

# **Leadership in listening**

The 7 levels  
of listening  
for professionals

Victor Pierau

**b:k light**

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# Foreword

*Written by Medy van der Laan*

We listen all day long. Often on autopilot, hardly noticing just how we listen. Leadership in listening shows us that we are clearly very much in the dark when it comes to our potential to listen. Just consider how much we need to communicate, daily – with our families, at the workplace – and just how barely conscious that communication often is. It's a backwards miracle that 'listening' as a phenomenon doesn't get the attention that it warrants in our day to day lives.

This book is the breakthrough. It attentively covers every aspect of listening. From the straightforward to the sensitive. From the basic skill itself to self-knowledge and ultimately: silent listening.

Chapters 4 and 6 held a particular fascination for me. Chapter 4 is about 'Selective listening' to counter conflicts of interest, and in Chapter 6, it's about 'Cognitive listening to remedy controversy'.

In my work as chairperson/director of complex collaboratives, amongst other things, it's my role, in a meeting to ensure that people are listened to. And, it's just as important that whilst leading the meeting that I listen well too (and furthermore, that I observe the non-verbal communication). It's all about listening to discern what's really being said.

As chairperson, the better I do this, so too the better and more relaxed the meeting goes. Everyone in the meeting feels more heard and consequently more valued. In turn people become more at ease and their willingness to listen (to the other person) increases. Your were, after all, able to air your interest and it has been received by the others.

It helps in these situations to feel safe. As chairperson, I pay careful attention to that. The adage, 'every interest is of interest' is at the heart of

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the meeting and appropriate manners also help to ensure calm. These are basic pre-requisites, you might think, but we cannot take them for granted. The better the atmosphere, so too the more open, relaxed and able to listen, people become. In particular, in discussions with serious conflicts of interest, being open and able to genuinely listen, can lead to a greater vulnerability. After all, if you are prepared to listen, how will the other person react? The fear of this, is ultimately what limits many a conversation.

In this book we are offered the beautiful answer: letting go of the ego. An increased vulnerability leads to greater strength. And in that strength, and even with an entirely different agenda, the other person is invited to listen.

Gaining faith in the power of your own vulnerability, through an open and listening mind towards another's perspective, is a powerful message from the 7 listening levels.

Medy van der Laan

Director, and former State Secretary

# Word from the translator

*Written by Pete Sanderson*

Whilst working for Zilveren Kruis, a health insurance company in The Netherlands, I was afforded the opportunity to recreate the contact centre. I am extremely proud of the multi-channel access to support that customers now enjoy at Zilveren Kruis. The numbers, before and after, make compelling reading. My personal joy, was the pursuit of collegial happiness, whence all rewards are ultimately sprung. And there is nothing that makes an employee happier than the feeling that he or she has been heard.

What I learned is that it is possible to galvanize the unique talents of the individual. To this end, Victor's trainings and subsequent book were instrumental. Whilst listening sounds like a no-brainer, you'd be surprised at just how obstinate we can be in the workplace. Noise cancelling headphones are great, but you're not meant to wear them all the time. And, the same old playlist wears thin, pretty fast. Nothing lasts forever, yet there is nothing new under the sun. So, take off your fancy headphones, and listen to the music in live surround-sound. You'll discover songs you never knew existed, and you'll rediscover old favourites, enhanced and improved.

More than anything, this book celebrates our unique complexities as humans, whilst simultaneously showing us that these inherent complexities need not stand in the way of hearing what you need to hear. On the contrary, it is a celebration of our innate ability to listen. It is a celebration of the most compelling symphony you have yet to hear. It is by

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far and away the most compelling piece of corporate literature you will read; that is, if you want to truly listen that you might hear, hear what you did not know, understand anew what you took for granted and never take it for granted again.

I have enjoyed translating this book, albeit more from the conviction that it needs to be heard, than from the perspective of translating itself. I guess only Victor knows that to be true. Joking aside, my thanks to Victor for affording me this opportunity to widen his audience. Language is but *a* conduit. Listening is *the* conduit.

