



How to Listen When Your Communication Styles Don't Match

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Why do people who consider themselves good communicators often fail to actually hear each other? Often it's due to a mismatch of styles: To someone who prefers to vent, someone who prefers to explain seems patronizing; explainers experience venters as volatile.

This is why so many of us see our conversational counterparts as lecturing, belaboring, talking down to us, or even shaming us (if we are venters and they are explainers) or as invasive, out of control, and overly emotional (if we're an explainer and they're a venter).

Facing this kind of mismatch, what do you think the chances are for either person actually listening with an open mind? My answer is... very low.

It is tempting to say “zero,” but since it's not possible (or even desirable) to work only with people who match your communication style, you need to develop the skill to try to listen around their communication style.

Listening around that style, however, can be incredibly effortful. When someone is either venting/screaming or explaining/belaboring it triggers a part of your middle emotional brain called the amygdala, which desperately wants to hijack your attentive listening and instead react reflexively with whatever your hardwired reactions are. And resisting that amygdala hijack is exhausting.

What To Do with a Venter

If your conversational counterpart is a venter/screamer, your hardwired survival coping skill might be to tell them to calm down (which will only make them more upset), to shut down and get silent (which will only make them yell longer, because they'll think you're not listening), or to try to point out how irrational venting is (which, as noted above, they will perceive as patronizing and belaboring).

Instead, say to yourself, “Okay, here comes another temper tantrum. Just let them blow. Try not to take it between the eyes and imagine you're looking into the calm eye of a hurricane and the storm is going over your shoulder.”

To do this, focus on their left eye. The left eye is connected to the right brain — the emotional brain. Let them finish. Then say, “I can see you're really frustrated. To make sure I don't add to that, and to make sure I don't miss something, what was the most important thing I need to do in the long term, what's the critical thing I need to do in the short term, and what do I need to get done ASAP?” Reframing the conversation this way, after they've finished venting, will make sure that your “explainer” self knows what to do – instead of ignoring the venting as another random outburst from “Conan the Barbarian” or “the Wicked Witch of the West.” Chances are, they do have something important they're trying to tell you – even though they're not communicating it very well.

After they respond, say to them, “What you just said is way too important for me to have misunderstood a word, so I'm going to say it back to you to make sure I am on the same page with you. Here's what I heard.” Then repeat exactly, word

for word, what they said to you. After you finish, say to them, “Did I get that right and if not, what did I miss?” Forcing them to listen to what you said they said, “because it was important,” will slow them down, will help you stay centered and in control, and will earn you their and your own respect.

What To Do with an Explainer

If your conversational counterpart is an explainer, your hardwired survival coping skill might be to say to yourself, “Here they go again, make sure you smile politely even if you want to pull your hair out. Try not to let your impatience and annoyance show.” The problem with this is that even though they may be oblivious to others as they go on and on, at some level they may be aware of your underlying impatience and... that might actually make them talk longer. Yikes.

Realize that the reason they explain and belabor things is probably because their experience is that people don't pay attention to what they say. They don't realize that while that may be true of some truly distracted people, for others, the reason they don't pay attention is that the speaker is belaboring something that the listener already heard — and doesn't want to hear over and over again. Another possibility is that these explainers may not be feeling listened to somewhere else in their life (by their spouse, kids, parents, or boss) and is now relieved to have you as a captive audience.

When the explainer goes into his explanation/lecture/filibuster, say to yourself, “Okay, this is going to take a while.” Put a mental bookmark in whatever you were working on. Then look them in their left eye with a look that says, “Okay, take your time, I'm fully listening.” Instead of feeling frustrated and reacting by become impatient and fidgety, remind yourself, “They need to do this. I can be patient.”

Then when they finish then apply a similar response to the venter/screamer with the following minor edit:

“I can see that you really had a lot that you had to say. To make sure I don't miss something, what was the most important thing I need to do in the long term, what's the critical thing I need to do in the short term, and what do I need to get done ASAP?” ”

After they respond to that, say to them, “What you just said is way too important for me to have misunderstood a word, so

I'm going to say it back to you to make sure I am on the same page with you. Here's what I heard.” Then repeat exactly, word for word, what they said to you. After you finish, say to them, “Did I get that right, and if not, what did I miss?” Your amygdala is probably saying to you and to me, “I don't want to do either of those things. These people are obnoxious and unreasonable. Why should I kowtow to them?” Here are several reasons:

1. **They aren't likely to change.** These are deeply ingrained personality traits.
2. **Being more open and inviting them to talk rather than closed and resistant will lessen their need to act this way.** Listening patiently hath charm to soothe the savage (or boring) beast.
3. **You will feel more self-respect and self-esteem.** The above approaches will enable you to remain cool, calm, collected, centered *and* communicative in situation that formerly frustrated you and made you react poorly.