

## It's good to talk - It's great to listen

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Anne Archer

### It's good to talk

#### How to listen so others speak

In every part of society there are risks attached to not listening. Silenced and hidden voices.

- The boss who didn't listen to the clues his employee was expressing before she took a month off with stress and fatigue; *Possible Risks: Ill health, interruption of workflow, cost implication*
- The Dad who didn't listen to his son when he interrupted him in his home office, when he came to ask if he wanted a drink and a sandwich; *Possible Risks: if persistent long term feeling of rejection in son, wrath of mum for putting work ahead of family, guilt of Dad leading to compensation through alcohol/ food*
- The Mum who was avoiding evening networking meetings because she needed to be home for her children and her partner who was on the verge of leaving because she kept working long hours, she felt ashamed and didn't want to tell her colleagues; *Possible Risks; parents separating and children negatively impacted, employee leaving, lower productivity, low trust in the workplace leading to lack of healthy communication, losing quality of thinking through being stressed and overloaded*
- The brilliant staff member who had just had a diagnosis of depression and was worried he would be sacked if he took any time off on the bad days. *Possible Risks; losing a member of staff un-necessarily, compound an existing health issue*

We rarely, if ever, think about the risks of not listening to someone. Yet, this simple act can have profound and long-term consequences. The fantastic job that is currently being done to raise awareness of mental health has been changing some of the conversations. Yet, for each person who chooses to talk we need people able to listen. Listening should be easy and straightforward yet sadly it is often poorly done.

About 15 years ago I was struggling with anxiety, and ill physical health. Every day felt like a battle to get through and I tried to keep the mask of professionalism, of superwoman and every day I just wanted someone to ask – “how are you doing, really?” No-one did in my workplace, where I spent so many hours. The closest was a Senior Partner who asked me if I

was happy. Sadly I just didn't feel I could let him in on my inner talk. Fast forward and I have made darn sure I am someone who listens when people talk. The greatest compliment is when a client says "I can hear myself Think", or "It's good to talk".

Within the past 6 months, I have had two examples where listening earlier would have provided a better solution to everyone concerned. A brilliant individual who, during the manic phase of his bi-polar condition was praised for not sleeping and working 17-hour days. With his astonishing creativity he was making money – and that's what matters right? Wrong, he needed someone to be his look out, so he didn't break. Then there was the Senior Manager who had a mother with dementia and a partner constantly complaining about late night working and having to "raise the kids single handed". A conversation at work where she had been listened to could have found a solution that was better than the downward spiral of the failure of family life and lowered productivity.

This lack of listening creates risks in our businesses. Risks that can be managed, mitigated, lessened.

### **What is it that we hear instead of what people say?**

#### **Our assumptions**

It's more important to service the client than to get 6 hours sleep a night. 67% of employees report showing up tired to work. They don't feel able to tell anyone they are shattered.

Tiredness impacts outputs, quality and quantity, relationships, decision making, problem solving, creativity as well as various health markers.

I'm doing these long hours for my children. That's my real motivation. I've just got to finish this "stuff" for the client.

Ask your children, listen to the answer, and they will probably want your time rather than another holiday or a bigger car. Did anyone put on their tombstone "Here lies Johnny, he worked long hours and never let the client down".

63% of us say we cannot talk to our boss about our mental health challenges. If you are a boss do you listen?

And if not, that's a risk, right there.

#### **Our fears**

Fear drives our fight, flight, freeze and appease centre housed deep in our brain. From that place we are going to make decisions, act, listen from a fear based perspective. If we feel fear, then it takes more effort to listen as we are being driven by an instinctive or primitive motive.

#### **Other emotions**

Joy, love, anxiety is experienced and creates a desire to move towards the conditions that are creating those feelings or move us away. Our emotional state directly impacts the quality and quantity of our listening.

### **Our previous experience**

We store experiences as memories, and they pop right up so we can make sense of our current reality. They can negatively affect how we hear what is being said as we make comparisons to our past. It all happens in a split second and without conscious awareness.

### **External “noise”**

When there are distractions, we can't hear ourselves let alone someone else. Examples are actual sound, people interrupting, over talking, status.

### **What does it take to listen?**

Listening is a skill that many of us can do with improving whether with family, friends, colleagues, people we meet going about our daily lives. When we are listening with an intention of supporting someone who may be experiencing mental health challenges, who may be a risk to our business, we need to sharpen our listening skills.

- Be there. Pay attention. In that moment of listening, show up. Fully.
- Check out your intention. Are you listening for your own smart responses, to provide a solution, or to allow the other person to express themselves? Often people feel more empowered and hope full when they can figure out a solution themselves or at least together.
- Connect. A coaching client recently said of our work together, “when I express myself to you, I express myself to me”. I take that to mean that you listen and allow the person to be seen and heard. They can then see and hear themselves.
- Take time. Allow the moment to matter. Be there and connect in that moment. Still your voices from the past, let them sit in silence. Invite the future to wait and be in this moment with this person right now.
- Encourage and signpost rather than assume, judge and direct.

When we listen with the intention of hearing the other person express themselves, we can understand any potential risk; we can provide the right support in a timely and relevant way to minimize risks; we can create a more not less trusting relationship.

### **Who do you need to listen to?**

Make a list of those people who matter to you. It may be family, friends, colleagues, bosses, staff, service providers. Ask yourself:

What is the risk of you listening versus not really listening?

What do you need to do differently to listen well?

Who is going to benefit when you do listen in a present, connected, time pressure free and encouraging way?

I'm Anne Archer, Coach, Mental Health Advocate and MH First Aid Instructor, long time listener, and I help people listen, so others speak. Smash the stigma.

Let's have a conversation – it's good to talk – it's great to listen!

If this resonates with you, get in touch.

[Anne@annearcherassociates.com](mailto:Anne@annearcherassociates.com)