Pete Sanderson  
Translator



# Introduction

*“When you talk, you are only repeating what you already know.  
But if you listen, you may learn something new.”*

DALAI LAMA

## Listening requires courage

Have you got the courage to really listen to someone else’s ideas? When you listen to someone, it may turn out that your pre-perceived thoughts have been completely off point. Have you got the courage, to really listen to, and hear someone’s emotion? If you’re able to really feel with the other person, then perhaps you would be much less angry. And, do you have the courage to really listen to someone’s needs? By listening to someone else’s need, it’s possible that your own need is met in an entirely different way.

When you read this, do you still want to listen? Your thoughts, feelings and desires may suddenly change. What would make it worthwhile for you to listen? What’s the value-added? In this book you’ll look for an answer to that question. Are you up for it? Are you prepared to release your reality to discover this value? If so, you’ve picked up the right book.

## Who’s this book for?

This book is especially for professional listeners, people who communicate a lot with other people. Whether you are a healthcare professional listening to your patients or a call centre employee to your customers, a

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politician to his constituents or an auditor to other professionals, if you read this book, you'll realise that there is so much more to be gained from that listening connection.

As a professional listener, you already listen, a lot. You know its worth. You know too, your own limits. You sometimes think to have heard correctly, when after all, the other person meant something else entirely. Sometimes your own emotions are so strong, that it's just difficult to listen. Or, it may be that your own agenda is blocking you from listening objectively to what is really going on. So, if you've discovered along the way, that listening isn't so straightforward, this book will be the solution. It's, therefore, not an easy book. With this book, I closely look at the causes behind our problems with listening and offer structural solutions. We delve into many and varied scientific domains, but also into more experimental, or holistic disciplines.

I wrote this book for those who wish to expand their listening skills. It provides many new insights. I listened too, to much of the science, building on from its worth, to create new value.

### The origin of this book

My whole life, I've been surprised by the many reasons why people don't understand one another. When I was in primary school, I used to help my parents understand each other. I'd listen to each their own way of talking and translate one for the other person what they were saying. Later too, at work listening played a key role. Firstly, as auditor, ('listener') I listened to problems and tried to discern what could be done better within the organisation(s). Later, in my psychotherapy practice, I'd listen to people's problems and tried to understand what could help them. And now, as trainer, I combine listening on personal level with scaled organisational listening. My 'listening' training comprises twenty percent theory, that you'll also find in this book, and eighty percent exercising the theory into practice. By listening, you create a deeper connection, and with that, an otherwise never heard conversation, exists. Much depth may be revealed in that connection.

In Dublin, June 2018, I attended the 39th international conference of The International Listening Association (ILA). Listening was discussed here, with nuance. Many scientists spoke of their research. Much to my joy, what was presented dove-tailed nicely with what I describe in this book. Yet, what I missed, was an all-embracing connection between all the composite listening parts. Everything came together for me, then; I'd been searching for that all-embracing connection for the past seven years. I set to work, and in March 2019, at the 40th ILA conference, I successfully presented my model. In this book I describe my model for listening. Predominantly, it focusses on listening on an individual level. The last chapter briefly covers listening at a team and organisational level.

### The heart of this book

You'll learn much about yourself in this book. Can you listen to yourself? Yes, sure you can. In actual fact, listening to yourself is the best way to make contact with others and with the challenges of the world. Why? Because by carefully listening to yourself, in conversation, you'll know, for example, if an emotion is yours alone or shared by another, or indeed, whether or not you're mixing up each other's emotions.

By listening better to yourself, you're better equipped to deal with the challenges our everyday life presents. You'll recognise symptoms of burn-out faster. You know what's going on when you listen and discern your body's signaling. The sooner you recognise the symptoms of stress, the more time you have to combat the cause. In essence, then, the aim with this book is to teach you, that through listening, each contact is deepened; your connection with yourself, with others and with everything around you. Your personal leadership is hereby key. Step by step you'll learn how to listen on different levels. And that's all good and well, as long as there are no obstructions along the incoming listening channel. In this book, you'll meet a host of obstructions. I call it distortion. You'll learn, too, how to accommodate this distortion.

