

Listening Exercise¹



Teaching Note

Materials Needed:

- Three chairs (and three people)

Exercise Overview:

This exercise is designed to make people aware of how hard it really is to listen effectively as a Thirdsider. One significant impediment to listening well is our internal voice – the voice inside our head that talks to us as others are talking to us. This internal voice talks to us on a number of occasions, but mostly when we are in debating mode trying to find the holes in another person’s argument. As a Thirdsider we need to be able to listen very well to all sides no matter what our perceptions are of the situation.

Purpose of the Exercise:

- The purpose of this exercise is to exhibit how hard it is to really listen and the impossibility of listening to two conversations simultaneously.
- While most don’t think they ever have to listen to two stories at the same time, they fail to realize that this happens all the time. The first conversation is the external conversation with another and the second is the concurrent internal conversation within us.

Exercise Time required:

- 2 minutes to explain the exercise
- 30 second to run it
- 5 minutes to debrief it

Total time: 7.5 minutes

Detailed instructions for running the exercise:

- Begin by asking for three volunteers to do a quick exercise
- Set up the three chairs so one chair is facing forward and the other two (on either side of the chair facing forward) are facing toward the chair facing forward. It would look like the following:

¹ There does not appear to be an ideal number to do this exercise with. It is preferable if there are at least 10 people, but that is not necessary.



- Put one person in the middle – the listener; put the other two – the talkers -- on either side of the listener.
- Tell the listener that they are to try to listen to the two conversations and remember as much as they can.
- Tell the two talkers to talk for thirty seconds about any topic of their choosing – just tell them to keep talking the entire time.
- After thirty seconds tell them to stop

General Debrief:

- Quote on listening to begin the debrief: “Listening is a rare happening among human beings. You cannot listen to the word another is speaking if you are preoccupied with your appearance, or with impressing the other, or are trying to decide what you are going to say when the other stops talking, or are debating about whether what is being said is true or relevant or agreeable. Such matters have their place, but only after listening to the word as the word is being uttered.” William Stringfellow
- In the debriefing you want to highlight the purpose of the exercise and really point to the fact that this problem with listening is something we do all the time. Most of the time however we are unaware we do this.
- You should also note that the people on either side of the listener represented the internal and external voices we have.
- The point of the exercise is that if we have these two conversations happening we really can't be listening effectively as a Thirdsider.
- You might also explain the difference between debate mode – where our internal voice is very active trying to find the holes in the others argument – and dialogue mode – where our internal voice is silent and our energy is focused on really learning what the other person wants/needs.

Questions:

The following questions may be used to elicit responses to this exercise:

- To the audience – any ideas what this exercise was all about?

- (Before answering the previous question) To the listener and talkers -- any ideas what this exercise was all about?
- After having done this exercise are you more aware of your internal voice or was this something that you never really thought of as something you could control?
- As Thirdsiders, you need to be in dialogue mode and help the parties themselves into that realm. Any thoughts on what you might say to them to get them to really listen?