, a professional developer from the United States, wrote about a group of teachers who saw her as the villain. "I was talking about growth and fixed mindset," she wrote, "and they thought I was telling them they had a fixed mindset. As a result, they completely stopped listening and rejected everything I said." If we are not mindful, all of us can slip into adopting a clever story in trivial or important ways—whether we are upset at the slow driver in the passing lane or the teacher who tells us what we don't want to hear about our son or daughter.

A second type of clever story that Patterson and his colleagues describe is the helpless story. Here, we create a story in which we convince ourselves that we are helpless in the face of some challenge. Patterson's ideas about "clever stories" are similar to what Martin Seligman (2006) wrote about learned helplessness and optimism and Carol Dweck (2006) has written about fixed and growth mindsets. We can tell ourselves that there is nothing we can do to change a situation that is affecting our lives even when there might be a great deal that we could do.

A helpless story in schools is the belief there is nothing we can do to teach students who aren't motivated, or whose parents don't care, or when we have too much paperwork, and so forth. It is easy to be seduced by such stories because teaching can be overwhelming. However, when we adopt a story, we stop seeing students as individuals and unconsciously start to look for evidence to support our story. As with villain stories, helpless stories interfere with our ability to see reality clearly, and most troubling, they make it difficult for us to see the unique attributes of each human being who sits in a staff meeting or classroom.

We can counteract our clever stories by first clearing our minds of the thoughts that might make it difficult for us to demonstrate empathy. I learned this from a coach of coaches when we discussed her attempt at empathy. Maureen tried

to be empathetic with family members during conversations about the kind of care her 90-year-old father-in-law should receive. "I had a hard time listening," Maureen told me, "because I had a lot of baggage in my mind from previous conversations. The only way I could understand their story was to get my story out of my head first."

Marshall B. Rosenberg, in *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life* (1990), refers to this clearing of the mind as empathy toward ourselves; that is, we need to understand our own thoughts and feelings before we can understand others. We can show empathy toward ourselves, Rosenberg writes,

> by listening to what's going on in ourselves with the same quality of presence and attention that we offer to others. Former United Nations Secretary-General Dag Hammarskjold once said, "The more faithfully you listen to the voice within you, the better you will hear what is happening outside." If we become skilled at giving ourselves empathy, we often experience in just a few seconds a natural release of energy that then enables us to be present with the other person. (p. 103)

Once we have demonstrated empathy toward ourselves, we can demonstrate empathy toward others. To do this, we need to understand that empathy, as Krznaric explains, is most commonly described as having two components—affective empathy and cognitive empathy. Affective empathy, Krznaric writes, "is about sharing or mirroring another person's emotions. So if I see my daughter crying in anguish and I too feel anguish, then I am experiencing affective empathy. If, on the other hand, I notice her anguish but feel a different emotion, such as pity ('Oh, the poor little thing,' I might think), then I am showing sympathy rather than empathy. Sympathy typically refers to an emotional response that is not shared" (2014, p. 11).

Cognitive empathy or perspective taking, Krznaric writes, "involves making an imaginative leap and recognizing that other people have different tastes, experiences, and world views than our own" (p. 10). One important part of cognitive empathy is to identify our own needs and our conversation partners' needs. As the following box illustrates, people's needs come in many shapes and sizes.

> In order to listen, you have to be still. You have to quiet your inner self, and you have to be willing to be vulnerable to being changed by your conversation partner. You have to be willing to say to somebody, "Oh, man, I know how that feels, I've been there myself. Let's just walk through this together."
>
> **—Carol Walker,** Instructional Coach, Green River, Wyoming

This list is based on Marshall B. Rosenberg's List of Needs in *Non-Violent Communication: A Language of Life* (1990):

- **Autonomy:** goals, values, dreams, personal growth
- **Celebration:** births, birth dates, marriages, losses, milestone events
- **Integrity:** principles, self-awareness, learning, honesty, self-efficacy
- **Purpose:** contributions, meaning, self-worth, learning, creativity
- **Relationships:** psychological safety, respect, support, trust, understanding, love, validation, reassurance
- **Play:** fun, joy, laughter
- **Spiritual Communion:** silence, beauty, guidance, knowledge, inspiration, harmony, order
- **Physical Nurturance:** health, food, weather, rest, exercise, shelter, sexual expression, touch, rest

One of main points Roman Krznaric (2014) makes in *Empathy* is that there is ample evidence to show that empathy can be learned. We can "humanize our imagination" (p. 83), Krznaric says, by expanding our capacity for empathy: "There is overwhelming agreement among the experts that our personal empathy quota is not fixed: we can develop our empathic potential throughout our lives. Our brains are surprisingly malleable, or 'plastic,' enabling us to rewire our neural circuitry" (p. 55).

