

# Have you got a minute?

## Listening and trying to understand, *really* understand

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**N**o one needs reminding about the importance of listening to students and colleagues, yet we find ourselves often preoccupied with what it is that we're going to *say* in a particularly difficult meeting or to a distressed person, believing that if only we can find the right words or come up with the best solution, we'll have done our job and things will improve. We remember the speeches of famous leaders, the oratorical eloquence, the intellectual acuity, the passion and wit: if only we could speak as well as these people, we'd inspire everyone and achieve so much.

With successful leaders, we're never told about the hours of listening that went on behind the scenes, making change possible. In my experience, it's never the big speeches, it's never what we *say* that makes the difference: it's about how well we listen. In schools, people never change their minds or change their behaviors because what we're saying to them is right. It may well be right, but that makes absolutely no difference to an angry colleague or tearful student or despairing parent. They're only able to change when they feel understood and they feel understood when they feel that we listened, *really* listened.

Simple! Except that listening is never as simple as it sounds. For a start, we have to understand who we are in the unconscious minds of the people talking to us so vehemently and desperately needing us to listen. Objectively, you're the principal: you have two children; you live ten miles from school; today you're worried about your ageing mother's health, about balancing the school budget, about a member of staff who's refusing to come to work and a host of other things. But in the subjective minds of so many people at school, you're not that person! You're the parent from long ago, about whom they continue to have strong feelings. 'Transference' is the idea that we're born into some sort of family with a mother, usually with a father and sometimes with siblings. These first relationships leave a decisive imprint on us so that, later on in life, whenever we're in another kind of group or relationship, we tend to 'transfer' onto the people in the present – unconsciously - feelings that we have about these original people from the past. Unwittingly, we find ourselves treating the people in the present *as if they were* these people from the past. We can't help it. We don't know that we're doing it. But this unconscious phenomenon will always affect day-to-day relationships between people, however senior or junior they happen to be in an organization.

The principal and other school authority-figures exist in the eye of the beholder, therefore. They're usually on the receiving end of lots of parental transferences from staff, students and parents ("She's got no idea how to treat people! He doesn't care as long as he's okay!"). Classroom teachers easily become parent-figures in the unconscious minds of students, and students are themselves on the receiving end of lots of sibling transferences from each other. You can hear this in the vehemence with which one person is talking about another (or talking about you) and you find yourself thinking, "Whoa! That's way out of proportion!" The truth will be that, yes, it *is* out of proportion because it's not really about you or whoever else it's supposed to be about: it's about someone far more significant in the speaker's life. So if there are 200 members of staff in a school, there'll be 200 different 'principals'.

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It helps to know this because, when we're being unfairly accused or treated as someone we're not, it's tempting to take it personally. It certainly *feels* personal but usually it's about a mother or father-figure from long ago. The person talking to us has never stopped wanting to be loved, to be treated as special, to be understood and recognized. Some of these things we may be able to offer within our professional roles but other things will always be impossible. We're not the idealised parent but nor are we the demonized parent we're portrayed as being.

School itself becomes a kind of composite parent-figure. Everyone has a view about 'this school' but that view will rarely be as objective and dispassionate as they claim. They'll say that they're committed to 'this school', that they work extremely hard for 'this school', even that they love 'this school', but they'll never get back the understanding and certainly never get back the love that they feel they deserve because, unfortunately, 'this school' only exists in their heads. When people curse their situation, filling with anger and resentment, it's often because they feel that someone somewhere isn't looking after them properly. More often than not, they name that person as their manager and blame him or her accordingly. But rarely is it just about that person. Their feelings are usually about someone much more powerful!

And feelings are what we have to listen to in the very limited time we have. Neurologically, people can't think straight when they're full of feeling. The amygdala floods the hippocampus which stops communicating with the cerebral cortex. For this reason, it's no use asking an angry, sad or despairing person questions beginning with the word 'why' because those are precisely the questions they can't answer until things have calmed down neurologically and they can think again. Instead, we have to give them opportunities to tell their story, to tell their feelings, especially the angriest, saddest, most explosive feelings. We have to ask explicitly about these feelings and know that this is an end in itself. Schools are thinking factories in which we encourage people to think harder, to think more deeply and to think for longer. We don't always make opportunities for people to describe what it is that they're *feeling* and yet when things are going wrong, it'll always be because one person's feelings have overwhelmed his or her capacity to think. Unless someone is prepared to listen to these feelings expressed as words, they'll get acted out, typically at other people's expense.

Pressed for time, we sometimes resort to dishing out advice. Advice may well be what someone asks for ("Have you got a moment? I need some advice!") but that's just an adult convention. No one's going to knock on your door and say, "Have you got a moment? I need you to listen to my feelings!" This may be precisely what they're hoping for but it sounds babyish, so they ask for advice because that sounds grown-up. And so you offer advice (very good advice, as it happens) but still the person goes away feeling short-changed. They tell other people that you didn't listen, you didn't understand. What they mean is that you didn't understand the feelings, the feelings, the feelings.

