

# Empathy Based Listening Overview

The most effective form of listening is empathy based listening. Empathy based listening, however, can only be achieved by removing one's listening distractors. My process is two phased. First, identify and remove listening distractors and then implement empathy based listening. The outline itself is simply a worksheet of potential listening distractors that we all have, to varying degrees, during a conversation. To use the checklist most effectively, you should fill it out prior to a conversation in which you would like to improve your listening. The listening distractor checklist serves as dual purpose in that it also serves as an empathy checklist for the individual you are talking with (the subject). The key to my listening improvement technique is to understand that the categories of **your** distractors are the same list of empathy items (which I refer to as "perspective portals") of the subject.

The list of listening distractor categories:

- Immediate, non-biased distractors. (Physical State)
- Personal, non-biased distractors. (Emotional State)
- Personal biases towards the subject (Relational State)
- A lack of topic familiarity (Competence State)
- Listener objectives, agenda, and fears (Outcome State)
- Listener immediate response distractors. (Response State)

These distractors, which you should attempt to marginalize, are the same categories of issues that you will also seek to identify in the subject: to empathize with the subject. Understanding their issues and listening to them through those issues is the Empathy Based Listening technique. Reducing your distractors enables you to best use the technique.

## A Deeper Dive into the Categories

### Immediate, non-biased distractors (Physical State)

These are the short term, physical or less important mental distractors that one can typically address in a short period of time. Examples are a lack of sleep, a loud restaurant setting, your cell phone receiving texts and calls, a head cold, the temperature setting of the room, an uncomfortable chair or a chair that is too comfortable. The term non-biased means that these are distractors that have nothing to do with the person you are talking with. These are distractors that would exist regardless of with whom you are talking. The impact of the non-biased immediate distractors will vary depending on who you are talking with but they will remain non-biased, none the less.

### Personal, non-biased distractors (Emotional State)

These are also distractors regardless of who you are talking with, but they are more entrenched issues which cannot be marginalized simply by changing chairs or getting a better night's sleep. Examples of personal non-biased distractors are the chronic illness of a family member, severe marital problems, maintaining an adulterous relationship from your spouse, financial difficulties, an important meeting or decision to be had soon after this conversation but not related to this conversation, the excitement of an upcoming event such as a child's championship game, a wedding, or the birth of grandchild. These

are all very impactful issues and they will distract you during a conversation with the subject, particularly if the conversation is not related to that impactful issue.

### **Personal biases towards the subject (Relational State)**

These listening distractors are the biases which the listener holds towards the subject. Such biases include, but are not limited to the subject's position on a negotiation, political views, age, gender, level of education, previous conversations with the subject, relationships with mutual colleagues, professional reputation, religious views, socio-economic status, job title, city/country of origin, accent, haircut, wardrobe, alcohol/drug use, tattoos, personal appearance, physical stature, etc. We all make assessments of the people with whom we interact. It is with new relationships when we tend to make mistakes in our assessments of others. These mistakes in assessment create major listening distractors when having conversations with these people. (Note: We listeners make as many positive mistakes in assessment of others as we do negative mistakes and all assessment mistakes create a listening distraction.)

### **Lack of topic/issue familiarity (Competence State)**

The introduction of unfamiliar terms, subjects and themes in a conversation become significant listening distractors. The introduction of a single unfamiliar term can reduce one's listening by 75% until the listener can mentally move on from attempting to understand the unknown term. A great example of this as a distractor is to watch a new couple travel to one of their home towns and the two of them listen to the parents of the local person in the relationship talk to them about all that is happening in the town. The outsider will be completely lost in the dynamics of the conversation while the child of the parents will follow along seamlessly. Typical listeners will attempt to decipher unknown terms or players in a conversation and they will stop listening to nearly all of a conversation until they understand the term. When hit with multiple unknown terms or players in succession, a listener will become frustrated and tune out of a conversation.

### **Listener objectives, agenda and fears (Outcome State)**

To some extent all of us have some purpose in our conversations. Nearly all conversations are for the purpose of gathering information or influencing others. Some people would argue that casual conversations are for entertainment, but I would say the information gathering and influencing of people we know and respect is entertaining. The specific information we seek to gather and the specific topics we seek to influence towards the subject are our objectives, agenda and fears that we are hoping to achieve or mitigate in conversations. These are our priorities and, as such, they are at the forefront of our minds during conversations. Focusing too heavily on these outcomes is a major listening distractor. Good examples are salespersons talking with clients, wealth managers talking with clients, both parties in a job interview, and both sides of a negotiation. More so than any other distractor, this is the area I have spent my time learning and teaching others to overcome to achieve better listening skills.