GETTING BETTER AT DEMONSTRATING EMPATHY

For this habit and the other ten habits in the book, I suggest three ways of getting better—*Looking Back*, *Looking At*, and *Looking Ahead*. When we Look Back, we consider interactions we've had with people in the past and think about how they proceeded and what we can learn from them so we can be more effective in the future. Schön (1991) refers to this as reflection on action.

When we Look At, we consider interactions we are having or observing. We might keep a log of times we demonstrate empathy, for example, or take notes on the ways others do or do not demonstrate empathy. Schön (1991) refers to this way of thinking as reflection in action.

Looking Ahead is making plans for how we will interact in the future. When we Look Ahead to demonstrate empathy, we consider our own thoughts and feelings and the thoughts and feelings of others. Killion and Todnem (1991) refer to this as reflection for practice. To genuinely internalize habits, we will likely have to Look Back, Look At, and Look Ahead several times, on our own, with coaches, or teams.

> If there's no empathy, there's no listening. You can be hearing things, but I don't think you can be listening unless you have empathy.
>
> **—Carol Walker,** Instructional Coach, Green River, Wyoming

At the end of this chapter, there are forms that anyone can use to Look Back, Look At, and Look Ahead. Volunteers in our study reported that they found it most helpful to use video to Look Back at their conversations and to write their thoughts down on the reflection forms.

Listening With Empathy

Carol Walker knows how important it is to listen. An instructional coach in Green River, Wyoming, for the past 12 years, and a secondary Spanish and English teacher for the previous 26, Carol was a participant in our global communication study. In my interview with Carol, she told me how important listening was for her work as a coach. "I don't think I can be an instructional coach unless I listen. Listening is how I learn from my conversation partners; how I support and cheer for them. Sometimes when I listen, I help people peel away things so they can see where their strengths are and where conflicts might be hiding."

"Listening," Carol says, "might be the most important tool for an instructional coach," but Carol sees listening as important in all aspects of life. For Carol, "listening is like oxygen. A healthy relationship simply cannot exist without it. When I listen, I allow the conversation to change me. Listening opens that door. But when I don't listen, the relationship becomes unhealthy—the transaction becomes tainted."

After years of teaching and coaching, Carol has learned that listening requires more of us than just not talking. In our interview, Carol said, "A lot of the time people confuse being silent with listening, but listening is more than holding silent. If people's souls have listening organs, they must use them when they are listening."

In order to become a better listener, Carol reads widely, and she told me she has learned a lot, especially from Brené Brown's books *The Gifts of Imperfection* and *Daring Greatly*, Mark Nepo's *Seven Thousand Ways to Listen*, and Don Miguel

> If everyone were a better listener, respecting what each other has to say, what a difference that would make for each person.
>
> —**Michelle Gilbert,** Instructional Coach, Plymouth Meeting, Pennsylvania

Ruiz's *The Four Agreements* and *The Fifth Agreement*. For Carol, listening is a way of life, not just a communication skill, so she was very willing to record herself in a conversation and watch her video to see what she might learn.

Given how important listening is to Carol, it might not be surprising to discover that one of the conversations she wrote about for our study was one where she was disappointed by how she listened. When Carol reviewed her conversation, she saw that she focused more on how her partner communicated than what he communicated. Reflecting on her conversation, Carol wrote on her reflection form, "I am heartily disappointed that my own lack of connection with a topic can lead to a lack of connection with a person. I have a lot to work on. There needs to be much less of me when others need my ear."

WE STRUGGLE TO LISTEN

Most people recognize the importance of listening. Almost every communication, relationship, or leadership book identifies listening as essential. And yet, when participants in our global study watched themselves in conversation, what they usually first noticed about the way they communicated was that they needed to become better listeners. Kathy DeVillers reflected, "I always knew I was a quick talker and interrupter, but I never realized how much it affected my ability to really listen to what others were saying to me." When people watched their videos they usually found, as Rebecca Jenkins wrote, "I always underestimate how much I talk and over estimate how much I listen."

