

Excerpt

RECLAIMING THE LOST ART
OF TRUE CONNECTION

LISTEN

Like you

MEAN it

XIMENA VENGOECHEA

CHAPTER 4

Clarify Your Role

was at my local breakfast spot when a woman walked in. “I am so frustrated with my sister,” she said, sliding into a booth with three of her friends. “She completely missed my daughter’s birthday. Her own niece. Her only niece!”

“Such a bummer!” one friend said. “So self-centered,” another added.

“I really wanted it to be a special day,” the woman said. “Having to make excuses for why her aunt hadn’t called was tough. I could understand if my sister had more nieces and nephews to keep track of, but she only has one.”

The third friend had observed from behind her plate of pancakes and piped in. “Could it be that she forgot, but didn’t mean anything by it? Didn’t she have that big deadline coming up at work, the one with . . . ?” She stopped as the group looked back, their eyes wide, as if to say *Hello! What is wrong with you?*

Each of us has a natural way of stepping into conversation: an

instinctive mode we tune in to without thinking. You may be a problem-solver by nature, ready to help a friend or colleague troubleshoot whatever is on their mind. Or perhaps you are more the cheerleading type, often complimentary, knowing just how to inspire your direct report to keep going on that challenging project they've taken on. Maybe you are like the friend at my breakfast spot, always trying to consider things from others' points of view, even when it might not be welcome. There are many ways to show up in a conversation, but we tend to play one role more often than the rest.

I call this our *default listening mode*. It is influenced by our unique temperament, how we've been socialized, and even cultural expectations. For many of us, chances are it started to take form during childhood, in response to our early relationships and the environment around us, and has been reinforced time and again since then and throughout our lives.

Sometimes our default mode is exactly what's called for in conversation, but sometimes it's not. Whether out of respect or politeness (a relationship between a manager and a direct report), cultural expectations and norms (always speak your mind, or never speak up around elders), topic (your favorite hobby versus a subject you know little about), or need (to be coached or to be directed), certain dynamics may ask us to shift from one listening mode to another in conversation. Failure to adapt can lead to miscommunications, awkwardness, and even conflict, all of which can make it difficult to maintain a connection. A direct report who always gets advice from her manager when she is merely hoping to provide visibility on her progress may start to feel micromanaged and disrespected.

A friend playing devil's advocate instead of cheerleader may cause cracks in a friendship and have to work hard to regain trust.



That's why it's so important to align our listening expectations and habits to what our conversation partner needs at that moment. Once we do, we can move in lockstep together: We know when it's time to celebrate our direct report's progress, not point out what's still left to be done. We understand when it's more important to quietly listen as our sibling describes a stressful day, rather than come up with a plan to relieve their stress or talk about our own. We sense when our roommate needs comfort, and when it would be better to leave them alone. We intuit when a sense of humor is called for in a tense meeting, and when empathy is what's needed to keep the group together. Over time, the more successful exchanges we have, the stronger our relationships become.

To be a more effective listener, we must understand our default listening mode, uncover what our conversation partner needs from

us in a given discussion, and adapt accordingly. The tips to come will show you how.

Common Default Listening Modes

As a researcher, my job is to be a neutral and objective listener. The way I show up in sessions—kind without being effusive, impartial without being detached, encouraging without biasing a response—stems from years of training, and helps me to receive, understand, and guide a participant in order to get to the bottom of whatever question we are working on. It's easy to spot a researcher clicking into “researcher mode” if you know what to look for.

Similarly, in the real world, we can learn to spot certain listening modes. Though our conversations may vary across a given topic, set of conversation partners, and our own personalities, even in an average conversation there are some modes that are more common than the rest, and identifiable if we are paying attention.

Below are the most common default listening modes, each with its own strengths and weaknesses. As you enter in conversation, listen for when these modes are surfacing, and with whom.