### Seven listening levels

In my life, as well as in my work, I singularly distinguish seven sorts of distortion. For that reason, too, I describe seven levels on which you can listen. Think, for example, of the distortion created by a lack of energy. If for whatever reason you're running low on energy, you'll be unable to listen well to the other person. You listen, instead, much to yourself, to accommodate your lack of energy. This is the first listening level, self-focused listening. Or, what do you do when someone suddenly displays intense emotion? The distortion coming from a fear of that emotion can hinder your ability to listen, emphatically. According to the model, each of the seven types of distortion belongs to a specific listening level. In chapter 1, I introduce the model and its seven listening levels. This is an important chapter to better understand where your obstructions lie, as regards listening. In chapters 2 through 8, you'll learn about each of the seven listening levels in detail and what you can do to accommodate and be free of the distortion. You learn how to apply the listening levels at work and in your daily life. The chapters follow a natural order, but you may read them individually. In chapter 9, we apply the model to three different contexts; the individual level, the team level, the organisational level. My wish for you, is that through this book, you are able to more consciously switch between the seven levels. Your connection with other people will noticeably strengthen. Enjoy it.

# 1

## Seven levels of Listening

### To listen, is to be in touch

I've always been more of a listener than a talker. While our western culture might emphasize speech, I increasingly encounter its disadvantages relative to listening. Speech is delivered from you, an outgoing delivery; it leaves you, as it were. The connection between yourself and another can suffer as a result. Listening, on the other hand, is to receive an incoming delivery. With the delivery accepted, you are able to connect.

Contact in the physical sense occurs when things collide. When two objects collide, there is contact between them. So too, (physical) contact happens when two people touch each other. Similarly, in conversation, their words and thoughts are connecting; they are in touch, one with the other person. In human contact something extra develops, namely one's experience of that contact. When someone touches you, or speaks to you, you may be either drawn towards, or repelled from that person. Any number of feelings about that contact is possible, in turn, motivating our desires, urges, needs etc. In this way, listening helps turn a moment of contact into a meaningful encounter.

The digital revolution is changing our interpersonal way of connecting. For one thing, it's easier to stay in contact with increasingly more people. The quality of contact in the digital world, however, leaves a lot to be desired. In the absence of face to face contact, there is no non-verbal signaling, making it difficult to hear what someone's not saying. I strongly advocate direct, interpersonal contact, where we really listen to each other. Only listening will get you past the façade. Then, you will connect to whatever is really going on. Listening helps you to make an actual,

real connection with another. Again, listening can help turn a moment of contact into a meaningful encounter.

## 1.1 Distortion as an obstruction to listening

*“It’s best to listen as much as possible because it’s good for your general knowledge. If you learn 10% from it (listening), you’ll be way ahead of the rest.”*

JOHAN CRUIJFF

### What is listening?

According to an early definition from The International Listening Association, (ILA), to listen is to notice, receive, interpret and answer audibly presented messaging (1). This definition excludes the signals you receive from within; your feelings, your conscience. That’s a pity; and that’s why I prefer the following definition:

*To listen is to ingest and digest signals.*

Listening starts with noticing a vibration (objective perception). This vibration resonates with something in your essence (subjective perception). You react on the basis of this resonance. Multiple signals are used to communicate a message (such as words, emotions and body language) and every signal has its own vibration. The signals transmit on as varied frequencies as we them receive.

Sometimes, the signals are less refined, crude even, such as exaggerated gesticulations made in anger. Yet, at other times the signals are more subtle, like an intuitive foray. To (be able to) register increasingly more subtle signals requires an increasingly more subtle awareness of yourself. In order to properly register these various signals, we require increasing, deeper levels of consciousness. Brain research over recent decades shows that receptiveness to these signals is associated with different frequen-

cies of brainwaves (2). I cover this subject in chapter 3, dual-focused listening.

### Distortion as an obstruction to listening

How well you register whatever is being signaled is dependent on how much you yourself distort the signal. The signal from the transmitter undergoes warping, as seen from both the objective and subjective perception. The purer the perception, the better you are able to listen. In chapters 2 through 8 I cover various types of distortion. You'll learn how to strengthen your listening skills by discovering just which distortions you yourself host.