So what do good listeners do? In part, good listening should be the natural outgrowth of the Better Conversations Beliefs I wrote about in Chapter 1. If we see our conversation partners as equal partners, then conversation should be back and forth. If we truly want to hear what the other person has to say, then we should listen better. We should, but our global study of communication reveals that we do not always do what we think we do.

For that reason, we need to learn and practice a few simple habits so our actions embody our beliefs. If we reflect on our beliefs and act to master a few high-leverage habits, we can become better listeners and start to have

better conversations. The strategies are simple. They can be mastered by anyone, and when they are applied with discipline, they will make you a much better listener, a more effective leader, and a better friend.

> I have learned that many people would like to have someone listen to them pretty much uninterrupted on any topic of their choice. I think this points out how much we crave personal time. Not many can afford private counseling, so inviting folks to sit down and have a chance to open up about some pressing topic is probably a good thing.
>
> —**Research volunteer**

Strategy 1: Commit to Really Listen. The first listening strategy is a simple but absolutely vital one, to commit to hearing the other person. When we commit to listening, we enter into conversations determined to let the other person speak, and this means we don't fill up the conversation with our own words. This is easier said than done. One research volunteer wrote about how difficult it was for her to simply commit to letting her conversation partner speak:

> I was absolutely appalled at how many times I talked over my conversation partner. Everything I said was an agreement, and encouragement, etc., but it sounded so incredibly rude as I listened to it on the tape. I was surprised by how much I talked over the speaker. In my mind, I've been aware of this all along, but I have never stopped myself from doing it because my comments are always supportive and encouraging. Listening to myself doing this, however, was appalling. Rather than encouraging, it's just plain rude, and I wonder how others have put up with this.

One of the challenges with listening is that we often fail to recognize when we are not listening. Our electronic devices, in particular, can pull us away from a conversation in a microsecond. Many participants in our study confirmed that their technology made it harder to talk. Beth Madison wrote that "having an open laptop and even glancing at it while talking to someone else can be a conversation turn-off." One participant wrote that she had to teach herself to avoid distractions. "When someone wants to talk to me, I now get up and move away from my computer and desk. I find somewhere to sit where there are not many distractions."

Authentic listening is something we feel as much as we see. You can tell when your sister who lives 2,000 miles away isn't listening when you are talking with her on the phone. Clearly, you can feel when someone right besides you is or is not listening. Authentic listening causes a genuine connection between people. If you

choose to make sure you are really listening to your partner, he or she will know. And so will you.

Strategy 2: Be the Listener, Not the Speaker. Good listeners give others plenty of opportunity to speak. For that reason, you should teach yourself to ask, "Am I the listener or am I the speaker?" If you find that you are always the speaker, work on taking on the alternate role.

There are many ways you can shift to being the listener. You can make a decision to care about what your partner has to say. You can also pose questions to the person you're talking with rather than telling him or her what you have to say. You can see every interaction as a chance to let the other person tell you something you don't know and see each conversation as a learning opportunity, not a telling opportunity. You can use questions to learn about your conversation partner. A great conversationalist lets the other person have the conversation.

As your conversation progresses, coach yourself by checking the situation and asking, "Am I the speaker, or am I the receiver?" If you're the speaker, then make a point to ask a question that hands the conversation back to your partner. Participants in our study had to use metacognitive strategies to keep the conversation focused on the other person. Michelle Gilbert wrote that she had to tell herself that "this person is speaking because they have a desire to be heard and they have something to say." Another volunteer wrote that she realized that "sometimes my mind is thinking about what I would do or what I think the Big Idea is, and I am not always right. I need to free my mind and just listen."

> I will be focusing on pausing and really thinking before responding. I keep going back to a comment—"see every interaction as a chance to let the other person tell you something you didn't know."
>
> **—Beth Madison,** Principal, Robert Gray Middle School, Portland, Oregon

Strategy 3: Pause and Think Before You Respond. Even if you listen with all your heart, mind, and soul, there is still a possibility that you will be perceived as a terrible listener. Careless words in response to what someone says can negate another person's comment and create the same impact as not listening at all. Let's say someone comes to me with a suggestion or idea, and without thinking, I quickly respond, "Oh, that will never work. We've tried that before, and it always fails." I may have heard what my colleague said, but my comment has the same impact as not listening because my words communicate that my partner's words had no impact on me at all.

