

## **Don't Just Do Something, Stand There!**

How often in a situation where there's conflict to be resolved, or a problem to be solved, or a dilemma to be unbundled, or a conundrum to be clarified, or a story to be heard, do you immediately jump in, reactively, with a quick solution, answer, or retort?

How often in such situations might you be hearing, but not listening? How often have you found that after jumping in with a solution or other response, you maybe did not get the whole story, see the complete picture, or understand on a deeper level?

One reason we have a tendency to jump in is because our minds are working at 90 miles an hour, making judgments on the fly, wrapped up in our preconceptions or assumptions judgments, preconceptions and assumptions that are often quick, misguided, off-putting or incorrect.

"Listen to understand before being understood" is a principle that is bandied about in all of the "effective listening" literature. We all say we "get it". We all feel we have this capacity — were good at listening. But, how often do we really, really listen before being understood, before reacting? Honestly?

Listening is not easy, especially today. In an age when we are caught up in 25-second sound bites, when we are inundated incessantly with input from our electronic devices, listening and focusing are very real challenges — challenges not easily met by most folks. Why?

Being raised in, or living in, a media age, many of us have become addicted to the need for immediate stimulation, resulting in a brain that is under-developed and one in which hyperactivity (e.g., the need to move from stimulus to stimulus — from blackberry, to facebook, to TV, to cell phone, to Twitter, to email, back to blackberry, back to cell phone, etc., incessantly and impulsively) makes focused attention for many impossible, resulting in our inability to listen, reflect and think more deeply in the moment. Because our brains require this type of change almost every few minutes, maintaining focus, listening, concentrating and consciously attending to someone can be difficult.

Since we have conditioned ourselves for more and more stimulation, more quickly, and because our low brain areas require this consistent stimulation and our cerebral cortex (the thinking/listening-related parts of the brain) are underutilized, we don't find ourselves really listening. Rather, we find ourselves being more reactive.

One unfortunate result of this conditioning is an inability to listen, to empathize, to be quiet and contemplative in a sustained way in the presence of another or others, especially when the situation calls for deeper reflection and understanding.

When listening is called for, many of us instead have a knee-jerk reactive response to engage in some way, shape or form — advising, "fixing", one-upping, educating, telling, training, hijacking the others experience, correcting, and, of course, suggesting an immediate solution — we feel the need to "do" something.

Unfortunately, when this happens, those across from us often feel unheard, unappreciated, invisible, angry, resentful, frustrated or attacked — anything but listened to. Not a great way to build trust, engender mutual respect, create a container of safety or cultivate conscious, healthy relationships.

So, the next time you're in a situation that calls for listening, perhaps don't be so quick to reassure, give advice, or explain your side or perspective. Rather, practice being present to the person(s) who are speaking, practice empathy to understand the other(s) more completely, breathe deeply, clear your mind and let go of all preconceived judgments and assumptions, listen with your whole being, not just your ears, to others' feelings and needs,

In other words, in situations that call for listening, follow the Buddhist expression: "***Don't just do something, stand there!***"

**So, some questions for self-reflection are:**

- Do you feel you're a good listener? How do you know? Would you feel comfortable asking others (at work, at home, at play, in your relationship) what they think?
- Have you recently been told you're not a good listener (at work, at home, at play, in your relationship)?
- Do you have a tendency to jump from electronic device to electronic device?
- Are you addicted to any of your electronic devices? If you say "no," can you do without it (them) for an hour, a week? If not, you're addicted - justifications and denials notwithstanding.
- Would folks say you're often the first to jump in with a suggestion, a solution, an answer...even when they may not be asking for one?
- Do you have a reputation as one who's always "fixing" others without their asking?
- Do you ever feel unheard, unseen, invisible when speaking with others?
- Do you ever hijack or "one-up" others' experiences?
- Would you consider yourself to be a compassionate and empathic person?
- Do you ever ask others if they think you understood them, before you claim you did understand them?
- What one or two ways this week or next can you "listen to understand before being understood?"

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