One of the basic models in which communication and distortion each play their role, is that of Shannon & Weaver (3). Their model records an initial form of distortion; external distortion. Distortion from out-with. However, both external and internal distortion can exist in human communication. The communication link may be disrupted by a one-sided internal distortion. (4) If you're tired, you'll might yawn. At that point you're unable to listen as well, and there's a risk your partner in conversation may interpret this yawn incorrectly. Whilst you're only intimating that you're tired, the interpretation may be that you are uninterested. Whether or not a message can be communicated, unfiltered, depends to what extent the transmitter (sender) and the receiver are aware of the distortion. The more able both sender and receiver are to reject distortion, so too the signal's strength and clarity increases. In our listening, human listening, internal distortion plays a far greater role than external distortion. The description of internal distortions and the strategies to accommodate them form the lion's share of this book.

## 1.2 Three orientations that influence the manner of listening

*“We have two ears and one mouth so that we can listen twice as much as we speak.”*

CONFUCIUS

How does distortion influence the way you listen? That very much depends upon with which part of yourself, you listen. In other words, what's your orientation? We distinguish three parts to being human: the personality, the ego and the essence.

### Personality

(The) Personality plays an important role in psychology. Various descriptions offer an impression of personality. Examples include: Personality is a complex sum of characteristics attributed to a given person (1). Or: Personality is a unique and stable pattern of internal and external behavioural characteristics through which an individual may distinguish himself from another (2).

In their plays, the ancient Greeks made use of masks to portray characters and emotions. They called these masks a ‘persona’. Persona is a derivative from the verb *per sonare*: to sound through. The mask could be attractive or less so, portray anger or delight, be large or small, just as with real people. Everyone has their own characteristics and displays specific behaviour, making them unique.

Therefore, you can view personality as a layer through which you allow something to be seen or heard. From that point of view, you might imagine personality not all that important, however charming or unique. I mean simply, that it is as an instrument, of use only when played the right way and for the right purpose. The question is, what could, or should the personality reflect or display?



Research shows us that during a lifetime, the personality is susceptible to change, in reaction to life events (3). A part of the personality is malleable, but does it also contain a constant part? Religious people may find such a constant part a natural thing, but scientists are not all convinced. What I can imagine as coming closest to that constant part, and what I experience, furthermore, is silence. However, let's first of all, view personality in its variable aspect.

### The changeable part, or: the ego(-parts)

The malleable, or, changeable part of the personality is a composite part. It consists of ego-parts, that together form the ego. Ego-parts are interrelated experiences of reality (thoughts, emotions, observations and memories) that at one time or another have been placed outwith consciousness. The process which governs this is called, dissociation. A dissociated ego-part, as such, is more like a temporary dream state that usually bears little influence on your consciousness. We pretty much all experience this, at one time or another. Not all that consciously, you drive home, oblivious to the time, and all of a sudden, you've arrived.

However, dissociation also occurs in what Freud called splitting (4). In this process a split off part of the ego continues to exist. Imagine a small child whose parent has died. The child knows the parent is gone, but the experience is too painful to think about. To accommodate this, the child may simultaneously perpetuate the illusion that the parent yet lives. The ego-part that believes the parent alive will, from time to time, exert influence on the child's consciousness. Ego-parts may exert this influence for many years.

The ego-parts exist, therefore, through interaction between the person(ality) and the surroundings, where the survival of the personality (apparently) is threatened. An ego-part was born at exactly that moment, to ensure survival. The personality is to some extent intertwined with these ego-parts. The more conscious you are of your ego-parts,

the more freedom you will experience. In other words, you can choose to act differently from how you otherwise would, given your pre-programmed ego-part. Every extreme lifestyle that is adhered to can lead to deformation. And so, deformation will occur in an egocentric lifestyle. An example of this deformation would be fighting battles (arguments, court cases, war) to get what you want. At the same time, the ego also ensures continuity. It ensures that you know where home is and where you were an hour ago. In short, ego, amongst other things, takes care of self-maintenance and the stability of one's personality.

