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Listen each other to a better place

by Linda Rising

With my good friend, Mary Lynn Manns, I've written a book entitled *Fearless Change* which describes patterns for introducing new ideas. Mary Lynn and I struggled to come up with a good name for our book and finally decided on "*Fearless*" as a reflection of one of the most important patterns in the collection: *Fear Less*. This pattern addresses the problem of resistance to new ideas. Our usual reaction to those who are skeptical about our ideas is to treat the resisters as naysayers and avoid them. We don't want to hear anything critical of our new idea. We tend to surround ourselves with those who agree with us. This means we limit what we can learn about the idea or how to improve the introduction process. We happily go forward believing that all is well—except for "those" negative people who just won't listen!

The *Fear Less* pattern advises innovators to listen carefully to those who aren't initially enthusiastic about the new idea. Listen and learn. As my mother used to say, "Listen hard to what you don't want to hear." The skeptic who takes the time to tell you what won't work is offering a gift. Appreciate it.

Often when I talk about this pattern, I tell the story of skeptics who not only gave me the gift of their viewpoints, but when I appreciated them, when I listened, those skeptics became my greatest supporters. They didn't necessarily sign up wholesale for the idea, but they helped me do the best job possible of bringing the idea to real fruition in the organization. I often thought that maybe no one had ever seriously listened to them before. I wondered what that's like—not to have anyone listen to you.

Listen to understand

Mary Lynn and I discovered a magical writing technique. When we would get stuck on some part of the book, I would say, "Ask me a question." Then Mary Lynn (she was really good at this!) would say, "Linda, why <important question>?" Then I would start explaining as I would to an audience member who might have asked the same question. Mary Lynn would type furiously to capture what often surprised both of us. This process reminds

me of something that author E. M. Forster observed, "How do I know what I think until I say it?" It seems that we need someone to "listen us into understanding."

In Barbara Waugh's book about her experience as a change agent at HP, she proposed:

"Instead of a great keynote speaker, what if we have a great keynote listener who can listen us into creating our visions for HP's future?"

Barbara explains that she first heard about the generative power of listening from Nelle Morton, the late feminist theologian and author, who believed that listening is a great and powerful skill that opens the creative floodgates in the person being listened to. The listener's attentive, unbroken, and receptive silence invites speakers to explore their thoughts and come up with ideas that they've never had before. Ideas that literally didn't exist until they were "listened into speech."

Listen to better health

Listening can have deeper impact for us than helping us understand what we are thinking. I was intrigued by reading an account of an experiment in *The Placebo Response*. In the mid-80s, several family physicians in Canada, led by Dr. Martin Bass, studied a large group of patients who visited doctors with a wide variety of common symptoms. The investigators asked: What best predicts whether the patient will say that he is better one month later?

Their detailed review of the medical records showed many things that did not predict whether the patient would get better: the thoroughness of the medical history and physical exam, whether the physician did any lab tests or X-rays, and which medications were prescribed. Almost everything physicians are taught turned out to make no difference for this group of patients.

The doctors were able to identify one factor that best predicted whether the patient would report feeling better after one month and that was—**whether the patient said that the physician had carefully listened to the patient’s description of the illness at the first visit to the doctor.**

In a follow-on study, Bass and his colleagues considered a large group of patients who came in with the new onset symptom of headache. After a year, they found that what best predicted an improvement in the headaches was the patients’ report that, at the very first visit, they had a chance to discuss their problem fully and felt the physician was able to appreciate what it meant to them. Barbara Starfield of John Hopkins University did a similar study of public health clinic patients in Baltimore and reached the same conclusion. The doctors listened their patients into better health.

Listen to reach a better place

I met someone at a conference recently who said: “I want to talk to you about patterns. What’s the big deal? I really don’t like patterns. Why should I? I don’t get it!”

I began my standard “why patterns are great” talk, throwing in everything but the kitchen sink in my attempt to convince my protagonist and “sell” patterns. Finally, I paused and the person said: “But, those patterns <about a particular subject> are worthless!”