### **Listener Response Distraction (Response State)**

We all know we do it and yet it continues to be the most significant distractor for people during a verbal conversation. Thinking about what you are going to say next. If a listener's objectives, agenda and fears

are a macro distractor of listening then listener response is a micro distractor. It is the immediate desire to influence or gather information during a conversation based on the current point of that discussion. When filling out your worksheet, it is impossible to fill in distractors here. Following a conversation, you simply need to go back to your worksheet and write down those topics or statements you were “sitting on” and waiting to say during the conversation which caused you to not fully listen to the subject.

## Empathy worksheet

You now have a full explanation of the distraction categories. That same list of personal distractions are also the categories of portals into the subject’s perspective. Those things that are a distraction to you are the same things which define the perspective of the subject. By removing your distractions during a conversation, you can increase your listening from 25% to 50%. By identifying, understanding and taking into account what the subject says through their perspective, you can increase your ability to listen to that particular subject well beyond 50%.

## Application

I want you to take my 30 day listening improvement challenge. For the next 30 days you need to choose and focus on one conversation per day. (The more important and lengthy - the better.) Prior to the conversation, you will fill out your listening distractor worksheet and your observed portals to perspective worksheet. Again, the blank worksheets are exactly the same. You should be able to accurately fill in your distractor worksheet except for the final section of listener response distractions. You will likely not be able to fill in the entire perception portals worksheet for the subject prior to the conversation. Do your best and fill in more as you get to know the subject better.

Just before you go into the meeting/conversation, I want you to spend three minutes looking at your distractions in each category and looking at the list of perspective portals on the worksheet for the subject. Think to yourself. Put your distractions aside. When you find yourself hung up on a distraction, identify that respective perspective portal in the subject.

Following that one, focused conversation of the day, you need to look at each of your worksheets and ask yourself, “Did I get distracted by any of the issues in on my worksheet? When I did, what did I do? Did I push them out of my mind? Did I seek to find that exact perspective portal in the subject during the conversation?”

For the first couple of days of this process, your listening will likely be worse than it has ever been before. Your primary distractor will be these listening and perspective worksheets. Before the week’s end you will find yourself removing these distractions and pushing yourself toward identifying the perspective portals. By the end of two weeks, you will find the process of identifying distractors and observing perspective portals more natural and, perhaps, even therapeutic. By the end of the month, you will find that you will not ever go into an important meeting without going through this process and you will notice the good and bad listeners in your life. You will certainly notice that others will begin to find you more appealing. The ultimate goal will be for you to have greater influence, control and understanding of yourself within every conversation.

If you would like more information in my Empathy Based Listening process to include seminars, team development and one-on-one training please reach out to me at [eric@ericmaddox.com](mailto:eric@ericmaddox.com).





# Effective Listening Checklist Distractors

## **Immediate Non Biased Distractors**

**Physical State** (Discomfort, Illness Cell Phone)

## **Personal Non Biased Distractors**

**Emotional State** (Marital Issues, Financial Difficulties, Family Distress)

## **Personal Biased Distractors**

**Relational State** (Politics, Gender, Discrimination)

## **Topic Familiarity Distractors**

**Competence State** (Industry Jargon, Acronyms, Incongruent Ideas)

## **Listener Objective Distractors**

**Outcome State** (Purpose, Outcome, Objectives)

## **Listener Response Distractors**

**Response State** (Thinking Ahead, Planning next move)





# Effective Listening Checklist

## Perspective Portals

### Subject's Immediate Non Biased Perspective Portals

**Physical State** (Discomfort, Illness Cell Phone)

### Subject's Personal Non Biased Perspective Portals

**Emotional State** (Marital Issues, Financial Difficulties, Family Distress)

### Subject's Personal Biased Perspective Portals

**Relational State** (Politics, Gender, Discrimination)

### Subject's Topic Familiarity Perspective Portals

**Competence State** (Industry Jargon, Acronyms, Incongruent Ideas)

### Subject's Listener Objective Perspective Portals

**Outcome State** (Purpose, Outcome, Objectives)

### Subject's Listener Response Perspective Portals

**Response State** (Thinking Ahead, Planning next move)



# Examples of "Breadcrumbs"

- Listen!
- Here is the deal.
- I need you to know something.
- I am the only one who know this.
- You may not believe me, but...
- I don't care if you believe me or not.
- I know this sounds crazy, but...
- Call me crazy, but...
- So G help me...
- I swear if I'm lying I'm dying.
- Let me tell you something right now.
- Have I ever told you about...
- Well, it's a crazy story...
- It's complicated.
- I'm telling you...
- I don't care what they say.
- Can I ask you a question?
- Let me ask you something?
- Here is the crazy thing...
- So, the crazy thing is...
- I cannot believe I'm telling you this, but...
- Everyone thought., but what happened was...
- Here is what I need you to know.
- Wait, wait, let me finish.
- No, wait, here is my point...
- But my point is...
- I know, but here is my point...
- Did you even listen to what I said?
- You are not listening to me.
- You are not hearing me.
- I don't think you understand.