

HANDOUT FOR VIDEO 3: LISTENING TO UNDERSTAND

This handout accompanies the six-minute video in the Better Conflict exercises from the Conflict Transformation Collaborative at Middlebury. This is the third video in a five-part series. Below, you will find instructions for the exercise, a transcript of the video, and additional resources.

LISTENING EXERCISE INSTRUCTIONS

This exercise takes less than 10 minutes. Find a partner to work with. You will need some scrap paper, something to write with, and a timer. In your pair, one of you will be the speaker, and one of you will be the listener. Then you will switch roles and run the exercise again.

Take a minute to jot down your thoughts in response to the following prompt: *Tell a story of a conflict you were involved in where you feel like your engagement didn't go well. What would you do differently?*

When you are ready, put down your pen and paper and get the timer.

1. Speaker shares their response (90 seconds). Listener does not take notes, does not nod or interrupt. Listener focuses on what the other person is saying.
2. Listener repeats what they heard (90 seconds). Speaker does not interrupt or nod.
3. Take a break to take a few notes.
 - a. Listener: what did you not understand? What felt challenging?
 - b. Speaker: did the other person capture what you said? What felt challenging?
4. Switch roles; repeat above instructions.
5. Step out of the speaker/listener roles. Reflect together on how the exercise went. What was your experience in sharing a story like this? What did you learn from being the listener?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Arthur Brooks, *Love your Enemies: How Decent People Can Save America from our Culture of Contempt*. Harper Collins, 2019.

Loretta Ross, *Calling In: How to Start Making Change with Those You'd Rather Cancel*. Simon and Schuster, 2025.

Peter Coleman, "US 2.0: Living With Our Differences," *Hidden Brain Podcast*, February 2024 ([link](#)).

TRANSCRIPT

Speakers: Sarah Stroup, Mandy Berghela, Teyonce Allison

Sarah: This video focuses on a foundational practice - active listening. Listening is hard. Sometimes we think that we are listening, and then suddenly find that we are thinking about our grocery list or the email we forgot to answer. Careful listening is essential if we need to negotiate, collaborate, or understand a problem. And, if we don't listen, it can escalate the conflicts that we're in.

Consider this quote from the book *Difficult Conversations*: one of the most common complaints that we hear from people engaged in difficult conversations is that the other person won't listen. In the great majority of cases, the reason the other person is not listening is not because they are stubborn, but because THEY don't feel heard."

It could be that you have stopped listening because YOU don't feel heard. The disappointing news, folks, is that we can't force other people to listen to us. When we are in a conflict situation, we can only control the choices that we make. Control is hard! If you've been in a conflict situation recently, you know it has emotional and physical impacts. When I am having a difficult conversation, my heart starts to race, my jaw starts to clench. I am flooded with emotion, I get that fight-flight-freeze reaction, and it's difficult to focus on the content of what the other person is saying. But if we are willing to listen ourselves, it might interrupt a destructive pattern.

If you want to work on responding to your emotions and noticing what's going on in yourself, please head to our videos on critical self-awareness. *If you are using other resources from nuwave, please check out the other short videos on emotional intelligence, self-management, and empathy.* If you know that those emotions are reactions are going to come up, *and* you are ready to practice ways to stay attentive and open as a listener, then keep going.

For this exercise, please find a partner to work with. This can be someone from your workplace, a friend, or someone at home. You'll be given a specific structure to work through, and this will take less than 10 minutes. You will need some scrap paper, something to write with, and a timer.

Let me first describe the structure of the exercise to you, and then I will give you a prompt to discuss. In your pair, one of you will be the speaker, and one of you will be the listener. I encourage you to do the exercise twice, switching roles.

Here is how it goes. The speaker will have a minute and a half to say whatever they want in response to the prompt. The listener's job is just to listen. Do not take notes - just focus on what the other person is saying. After that, the listener has one minute to describe the speaker's statement back to them. The speaker shouldn't interrupt or nod, just sit and listen to their words as expressed by the other person.

After you have taken turns, take a brief break. Use your scrap paper to take a few notes on what it was like to be the speaker and to be the listener. The speaker might think about sharing openly, and whether the listener actually captured what they were trying to say. The listener might note what they did not understand or what felt challenging.

Next, I am going to tell you what the prompt is and then give you an example. First, here is the prompt that you'll use for the listening exercise. *Tell a story of a conflict you were involved in where you feel like your engagement didn't go well. What would you do differently?*

Mandy and Teyonce will show us an example of what this exercise looks like.

Mandy: So I was in this group project last week, and I didn't really go that well. There was one person in the group that continually tried to assert themselves. They asserted their authority into the group, and I didn't really like that, so I kind of started talking, thought about them to the rest of the group. And in retrospect, I do wish I handled it differently. I wish I communicated it to the person who was trying to assert themselves, and see if there's a way that we can work it out. But I wasn't able to do that. So I do wish I was able to communicate with them. Maybe that would have changed how our project went.

Teyonce: I'm so sorry you had that experience. Is it okay if I just recount back to you what I've heard to make sure that I am taking away the correct thing from what you've shared with me?

Mandy: Yeah, definitely.

Teyonce: Okay. So, you were in a class and you had a group project that was assigned, and there was one person that just tried to assert their authority over everyone else in a way that didn't seem to make you feel good and didn't give equal voice to everyone else in the group. And as a result of that, to just express your frustration, you talked about that person, to the rest of your group, rather than confronting that person individually, and that's something that you'd like to you wish you could have done differently is talking to that person and expressing to them why you didn't appreciate how they were acting in the group setting. Is that correct?

Mandy: Yeah, you got that right.

Sarah: This exercise helps us practice and reflect on what it means to focus on listening to understand. What is your partner saying? What are the experiences that they've had. How do they describe them? Can you repeat those back to them with words that they would understand as their own? This practice is called "looping." It is used by negotiators, mediators, journalists, therapists, and now by you! It is a way to slow down our urge to respond and start by checking in on our own understanding of what the other person is saying. Thanks as always for your time, and have fun practicing!

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April 2025