

How To Really Listen

by Peter Bregman
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One morning, my wife Eleanor woke up, turned over, and said, "I am not looking forward to this day." I asked her why. What came out is that we were at the start of the Jewish high holy day season, which means colder weather and three weeks of big social meals, long religious services, broken routines, and children out of school. Eleanor didn't grow up with these traditions, and they can be overwhelming. Now, I run a management consulting company; problem solving is what I do. So it didn't take me long to jump in.

"Cold weather means ski season is about to start," I said. "You love skiing. And these holiday meals are fun and filled with people you love — they'll make you feel better. And I'll be with you; you won't be alone with the kids. Also, you know, Jesus was Jewish, so it's kind of your tradition too." Even as I said it, I knew that last one was a reach. It became clear that I was making her feel worse and now she wasn't just sad, she was angry. And when she got angry, I felt myself get angry too. And self-righteous. *Here I am trying to help her and this is what I get?*

But then I smartened up. Instead of giving in to my anger, which would have really blown things up, I shut up and listened. When I did, I began to hear the real stuff, the things that neither of us was actually saying. What I discovered was that she was upset because the focus on mothers during the Jewish holidays taps into her insecurities about motherhood, not being a Jewish mom, and not having time to spend on her own work. I also discovered that my own babbling wasn't so much to help her feel better as to help me feel better. I'm the reason she's in New York City, living through cold winters, and part of a Jewish family.

In other words, by trying to make her feel better, I was doing the opposite of making her feel better. I was *arguing* with her. In fact, most of the time when we try to make people feel better, we end up arguing with them because we're contradicting what they're feeling. Which, inevitably, makes them feel worse. Listening, it turns out, is magic. Not only did it help me understand what was going on with both of us, but it helped Eleanor feel better, too. It made her feel that she wasn't alone in her feelings; I was with her.

All I had to do was listen.

But listening isn't easy. The more we listen to others, the more likely we will react — or overreact — to what they say. Listening, it turns out, is much harder than speaking. We have to allow things we might disagree with to hang in the air. We have to move over a little and create space for those things to linger. That kind of listening takes tremendous courage. But if we're interested in learning — about ourselves as well as others — then it's worth it. And if we're interested in being connected to others, showing them respect, helping them feel better, and solving problems between us, then it's more than worth it. It's essential. Until people feel heard, they will fight to be heard. But once they are heard, there is little left to fight for, and then we can move on, not as "us vs. them" but simply as "us."

So how do you listen in a way that transforms conversations and relationships?

1. **Actually listen.** And only listen. That means don't multitask. I'm not just talking about doing email, surfing the web, or creating a grocery list. Thinking about what you're going to say next

counts as multitasking. Simply focus on what the other person is saying.

2. **Repeat back.** This feels a little silly at first but works magic. If someone says she is angry about the decision you just made, you can say "you're angry about the decision I just made." I know, I know, she just said that. But it shows you're listening and it communicates to the other person that she's been heard. If you don't have the courage to try it with an adult, try it with a child. You'll see what a difference it makes.
3. **Ask questions.** Explore the other person's thoughts and feelings more deeply. And "You don't really believe that, do you?" does not count as a question.

Really listening can feel risky, which seems strange because listening doesn't materially change anything. But sometimes you'll hear things that are hard to hear. Remember that listening is not the same thing as agreeing. And it will never force you to take any particular action. If anything, it will reduce the intensity of people's insistence that you take a specific action. Because in many cases what they're looking for is proof that you've heard them. So if they feel you've really heard them, their need for action diminishes.

As Eleanor spoke, I noticed my own resistance to various things she was saying. There's no question that it's hard to really listen. But once I relaxed into it, I heard her in a much deeper way. That made her feel better. Call me codependent, but it made me feel better too. It turns out that sometimes, just listening is problem-solving.

Peter Bregman is the author, most recently, of *18 Minutes: Find Your Focus, Master Distraction, and Get the Right Things Done*. He advises and consults with organizations ranging from Fortune 500 companies to nonprofits. He speaks worldwide on how people can lead, work, and live more powerfully. He is a frequent guest on public radio, provides commentary for CNN, and writes for Harvard Business Review, Fast Company, Forbes, and Psychology Today. Peter lives in New York City, and can be reached at www.peterbregman.com.

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