### The constant part, or: the essence

The constant part is separate and independent from the changeable part. I refer to that constant part as the essence. Personality and the ego cannot influence the essence, otherwise it would simply be changeable. Also, personality cannot directly perceive the essence, but can experience it, namely through silence.

In my experience, you can also consciously perceive an echo of the essence. If you release all ego-parts, an ego-less situation will come into being. The unchangeable, the essence, can form an intuition in your consciousness, that exerts itself through thoughts and emotions. The changeable part with its ego-parts is then, in turn, able to influence this.

### The three orientations in summary

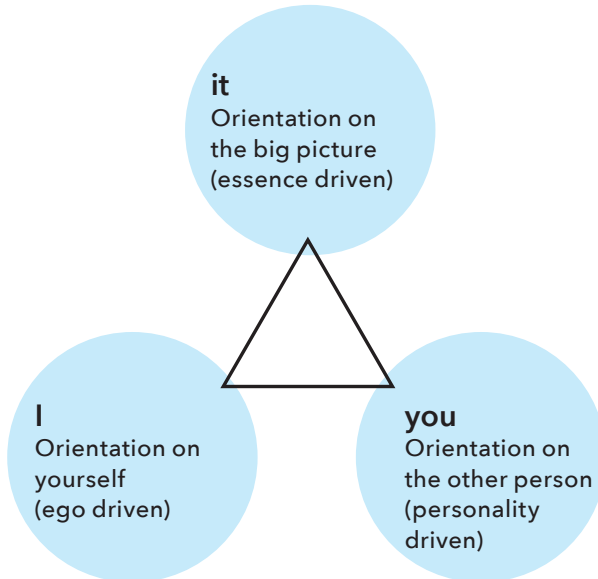
I see us as composite creatures, comprising three parts: the ego on the one hand, the essence on the other; with these two influencing the personality.

- Amongst other things the ego's function is one of self-maintenance and the prolonged stability of one's personality. The ego is primarily focused on one's self (I).

- Then there is the neutral, self-aware personality. Your personality facilitates contact with other people, and you focus on the other person (YOU).
- With the essence you can circumvent the distortion that exists between yourself and the other person. With the essence you can focus on the big picture (IT).

In this way, you are able to listen with three orientations. Firstly, the orientation on yourself, secondly, your orientation is on someone else, and thirdly, your orientation is on the big picture (see figure 1).

If you can release the distortion, you'll be able to switch in orientation; away from yourself, via the other person, to an orientation on the big picture. Let's look more closely at the three orientations.



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Figure 1: The manner of listening is dependent on three orientations

### Orientation on yourself (I)

Multiple factors will influence you as you listen. Your own internal state of being, for starters. If you are very emotional, you'll listen differently as to when you are at peace. With the orientation on yourself, you can connect with yourself. You become aware of your inner state. This can be whilst connecting to others, but also whilst alone. You become conscious of your energy levels, your needs, your emotions and your convictions. With the orientation on yourself, you may become conscious of your ego-parts. On the one hand, ego-parts can help you feel anchored in your surroundings, but they can also make it difficult to listen to somebody else. In other words, your ego-parts can also get in the way. To know yourself in this regard (by listening carefully to yourself), you are able to release the ego-parts if necessary. Without ego-parts getting in the way, you are better equipped to listen to someone.

### Orientation on the other person (YOU)

When you listen to someone, your attention is drawn outwards, towards the other person. I call this orientation 'orientation on the other person'. In this orientation, personalities meet. Important aspects here are: boundaries, attention and empathy.

When you connect with someone, you'll decide to what degree are you open for that connection. The sum of all experiences turns a moment of contact into a meeting. And inasmuch as you're conscious of it, you can make a personality driven choice. Do you connect ego-driven, or with an orientation on the essence?

If you connect via the ego, the meeting will be fed by an orientation on yourself, for self-maintenance. This focus is conducive to loneliness and can lead to the realisation that in ego terms, you can never be together with an 'other'. At this point, distortion plays a big role in the meeting. Being led by the distortion, it can be difficult to focus on the overarching goal, the reason you are together. But, as soon as you are aware of the distortion, and you shift your focus to the essence, you are able to give your attention the big picture. This orientation enables