A better strategy is to pause before responding and ask yourself, "Will what I'm about to say open up or close down the conversation?" If my comments shut down my partner, then I should find another way to respond—or say nothing. But, listening is more than taking words in. You may have had the experience where someone was able to parrot back what you said but who didn't really seem to listen to you. Listening is about hearing the words and being sure to process them. When we listen to others, we must make sure we let their words sink in, and then we need to comment in ways that authentically show we have heard what they have said. There are two techniques here, and both are important. First we pause, and second we think about what we will say before we speak.

> Listening stiches the world together. Because listening is the doorway to everything that matters. It enlivens the heart the way breathing enlivens the lungs. We listen to awaken our heart. We do this to stay vital and alive.
>
> **—Mark Nepo** (2013, p. xiv)

When we pause, we allow for what I've heard Susan Scott, author of *Fierce Conversations*, describe in her presentations as the "sweet purity of silence." Learning to be quiet was an important skill for one research participant. She wrote that "silence is OK, even though it may be uncomfortable for a while. We have a tendency to fill the gap of silence."

A great description of the power of listening is provided by Marshall Goldsmith in his book *What Got You Here Won't Get You There* (2007). Goldsmith describes "one of his all-time heroes," Frances Hesselbein, who, Goldsmith tells us, was identified by Peter Drucker as "the finest executive he's ever known." Goldsmith writes:

> Frances Hesselbein does a lot of things well. But she does one thing superbly above all else. She thinks before she speaks. As a result, she is a world-class listener. If you asked her if this was a passive gesture, she would assure you that it requires great discipline, particularly when she is upset about what she is hearing. After all, what do most of us do when we're angry? We speak (and not in the carefully measured tones of a diplomat).
>
> What do we do when we're upset? We talk.
>
> What do we do when we're confused or surprised or shocked? Again, we talk. This is so predictable that we can see the other party almost cringe in anticipation of our harsh unthinking autoreflex response.
>
> Not so with Frances Hesselbein. You could tell her the world was about to end and she would think

before opening her mouth, not only about what she would say but how she would phrase it.

Whereas most people think of listening as something we do during those moments *where we are not talking*, Frances Hesselbein knows that listening is a two-part maneuver. There's the part where we actually listen. And there's the part where we speak. Speaking establishes how we are perceived as a listener. What we say is proof of how well we listen. They are two sides of the same coin. (p. 148, italics in original)

Strategy 4: Don't Interrupt. If you find the first three strategies too difficult, there is a simple way you can improve your listening skills overnight. Stop interrupting other people when they are talking. When we interrupt others, we are showing them in not-so-subtle ways that we believe that what they are saying doesn't really matter—our comments matter so much more.

> I am working on not interrupting others with my sense of urgency during many of my conversations with others and not formulating a response before the speaker is finished.
>
> —**Kathy DeVillers,** Professional Learning Specialist, Green Bay Area Public Schools, Wisconsin

Listening is an important way to show respect for others. When we really listen, we have a chance to enter into a deeper form of communication. A conversation characterized by people really listening is humanizing for all parties. When we truly hear people, we see them as human beings who count, whose ideas, heart, and soul matter. When we interrupt, on the other hand, we treat others as objects put on earth only to help us get what we want. What's a good goal for how often we should interrupt? How about never?

GETTING BETTER AT LISTENING

There are many excellent books with great ideas about how to become a truly outstanding listener. To become an excellent listener, we need to demonstrate empathy, which as Roman Krznaric (2014) explains, involves understanding how others feel and what they are thinking (especially about their needs). Marshall Rosenberg (2003) writes that one powerful way to demonstrate empathy is by paraphrasing what we hear others saying. On her reflection forms for our global communication study, Joellen Killion, who has authored many helpful books about professional learning, stated that for her to be a good listener, she had to be careful not to let questions interfere with her ability to truly listen. Stephen Covey described the importance of listening as a way of understanding another's paradigm.

All of these ideas are outstanding, but I would suggest they represent the second level of listening. Once you are habitually listening to others, you should consider refining your habits by implementing these new practices. But the first task is simply to stop talking and hear what the other person says. Almost all of the participants who studied listening reported that they improved because they did not try to do too much. The four simple strategies—(a) commit to listen, (b) make sure your partner is the speaker, (c) pause before you speak and ask, "will my comment open up or close down this conversation?" and (d) don't interrupt—provided challenge enough. Once these strategies become habitual, you can move to level two, perhaps by reading some of the books described in the Going Deeper section.