The Explainer. Explainers have an answer for everything, especially when it comes to our feelings (*You're feeling burned out? It must be because of our culture of overworking.*). Rational thinking can provide welcome perspective and help us gain distance from our feelings. Still, Explainers must catch themselves not to go overboard, since we don't always want an explanation for our

emotions; that type of response can come across as short-sighted and dismissive.

The Validator. It can feel great to talk to a Validator, especially when you are in need of a pick-me-up (*Yeah, it is their fault! They don't understand you!*). These natural cheerleaders are always on our side, but unchecked, Validators can unintentionally inflate your ego, skew your perspective, and even stunt your personal growth.

The Identifier. Identifying happens when a listener likens their experience to the speaker's and brings a conversation back to them. "I know exactly what you mean." "I felt the same way when . . ." "It's like how when I . . ." These responses can help us to feel less alone in our experience. At the same time, not everyone craves affirmation; in these cases, identifying responses can be disconnecting. They show the listener that we aren't listening at all—we're thinking about ourselves.

The Problem-Solver. Problem-Solvers have a solution for everything and are the perfect sounding board when you need to make progress or improve an idea. The catch is when a Problem-Solver solves "problems" that don't exist. You might have simply been thinking aloud, but to a Problem-Solver in overdrive, everything you say is an opportunity to fix, solve, or rectify.

The Nurse. The Nurse puts your needs above theirs. It's never too late for them to run an errand on your behalf, or too much

to tend to you when you're feeling down. But the more they take care of you, the more your relationship tips out of balance. Not only can all that care feel overwhelming, but it's also all too easy for a Nurse to focus so much on you that you never get to support *them*.

The Defuser. Defusers are known to play down tense or uncomfortable situations, often using jokes. When a dose of levity is called for, their humor is helpful. On the other hand, if a Defuser makes light of every situation, especially ones that are difficult for you, it may be hard to feel close to them.

The Mediator. Mediators love to look at things from all angles and assume good intent, and make great company for mitigating conflict. But like the friend at the café, in an effort to understand everyone's perspectives, they can sometimes inadvertently make it feel unsafe to share our point of view at all.

The Empath. Empaths have an uncanny way of tuning in to your emotional experience—sometimes even before you do. “I sense you are feeling weighed down lately,” they may say, “Is everything OK?” It can be comforting to be seen by Empaths in this way. To be most effective, Empaths must read cues carefully and ensure there is trust in the relationship; without it, their intuitions about how we feel can unintentionally make us feel exposed and even suspicious (*How do they know so much about me?*).

The Interrupter. Interrupters are always one step ahead of us—or so they think. At their best, Interrupters make spirited conversation partners. At their worst, Interrupters can be tiring—as quickly as they jump in, it can feel like everyone else is shut out.

The Interviewer. Interviewers are known to ask their conversation partner lots of questions. Their genuine curiosity can make us feel valued. Nevertheless, asking too many questions can make conversations feel like interrogations. This approach also shields Interviewers from having to share their own stories, making it difficult to get to know them.

The Daydreamer. Daydreamers are often lost in thought during conversations. Whether due to rich imaginations or anxious minds, their tendency to distract isn't personal, but it can make us feel less than worthy of their time. “What were you saying again?” quickly becomes a tiring refrain.

These modes are helpful to be aware of. Recognizing them in *others* gives us insight into who they are; if I understand that you are a chronic problem-solver, I know not to take it personally when you give me unsolicited advice on a challenge I am working through, because that is simply your way. Recognizing these modes in *ourselves* helps us to better regulate our responses in conversation. It is much easier to catch if we are slipping into a mode that may not be welcome—and to do something about it—when we know there is a range of other modes we can tap into instead.

Self-Reflect: Identify Your Default Listening Mode

To help identify your habitual response in conversation, consider the listening modes you just learned about and answer the following questions:

- What do you think is your default listening mode?

COMMON LISTENING MODES



- What would your friends say? How about your parents? Your co-workers?
- In what scenarios might your default mode change, if at all?

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