

# How to Create an Open Dialogue and Really Listen

**The experience of being heard is profound. It's also rare.**

In business, it's estimated we interrupt each other every two or three minutes. Worse, managers interrupt other workers six times as often as entry-level employees. In surveys, professionals admit they are much more skilled at talking than at listening, even though they rate listening as more important. We don't listen to each other even though science tells us how important it is.

Managers who create psychologically safe spaces, where their workers feel secure in expressing their ideas and concerns, have more productive and creative teams. Plus, workers whose managers listen and create a safe environment perform and function better than those whose managers don't. Psychological safety means that a person can express themselves openly without fear of being judged, ridiculed, or punished in some way for what they say. It also means that they feel heard, understood, and respected—that their opinion is valued.

One fundamental part of creating safety is through listening authentically. Authentic listening involves much more than letting their words hit your ears; it is a skill that takes practice. While we are often coached about how to speak effectively, most of us are not taught how to really pay attention while others speak. Instead, we tend to skip the listening part while we think about what we want to say next, when it is our turn to talk. We are in our heads trying to solve or fix or contradict, rather than really hearing.

**If your goal is to create a psychologically-safe space and truly listen, start by acknowledging that listening does not come naturally. Then take steps to make yourself more successful.**

## **1 Create an environment that allows you to focus on the other person.**

**Put away devices, minimize noise and distraction, and allot sufficient time.** If possible, be present, make eye contact, and show interest with open body language.

## **2 Set and hold a clear, conscious intention.**

**The other person can read your intention.** They will know immediately if your intention is to “make sure they feel heard” versus “get this conversation over with.” Consider what you hope the other person will experience (e.g. an opportunity to clarify their own thinking; that they feel understood; that you care). This one action will have the greatest impact on your conversation, so take time and embody a clear intention.

### 3 **Let them talk.**

**Your goal is to let them say what they need to say.** Invite them to share their thoughts and get out of the way. Nod, acknowledge you are listening (mm-hmm, I see), and perhaps express appropriate empathic words when an issue is important (wow; oh how hard; that's tough; how exciting!), but DO NOT comment or pull the conversation to your thoughts or opinions.

### 4 **Confirm you have heard and let them talk more.**

**When they pause, take an opportunity to reflect back specific things they said.** (So, you've noticed A, B, C; It sounds like you're worried about X, Y, Z.) Then, allow them to say more.

### 5 **Apply the Rule of Three.**

**The first thing someone says is almost never what matters, because the act of speaking helps them get clear.** Invite them to say more, or ask if there is anything else they would like to share. Give them at least three opportunities to get to what really matters. Then summarize what you heard.

As simple as these steps sound, conversations that allow one person to fully express their thoughts are extremely rare. The experience of being heard and understood, by itself, helps to dissipate emotion and move past disagreement. It also builds trust and a foundation for more meaningful and productive conversations.

In our action-oriented business culture, our usual goal is to jump to solutions. However, the process of authentic listening can be a goal in itself: to simply understand another person. The conversation does not have to end with a plan or solution. That can be left for another day or a next conversation after everyone has a chance to process what was said.

**When you decide to move toward next steps, one way to shift another person's thinking to a solution is to ask:**

**Now that we understand that the issues are A, B, and C, I'm curious, what would you like to have happen?**

**Then, start the authentic listening process again.**