

Leadership Development

The Power of Respectful Listening: A Path to Change

Adam Grant's excellent book, *Think Again*, is a great resource for understanding how people unlearn and relearn. Motivational interviewing—“[helping \[people\] find their own intrinsic motivation to change](#)”—is one valuable idea that he adapts from psychology. I love the concept, but I think the term is too narrow. Thoughtful interviewing may help inspire others, but Respectful Listening is a more apt description of the process.

It can be difficult for us to challenge formed opinions. We have all seen firsthand how divisive even previously mundane topics can become. Hardened beliefs make it difficult to find cooperation, exploration, and collaboration.

Respectful listening creates space for both parties to reconsider their entrenched ideas. The key ingredients are:

1. Deep respect and interest in each other's opinions
2. Recognition that any change brings with it risks and can be scary
3. Ceasefire in attempt to influence the other person

In short, be a great listener. Great Listeners make others feel smarter! Here are the steps:

1. **Find Agreement:** Every argument contains one point of agreement or shared values. For example, a doctor recommending a vaccine and a patient who declines that vaccine both want the patient to be healthy.
2. **Invite the other party to explain their position fully.** Ask for clarification and more detail when you don't understand. Listen intently, and temporarily “forget” that you have different ideas. Resist the urge to argue your own position or influence the other person.
3. **Summarize what you hear and check for accuracy.** Sometimes in listening, we do some sneak interpretation. By restating what you heard in your own words, you both demonstrate that you are paying attention (not just listening for an opening to jump in and change their mind!), and you give the other person a chance to correct any inaccuracies that may have crept in.
4. **Share your thoughts** respectfully and calmly. You may ask, “Now that I have gone through my reasons, can you tell me why I am so interested in you considering X?” You can correct or reexplain misunderstandings.
5. **Conclude by affirming that you have confidence they will make a decision that makes sense for them.** This lets the other person know that you respect them and their ability to make decisions for themselves, even when you may disagree with them.

6. **Help them move forward.** If the other person's response indicates they may be changing in their thinking, ask what next steps make sense and how you can help them achieve it.

Support any evidence of *change talk*—implicit or explicit references to a desire, ability, need, or commitment to do something different. Be a guide to self-discovery. Respectful Listening opens up space to reconsider points of view and opens up new paths.