

What is the Value of Selective Listening?

By T. Waldmann-Williams, PhD

In my younger life, my sisters often said I used selective listening. It seemed as though they disapproved of this competency, one that seemed to insult them rather than validate what they were telling me. If selected listening was mixed with inappropriate behavior, not that I recall having inappropriate behavior, this might raise feelings of frustration, insult, or even anger. Over time and upon reflection; watching the movie and reading the book '*A Beautiful Mind*'; being an executive coach; and facilitating the Plexus Team Spirit training I think selective listening is essential to our well-being.

This article presents a definition of selective listening, a simple overview about what others say about selective listening, benefits of selective listening, examples of when selective listening is important, and approaches to giving feedback to those who apply selective listening when you think it is inappropriate.

A definition of selective listening is information that I *only* choose to take into my being emotionally, physically, mentally, and spiritually (within my spirit/humanness and not in a religious sense). I think my sisters thought I heard them say things. In reality their words and voices most often didn't penetrate my focus at the time. There were times that I did invoke selected listening because timing or their tone of voice or choice of words did not seem to be in my best interest. My mother used to say my father had "selective hearing." Now, in my opinion, that is different from "selective listening" because the receiver must hear the words or sounds first before deciding to select for what they listen. You could get my father's attention by saying his name first, or by the sound in our voice, or having it be around a particular time, i.e., around dinner time, because he was anticipating that someone would say, "Dad, dinner's ready." Our focus or attention at times is so deep within us that our unconsciousness self-selects both hearing and listening. It is not that a person chooses to ignore or select what is being said, but that the individual is in a zone that sounds cannot penetrate. This seems to occur for many from my experience, especially for athletes, artists, dancers, and musicians or anyone when they are focused on a particular result. Often they might hear when it does penetrate, "Did (n't) you hear me?" or "Are you listening?" in tones of voices that makes them wish you were NOT in earshot.

Our lives are full of opportunities to mis-hear, misinterpret, or misunderstand what others say even though we may be fully committed to listening. The current Sprint commercials provide good examples of someone mishearing or misunderstanding what someone else says allegedly due to static from inadequate technology. However, the poor result could also be due to poor judgment or discernment, fear of inquiry, ignorance, or other incompetence. Some barriers to our listening are our own assumptions, prior experience, inattention, beliefs systems, discernment, distractions, paradigms, conclusions, and, yes, even inadequate technology¹. Other barriers could be our unwillingness to listen at a particular time, distractions, or environment. There must be a conscious choice to listen (Hampton, 1986). Hampton goes on to say that a good listener is confident, mindful, and committed to listening. They exhibit a value or concern for the individual. In selective listening, an individual may not even be aware that their barriers to listening have been raised.

"We engage in selective listening when we only listen for points that support our set biases or conclusions" (Schulz, 2001). We selectively listen or display our biases

¹Some of these concepts reflect the Ladder of Inference as presented in [The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook](#) (Senge, 1994).

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everyday when we switch radio or TV stations, or change a CD or video, or turn a “deaf” ear to those we would rather not hear. But do we only listen for points that support our set biases or conclusions? It seems to me that our attitude about what we want to listen to is important. For instance, I may not want to hear that someone disagrees with me, but I am willing to listen because I believe there may be something for me to learn in order for me to think differently about a subject. J.F. Kennedy was purported to listen to both sides of the argument during the Cuban Crisis in order to make a more informed decision.

Through trial and error, I learned that stating a person’s name first and then saying “pause”, for instance, “Sally, pause” will enable an individual to listen to what I say. Through experimentation, I found that saying “pause” first, e.g. “Pause, John” did not stop an individual talking, but “John, pause” always did stop the individual. This enabled me to more easily coach an individual through some behavior change. Saying a person’s name first is important because we hear our name as it reaches our consciousness but we don’t hear the word ‘pause’ when we say it first because we are not anticipating it. If someone yells or talks loudly to me, I find it difficult to hear what they are saying and so I can’t listen. I must ask the individual to stop yelling or to lower their volume and intensity so I can hear and listen to them. Every time that I have done this, it also seems to change the individual’s tone of voice and choice of words; therefore I can more easily hear and listen to what the person says. It shows that I am interested in ‘what’ they are saying but the ‘how’ was getting in the way.

Listening to oneself in silence is one way of learning. What is not being said can be just as important as what is said. “To listen well, we must attend both to the words and the silence between the words” (Isaacs, 1999, p. 88). For instance, when coaching my client, Harry (not his real name) said he was concerned when his boss said personal / professional development as a business objective was not important even though the company thinks it is important. I asked Harry what he said to his boss. He said that he was silent and told his boss that he needed to review the document and that he would get back to him. This “forced silence” gave Harry the space to listen to himself and reflect about how he felt and what he thought so that he could state his view of personal / professional development as being a competitive advantage for an organization. After listening to Harry, his boss said that he really believed that personal / professional development was important but that with the pressures of the business he thought only focusing on business was more important.

Listening to oneself enables an individual to deepen attentiveness. According to William Isaacs, “the ancient root of listening means to ‘place perception.’ When we listen, we place our perceptions” (Ibid, p. 85). Isaacs writes about Krishnamurti, the Indian philosopher who said that if you only project your opinions, prejudices, and the like that there is no value in that.

One listens and therefore learns, only in a state of attention, a state of silence, in which this whole background is in abeyance, is quiet; then, it seems to me, it is possible to communicate (Ibid., p. 85).

After I read the book and watched the movie, *A Beautiful Mind* about John Forbes Nash, Jr., I thought Nash used selected listening when he heard his voices. In the book he said he used rationality to determine to what he should listen. It was not rational to listen to his voices.

