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Listen with your eyes!

Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak. Courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen.

– Winston Churchill

Imagine hour-long conversations during which you are listened to with respect by someone who does not share your opinion or by someone who shows interest in spite of difficulties understanding your language. The whole of last week I spent in "Englishtown", in La Alberca, Spain, 4 hours bus drive west of Madrid. We were 22 Anglos and 22 young, highly educated, rising Spanish executives from various branches. The objective was to brainwash the Spaniards in English conversation. We had conversations from 9 a.m. until earliest 11 p.m. every day for 6 1/2 days. Totally exhausted already the first day, I wondered why I was doing this. The Spaniards, after all, learn a language from this but what would I get? Soon, however, it became clear to me that I was in for a practical in-depth study of the art of "listening".

The fact, that they could not always understand every word or sentence that I said in English, made them adopt a truly focused and involved listening position with exploring eye contact – all the time. It was that exploring eye contact, which made me understand, that we should listen with our eyes. Sometimes they asked me to repeat. They wanted to know if they had understood correctly. They wrote down words and sentences which they had not understood. They simply made an extremely sympathetic impression on me. And, therefore, I asked myself - why is this such great fun? Why do I find these people so sympathetic? And the answer became crystal clear. They are fantastic listeners! OK, they had to produce results and may normally not always listen so focused, but this particular week they showed me the warm impression a really good listener makes on a conversation partner. Perhaps the simplest way to understand how we should listen, is to see how we react ourselves to the varying listening habits of people to whom we speak. Here are some examples of unsuccessful listeners, with whom we don't willingly identify.

- **Deaf-ear** - A person, who is distracted by one thing after the other, looks passed the speaker, keeps changing position, starts opening mail or investigates if his watch is still working. Actually, it is pretty much sufficient if this person shows only some of these behaviours, even sparingly, for the speaker to understand that nothing is being perceived.
- **Rusher**- A person, who is so impatient, that he cannot wait for the end of a sentence or story. He feels the urge to show his intellectual brilliance by continuously finishing them on behalf of the speaker, before the speaker has had a chance to say what he wanted to say.
- **Ego** – A person who is so self centred, that he keeps interrupting by talking about himself, his doings and experience, while ignoring the speaker.

How, then, can we learn to listen?

The answer is practice! First of all, "hearing" and "listening" are fundamentally different. We can hear a sentence without perceiving the contents. If we have perceived the contents, then we have listened. Here are some practice rules – go ahead, start now!

The listener:

- Take an involving position like leaning forward
- Have paper and pen at hand if the situation permits
- Let the speaker finish and only interrupt when unselfishly asking the speaker to repeat and confirm that all was correctly understood.
- Show enthusiasm, involvement and deep interest
- **Keep eye contact with the speaker – i.e. listen with your eyes!**

Only he who listens can speak.

– Dag Hammarskold

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