> **Effective Listening**
>
> 1. Commit to listen.
> 2. Make sure your partner is the speaker.
> 3. Pause before you speak and ask, "Will my comment open up or close down this conversation?"
> 4. Don't interrupt.

You can get better at listening by internalizing the four simple strategies—either on your own or with a partner or team—by using the *Looking Back, Looking At,* or *Looking Ahead* reflection forms included at the end of this chapter.

The *Looking Back* form can be used to review conversations and assess your interest, how effectively you listened, and to identify what you can do to get better at listening.

The *Looking At* form can be used to consider models of good listening you see around you, to create your own understanding of what good listening is, and to identify strategies that you consider important for good listening.

The *Looking Ahead* form can be used to prepare yourself to truly hear what others are communicating and to move toward level two of listening by considering the emotions and needs your conversation partner might be feeling.

TO SUM UP

This book begins with the habit of demonstrating empathy because so much of communication depends on understanding others. When we demonstrate empathy, we see beyond our stereotypes and stop seeing people as objects. Instead, we start to see others as the unique subjects they are. Martin Buber (1970) referred to this as the distinction between "I-It."

Roman Krznaric (2014) identifies two components to empathy:

1. Affective empathy "is about sharing or mirroring another person's emotions."
2. Cognitive empathy "involves making an imaginative leap and recognizing that other people have different tastes, experiences, and world views than our own."

Marshall Rosenberg (2003) sees identifying others' needs as a crucial part of empathy.

Listening is one of the most important Better Conversations Habits, and when participants in our global study reviewed themselves on video, they almost always identified listening as an area where they wanted to get better.

If we embrace the Better Conversations Beliefs—especially that we see our conversation partners as equals, that conversation should be back and forth, and that we truly want to hear what the other person has to say—then we *should* listen with empathy. We should, but unfortunately that is not always the case. To be effective listeners, our habits need to be consistent with our beliefs.

In this chapter, four strategies are identified to promote the habit of effective listening:

1. Commit to listen.
2. Make sure your partner is the speaker.
3. Pause before you speak and ask, "Will my comment open up or close down this conversation?"
4. Don't interrupt.

GOING DEEPER

Roman Krznaric's *Empathy: Why It Matters, and How to Get It* (2014) is a great overview of writing about empathy. Krznaric draws on neuroscience research to argue that we are more than the self-interested beings described by authors such as Hobbes, Smith, Freud, and Dawkins. Krznaric provides useful definitions of empathy, especially when he distinguishes between cognitive and affective empathy. This is the book to

read if you are interested in why empathy matters and how you can develop your own capacity for demonstrating it.

Krznaric acknowledges his debt, as I do, to Marshall B. Rosenberg's *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life* (2003), which almost lyrically describes the importance of empathy as a foundational support for meaningful human interaction. Rosenberg proposes that when we treat people like objects—that is, when we do not fully appreciate their humanity and need for freedom—we commit violence against them that can be even more damaging than physical violence. His book describes a theory of interaction grounded in the belief that everyone is capable of empathy, and it is through empathy or compassion that we can move beyond "right and wrong" conversations to more meaningful conversations that address our needs.

If you are interested in a scholarly articulation of the role of the theory of empathy in psychology, biology, the meaning of life, and ultimately the structure of society and implications for our future, see Jeremy Rifkin's hefty and impressive book *The Empathic Civilization: The Race to Global Consciousness in a World in Crisis* (2009). For an excellent introduction to the book, watch Alan Greg's interview of Rifkin on TVO (http://tvo.org/video/164754/jeremy-rifkin-empathic-civilization-full).

The book that first influenced my thinking about listening is Stephen Covey's classic work, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, first published in 1990. Like Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, Covey's *7 Habits* is packed with wise advice for anyone who interacts with others, which is to say, everyone. Covey's advice to "seek first to understand, then be understood" remains excellent advice for people engaging in communication in the 21st century.

Marshall Goldsmith's short but powerful book *What Got You Here Won't Get You There* (2007) also offers excellent advice for communicators. Anyone who learns and takes to heart Goldsmith's 20 habits will be happier, more successful, and most likely a better person.

Mark Nepo's *Seven Thousand Ways to Listen* (2013), which Carol Walker described earlier in this book, defines listening as a way of life, not just a communication habit. The spiritual approach of the author won't appeal to everyone, but many consider this book to be essential reading for a well-lived life.