



# How to Give the Gift of Feeling Understood: 3 Levels of Effective Listening

By Jessica Johnson

Recently I worked with a Forbes Global 200 organization to develop a new leadership program for its senior executives. The CEO wanted to call it “Speak Up,” and through it encourage his executives to engage in conversation and debate instead of simply taking orders. It was a significant change for the very structured and historically authoritarian culture of his company. But, unfortunately, the CEO wasn’t quite ready to be the change he wished to see.

In a public meeting a courageous leader stood up—and spoke up—in a question-and-answer session. In front of the very leaders with whom he wanted to encourage “speaking up,” the CEO took issue with the leader engaging in the debate and promptly and publicly shut him down. To his credit, the CEO recognized the misstep

and apologized—but not until weeks later. Damage done. He realized his own development around listening skills was critical to facilitating change.

*Helping others feel understood happens even more infrequently — yet it’s a gift that we all long for.*

Research tells us that though we spend a lot of time *hearing*, only between 25-50% of that time are we engaged in really *listening*. Helping others *feel understood* happens even more infrequently—yet it’s a gift that we all long for.

I’m a professionally trained coach and a facilitator of leadership development. In those roles and in all aspects of my life, I’ve found it helpful to develop better mindfulness around different levels of listening. I try to not only hear the words people are saying but also make sure they feel listened to and understood. Mindful listening takes dedicated and ongoing practice and I am still practicing.

Review these levels and consider where you were in three different conversations this week—with individuals or in a group:

## Level 1: Inward Listening

While we hear words a person is saying, our focus is on what it means to us personally or to our team or the work we’re trying

to accomplish. We may find ourselves formulating a rebuttal, digging in our mind for a relatable experience, or crafting a clever question. We absorb the words, but our minds hold them in a trap that quickly recycles them. There are helpful times to listen in Level 1—like when your doctor is sharing a diagnosis with you; that situation is 100% about you. Yet if we want to be more **effective at helping others** feel understood—we need to spend less time in Level 1 and more time in levels 2 and 3.

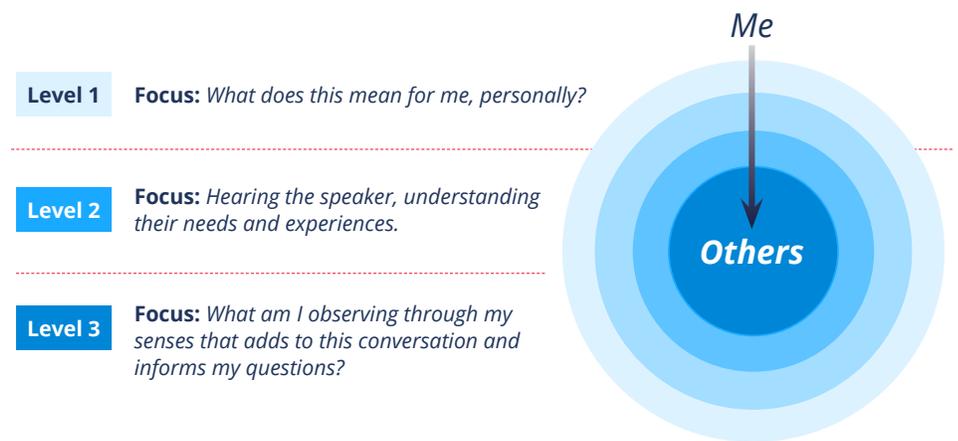
## Level 2: Concentrated Listening

In level 2, we have a sharp focus on the subject we're listening to. The distractions around us are minimized, as well as the chatter that usually goes on in our heads in Level 1. We're curious and we ask questions because we don't assume we know what it's like to be the other person. We seek to understand a frame of reference different from our own—what it feels like to stand in their shoes. To do this well we need to keep our own biases, experiences and judgements at bay. Deep connections are built when we are able to spend more time in Level 2.

## Level 3: Comprehensive Listening

At this level, we're not only listening in a focused manner, but we're also observing with all of our senses. This could include

**Figure 1:** Levels of Listening



actions the person is taking or not taking and interactions they are having with us and the world around them. Maybe an individual you mentor comes to tell you he's received a job offer for a company with which he's wanted a job for a very long time. He tells you about many exciting elements of the position, but his underlying mood or tone doesn't suggest much personal excitement. You ask a bit more and he shares with you a family issue that developed overnight and is weighing on his mind. You ask questions to better understand him and are able to feel with him as you share the experience. Level 3 listening can happen over the phone or by other electronic means—not just when you're face-to-face.

Evolving to higher levels of listening takes

practice, but it is definitely **a skill we can develop**. As we are more mindful of which listening level we're in, we can cultivate better habits as we seek to spend more time listening in Levels 2 & 3.

When was the last time you really felt like someone listened and understood you? It's a gift I wish we could all wrap up and give more often. Being mindful of the level in which you're listening is a great start on the road to being a more frequent giver of that gift.

Transformational leaders invest in developing their listening skills. One way to practice this leadership skill—and many others—is to participate in RBL's **Leadership Academy**, a highly rated skills-development program for organizational leaders.

Visit our insights page to find more information related to the content of this paper.

Send us your thoughts or questions regarding the content of this paper.



[rblmail@rbl.net](mailto:rblmail@rbl.net)