Ah, so the problem was not with “patterns” at all, but with “those particular patterns,” and, as it happens, I didn’t like them either. As soon as I acknowledged that “those particular patterns” were not very good ones, the speaker was happy and moved on to another topic—enough said.

I was astounded. How many times must I learn this lesson? I get countless numbers of questions in email and during presentations. As soon as I hear a keyword, I’m off and running, assuming that, of course, I can answer that! I am careful to say at the end, “Does that answer your question?” But, of course, many times I wonder if the questioner is intimidated by the situation and nods out of politeness. If only I would stop and really listen. I could listen the questioners to a better place and go right along with them! If I had only done this with the patterns objections, I could have listened him into appreciating patterns, instead of arguing my case.

Now and then, I like seeing old re-runs of the television series MASH. Just a few weeks ago as I was thinking about the power of listening, I saw the episode where a soldier killed in battle has trouble realizing that he has died. He tries to communicate with members of the MASH unit, but only Klinger, who is suffering from a high fever, can hear him. The “dead” soldier observes that of all the things that he thought he would miss after death, the worst is that he is talking but no one is listening. No one can listen him to a better place. How many people spend their lives like this?

Listen to our customers

Think of the power of adopting this technique in the workplace! What would happen if we listened to our colleagues and our customers? What would change in our homes, if we listened to the members of our family? Would we all help each other to be in a better place? One of the customer interaction patterns I have written is called *Listen, Listen, Listen*. It is about helping you and your customer move to a place of better understanding and building a trusting relationship. The keystone of that pattern collection is called *It’s a Relationship, Not a Sale*.

Let me recommend the free newsletter Good Experience <http://www.goodexperience.com/signup.php>

A recent issue pointed to a *Wall Street Journal* article about Vodafone’s attempt to make a simpler cell phone (*Mobile Phones, Older Users Say, More Is Less*):

<http://tinyurl.com/a9oqd>

Here’s an excerpt from that article:

What [Vodafone] heard from consumers aged 35 to 55 shocked executives of the Newbury, England company. Many in that age range didn’t know their cell phone numbers or how to use basic functions. One-third, for example, said they didn’t know how to tell when they had received a text message. Some thought the envelope icon that signals a message meant their phone bill had arrived...

Many 35- to 55-year-olds also didn’t like going into Vodafone retail stores because the young staff - average age 24 - talked in acronyms they couldn’t understand. These consumers said they weren’t interested in the cameras, Internet browsers and many of the other features that are becoming standard on the latest cell phones. “Our biggest customer segment turned round and said: ‘You haven’t been listening to us,’” says Guy Laurence, the company’s consumer-marketing director. “It was an industry for kids.”

What a wake-up call! Listening, really listening to your customers can move you to a better understanding of customer needs that your product can satisfy.

Listen to each other

On a personal level, you might try what humorist Loretta LaRoche calls Power Whining. Simply tell a friend that you’re stressed and need 2 minutes to unload. The friend’s job is just to listen without interrupting. When you’re done, reciprocate. When both of you have finished, wrap up with a 1-minute monologue each, describing the things for which you are most grateful. The last bit puts everything into perspective by reminding you both to be grateful for all the things that aren’t stressing you out. We need that kind

of reminder to help us stay on an even keel.

Finally, in case you feel that no one listens to you, the best way to solve this problem is to start listening to others. Give someone the gift of your attention and you will probably find that soon others will be listening to you. Could we start a chain reaction that might help a noisy world that needs the silence of personal attention? Let me know if it works for you! ■

References

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> About the author



Linda Rising

With a Ph.D. from Arizona State University in the field of object-based design metrics, Linda Rising's background includes university teaching and industry work in telecommunications, avionics, and tactical weapons systems. An internationally known presenter

on topics related to patterns, retrospectives, agile development, and the change process, Linda is the author of numerous articles and four books – *Design Patterns in Communications*, *The Pattern Almanac 2000*, *A Patterns Handbook*, and *Fearless Change: Patterns for Introducing New Ideas*, written with Mary Lynn Manns. Find more information about Linda at www.lindarising.org.

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