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When people feel understood, all sorts of things become possible. Self-esteem (the thing we want everyone in school to have) comes less from success and praise and overcoming challenges and more from simply feeling understood. We feel that we exist and are potentially worth something when someone understands us. A baby's sense of self develops by looking into the face gazing down and seeing itself reflected in that face: reflected accurately, empathically, fondly. The baby cries out, the face appears, the face understands. What a relief! This is how babies develop a primitive sense of self, learning to reflect on themselves, having internalized – little by little - the experience of other people reflecting on them. But some babies don't have that attuned, interested face reflecting them back to themselves, understanding them. Without it, they grow up unsure that they're worth anything; at worst, unsure that they even exist. They scream out in panic, hoping that someone will come along and will understand. In schools we might find ourselves effectively working with six-year-old babies, sixteen-year-old babies, forty-six-year-old babies still desperate for our understanding because they've never been able to take that for granted in their lives. Nowadays, their need for reassurance may be disguised in all sorts of sophisticated adult ways but, underneath, little has changed. The fear of not being understood has never gone away. The panic still lurks. And it's the parent-figure to whom these people look for understanding. They may fantasise about taking revenge on that parent-figure ("I'll call in and say I'm sick! Or I'll say I never got the email!"); they may fantasise about resigning ("Then she'll realize!"); they may go so far as to resign.... And all because the parent-figure appears not to be understanding.

So how do you listen and understand when there's never enough time? Up ahead, there's a clatter of canteen cutlery and you're waiting in the queue next to a student you know. Innocently you ask, "How are you?"

"Not good," comes the reply.

Now what? Do you ask more, knowing that you only came to buy a quick sandwich because you're already late for something else? Do you pretend not to hear? Do you mumble something like 'Ah well, never mind!' or make a trite remark about everybody's lives being difficult at this time of year?

It's better not to ask the question in the first place if you don't want to know or haven't got time to listen. If you're going to ask, then be prepared to stop and listen, if only for a few minutes. Good listening isn't about how much time you've got. What matters is the quality rather than the quantity of your time. Of course you'd like more time, but a good, uninterrupted four minutes is better than forty minutes of being distracted and trying to do other things at the same time as listening. If necessary, be clear. "I've got four minutes before I need to be somewhere else." People will often cut to the chase if they know that there's not much time, or they'll censor themselves, holding onto whatever's troubling them, knowing that they'll need longer than four minutes to do justice to their story.

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You might be tidying things away in your office towards the end of another long day when a colleague wanders in and asks, “Have you got a minute?”

If you haven’t got a minute, it’s better to say so in the nicest possible way. And if you do have a minute, then be clear exactly how long that ‘minute’ can last. “Yes, I’ve got three minutes but then I’ve got to be at a meeting.”

“Ah well, it’s nothing important,” says your colleague, retreating. “I just wanted a chat.”

“Anything in particular?”

“Just life!” she smiles, hesitating. “Things haven’t been too good lately.”

Hearing this, you know that you won’t be able to do justice to the conversation in the remaining two and a half minutes before you have to be at your meeting. But at the same time it’s important to acknowledge that you’ve heard what’s just been said.

“That sounds really important,” you say. “There isn’t time to talk now, but how about we meet tomorrow at break time?”

There are schools where the only way to get attention is by shouting loudly. Students do it by misbehaving; parents do it by storming into the principal’s office; colleagues do it by losing their tempers or by bursting into tears or by not coming to school. In schools like these, there’s an unspoken belief that waiting patiently to be noticed and heard never works and that distress has to be enacted for anyone to notice. In schools like these, a culture develops where everyone seems perpetually stressed and the days seem to lurch from crisis to crisis. The corridors are full of people running and shouting, pushing past each other. Even the bell seems to ring particularly loudly!

It’s important to develop a culture where it’s normal for people to get heard but not by shouting louder than anyone else. In a listening culture, running out of lessons in tears doesn’t work and throwing furniture around doesn’t work. Asking and arranging to talk with someone, on the other hand, *does* work because everyone in school is a confident listener and everyone in school makes time to listen. “But not right now. Not when I’m in the middle of doing something else. Let’s arrange a time....”

In school, time spent listening has to be boundaried, partly because the listeners are busy people who don’t have much time and partly because, even when people are distressed, they have to learn to wait their turn.

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“I’ve got a couple of minutes and then I’ve got to make a phone call. I know that’s not much time, but if we need longer, we can arrange to meet again and carry on talking.”

Once people believe that they’ll get heard eventually (“It might not be now and it might not be today but you *will* get your time!”), they learn to wait. That way, anxieties are contained; setbacks don’t have to become catastrophes; misfortunes don’t have to become tragedies.

There are hit-and-run merchants, however, who drop bombshells knowing full well that there isn’t time to talk properly. A girl tells you that she might be pregnant, for example, just as the bell’s about to go for the end of the lesson. Or a colleague gets into his car, turns on the engine and tells you through the window – tearfully - that he split up with his partner last night. Sometimes people tell us these things and then run off, in effect, avoiding the conversation, leaving us with the very feelings of helplessness, uselessness and frustration that they themselves are feeling. These feelings don’t belong to us but get dumped on us.

What to do with hit-and-run merchants? While we always respond to children and young people in real danger, it’s important *not* to over-react to a hit-and-run by stopping whatever you’re doing. After all, boundaries are inevitable, rules are rules and lessons have to continue, even when people are in distress. There are people who will deliberately tell you things when there isn’t time to talk because, really, they’re testing the boundaries, seeing whether they’re special, whether you’ll be able to make an exception for them and stop whatever it is that you’re doing. They have to learn that they’re important, special even, but that your life doesn’t necessarily revolve around them.

However old we are, taking responsibility for our lives can be frightening. Students and colleagues are usually better able to move on, to take responsibility for themselves, when they feel understood and when other people have stopped dishing out advice. Better to acknowledge that life is tough and that bad things really *do* happen.

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