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"Research on attention is concerned with selective processing of incoming sensory information. To some extent, our awareness of the world depends on what we choose to attend, not merely on the stimulation entering our senses" (Driver, 2001). If we do not attend to what we are listening we can misplace our perceptions. Listening is a function of both attitude and attention and takes place both internally and externally, therefore the benefits would seem to benefit the individual both internally and externally.

Steven Covey makes distinctions between four types of listening. "We may practice selective listening, hearing only certain parts of the conversation. We often do this when we're listening to the constant chatter of a preschool child" (Covey, 1989, p. 240). He states that the highest form of listening is empathic listening – which is what he terms seeking to understand.

Larry King (1984) says that the first rule of conversation is listening. "I realize that every morning that nothing I say today will teach me anything, so if I'm going to learn a lot today, I'll have to do it by listening. ...Careful listening makes you better able to respond – to be a good talker when it's your turn. Good follow-up questions are the mark of a good conversationalist" (Ibid. 40-41). Selective listening can enhance a conversation so that you can focus in on what's important to a particular individual and to yourself. This is a benefit of listening but selective listening can more enhance the conversation (with whom you desire to converse) as you focus your attention and listening on that particular individual by shutting out others' conversations.

A benefit of selective listening is that it develops our sense of what we like and dislike and can optimize our time and passion, and hone our judgments. This type of selective listening is how Heather Kurzbauer (1997) describes Reinhard Goebel's passion for Baroque music – and how he *selectively* listens to *selected* recordings of Baroque music.

Another benefit of selective listening is that we can have dual learning capabilities (learning what we do desire or do not desire to listen to as well as listening for what is said and not said). Selective listening can allow the silence to deepen our awareness of who we are. We can discover our perceptions about what is being said in order to more adequately or appropriately respond. This can enhance communication because we bring clarity and crispness.

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator illuminates a distinction of silence which can be interpreted as selective listening. For instance, the use of silence is different between extroverts and introverts. I am an extrovert (one who thinks out loud) who thought that silence had to be filled with words otherwise I thought that time was misused. It took me a while to understand that silence was okay and necessary. I had to learn that someone (especially an introvert) was not ignoring or disrespecting me while they were silent. For introverts, (who think internally) they can have incredible fun thinking to themselves and forget that they never said anything or they think that what they are thinking does not have to be said. The mere act of thinking is enough for them. The amount of time in silence is different for both because silence is usually uncomfortable for an extrovert while the opposite is true for an introvert because silence allows time for an introvert to think and to deepen their thinking as well as get energized. There needs to be an agreeable amount of time for silence or what I suggest for my introverted clients is that they inform those with whom they are talking that they are thinking in silence and may

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need a set amount of time to think. I suggest to the extroverts several things: 1) inquire during a period of silence, "Are you thinking?" and 2) limit their air time and add pauses so that others can process what they are hearing.

Another benefit of selective listening is our ability to discern. Being able to distinguish between good and bad advice is important. Another coaching example is Mary (not her real name) who listening to everyone in her family exclaim that she should stay in her job because it was safe even though she was depressed and unhappy. They said that what she wanted to do would take too much money and that besides she did not know how to run a business. Mary wanted to listen to herself but her internal senses were overwhelmingly compelling. Through development of her own vision and mission and discovery of her passion she developed a business plan to realize her dream. She executed activities as being coached, journaling, taking classes and joining associations like National Women's Business Organization (NAWBO) allowing her internal voice to become stronger and more courageous. She went back to school and worked until she was able to fulfill her dream which was to open a bed and breakfast.

But how does one decide what and to whom to listen and not listen? An old saying, "to thine ownself be true" is just as relevant as "two heads are better than one." Marilee Goldberg Adams, Ph.D. says that the right question will get you the right answer. But which question is right? The Quakers have a technique called the "Clearing Committee" which Williams Isaacs discusses in his book (Isaacs, 1999, p. 157). Adams calls this Q-Storming™. The technology is to get a number of trusted people who will listen to your situation and the questions you have asked yourself and then in turn provide questions for you to ponder later. The individuals frame the questions so that you can learn from the questions rather than leaving you feeling judged by the questions. The questions are recorded and given to the individual to contemplate. The number of times I have used this technique the individual, as well as others, gained from the questions. The individual feels listened to and has always received new questions for clarification. Not all questions will be relevant but they give you a framework for reflection and decisions.

Another idea is to do informational interviewing with individuals you trust and who you feel have your best interest at heart. Using a learner mindset™ (Goldberg Adams, 1997) you will be free to listen to them without judgment. Reflecting about what they asked or said you can discern what seems right or not right for you.

But the bottom line is that whomever you listen to – you should receive the information as though it is just that – information. Whether or not you use the information depends upon listening to yourself. To be open to what someone says is to employ vulnerable listening. This requires that you suspend your judgment and later reflect what you want to take into your being.

So, what do you do if someone is "selectively listening" to you? The first thing is to acknowledge that the individual has the choice to listen or not listen to you. Secondly, state that you know the individual may selectively listen and has that choice. The third is for you to not take it personally if the individual chooses not to listen even after you stated the risks or consequences should they not listen. Of course this does not mean you tell someone who is in danger that they can choose or not choose to listen because at that moment you must do or say what must be done or said to keep them from harms way. In this situation, just remember if you need to get someone's attention quickly, say their name first.

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Another approach is to ask what the purpose of the question or the discussion is, "I am curious as to why you ask," or "Tell me what you want to do with the information" are good statements to open the discussion. This gives you both an opportunity to listen to the purpose without assuming what either of you will do after the discussion.

In summary, the value of selective listening can enhance decisions, your perspectives, and enable you to learn. Two questions I ask myself are 'How has my selection enhanced my learning?' and 'What am I missing by my selections?' This gives me a balance and a paradox of selective listening.

End Notes:

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