



WHITEPAPER

Are you listening?

BY PEGGY BAUMGARTNER

In our experience, the challenge of high performance is not in knowing what to do; rather it is doing what you know. This is especially true when it comes to listening.



At the completion of our Coaching For High Performance workshop, participants create action plans for improving 1–2 key coaching behaviours. Listening is a focus for on average 30% of participants. We consistently hear that focusing on listening is about way more than simply getting information.

It is also about building trust, confidence, motivation, and commitment, and gaining a real understanding of where someone is at. When a coach or manager is skilled at listening, conversations occur at a deeper level, as do relationships. And, listening saves time and money by preventing misunderstandings and uncovering challenges early. We all know this, so why do so many of us simply accept the fact that our listening skills “aren’t great”? Well, in short it is because listening is an easy skill to understand but hard to do well.

So, for those who have been able to elevate their game in this area, how did they do it?

I looked back at the close to 2,500 action plans I have collected in the past seven years to investigate this question. In particular, I wanted to understand what separated those who were successful in improving their listening skills from those who had made improving their listening skills a priority, but hadn’t seen the movement they had hoped for. When I looked back at the action plans of the ‘successful’ group, four clear patterns began to emerge. The people who improved the most tended to:

- **Get Clarity ...** on what specifically they needed to improve.
- **Get Specific ...** in planning what they would do differently.
- **Get Committed ...** by setting up ways to monitor their progress
- **Get Support ...** for when the challenge would be greatest.

FOCUS FOR PARTICIPANTS
(ON AVERAGE)



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1. GET CLARITY

Becoming a ‘good listener’ is an end goal; it feels too big for many of us. In order to improve, you need to get focused on a performance goal. That is, what is the next step to you improving your listening?

In order to set an effective performance goal, you first need to identify what currently blocks you from listening. Do you find yourself finishing the thoughts of others? Are you distracted by BlackBerries, computers or other things in your environment? Does boredom or a lack of interest have you day dreaming? Do you think you are always right? Are you busy thinking ahead as to how to respond? Start by building an awareness of what it is that specifically blocks you—because changing this specific behaviour is where you want to start; it’s your performance goal.

For example, one manager I know, who by his own admission ‘never’ listened, started by focusing on giving people who came into see him in his office his undivided attention. To him, that meant coming around to the other side of his desk, sitting beside the other person facing them, leaning forward, making eye contact, etc. Another leader chose to narrow down his end goal to a performance goal by starting with an individual he wanted to develop better rapport and trust with.

And remember you have to start small. As legendary Canadian track and field coach Andy Higgins would say: ‘focusing on everything is focusing on nothing.’ If you try to change too many things at once it becomes overwhelming. If you’ve taken our Coaching For High Performance workshop, the listening self-assessment in your workbook can also be a great assist in helping you to determine where to focus.

Your ideas don’t have to be this creative but they do need to suit your personality and focus specifically on the block you identified as your goal.

2. GET SPECIFIC

Once you have identified the challenge, you need to map out specific strategies for changing your behaviour. I have heard some really creative ideas in peoples’ plans.



For example, one manager who had a tendency to check his email or multi-task when on the phone with his people printed a photo of his team that was the same size as his computer monitor. Now when he speaks with team members he flips the picture over the monitor so he can make ‘eye contact’ with the person he’s speaking to and block out email temptations. Your ideas don’t have to be this creative—but they do need to suit your personality and focus specifically on the block you identified as your goal. Here are a few ideas that some of our successful listeners found practical and effective:

It is critical to anticipate when it will be hardest for you to really listen and plan for the support you need in those moments.

If you are distracted by your own thoughts and ideas ...

- Keep a piece of paper handy to park the ideas and thoughts that come to mind during conversations. Write them down and set aside some time each day to address.
- Challenge yourself to summarize conversations or frequently check for meaning

If you think you are always right ...

- Remind yourself to be genuinely curious. Ask yourself, ‘what might they see that I don’t?’

If you get distracted by things in your environment ...

- Remove distractions. Put your phone in a drawer or somewhere out of sight when you are talking
- Challenge yourself to make eye contact whenever the other person is speaking

If you talk too much and don’t leave room for others (or you interrupt) ...

- Prepare a couple of questions in advance into which you genuinely hope to gather input
- Create a visual or mental cue to remind yourself to stop talking and/or let them finish what they are saying

3. GET COMMITTED

As part of your planning process, it's important to think about how you are going to keep yourself on track with the change(s) you are making.

For example:

- Will you enlist the help of others to give you feedback in the moment?
- Will you pause each day or each week to assess how well you listening?
- Will you have a reminder notice pop up once a month, forcing you to assess your progress? Noticing what helped when you were successful and when listening is still a challenge?

So often, our efforts to improve our own 'soft skills' fall by the wayside as we deal with the pressures and priorities of the work world day in and day out—so build a plan to keep this top of mind.

4. GET SUPPORT

Finally, it is critical to anticipate when it will be hardest for you to really listen and plan for the support you need in those moments. Many of the successful listeners I spoke with explained that they tended to slip into bad listening behaviours when they didn't think that they had time. To ensure their action plan was successful, they came up ideas for what they would do in these moments in advance. For example, one person decided they would make a conscious decision to either make the time and listen, or they would tell the person 'I am just in the middle of something right now, can we schedule time to talk about this in an hour?' This allowed them to pick a time when they didn't feel rushed or overwhelmed by other activities or deadlines. Determine when you feel most challenged to listen and figure out what your strategy will be.

If you do these four things, my experience indicates that you will be well on your way to becoming a better listener. And, rumour has it that if you improve your listening skills, you may see a few benefits at home in addition to the numerous benefits at work.

Good luck. And, please do let us know how it goes by emailing me at peggy@thirdfactor.com. I am all ears!

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