

## IF THEY WOULD ONLY LISTEN



**Dr. Richard D. Halley**  
**Honorable Director (Academic)**  
**Global Listening Centre**

If they would only listen: How many times have we heard someone say these words? The issue of concern shifts and changes. It could be global warming; it could be plastics in the oceans; it could be any harm to our environment. There are many issues that people seem to believe that if only those who disagree would listen to each other, the problem could be resolved. However, the truth is often that those who disagree listen just fine. They just disagree. This is often particularly true when negotiating internationally. Think for example of the long negotiations at the end of the Viet Nam war. Both sides understood very well the positions of the other side. They just clearly disagreed and the search was for any tiny piece of common ground.

Listening practitioners have to understand that the first requirement of listening is to want to understand another's point of view. We can teach others how to listen and they can learn to listen well, but if at any particular moment they do not wish to understand or to adjust their positions about something then knowing how to listen will not end with them understanding the position of the other, no positions will change and they end up where they started.

Many times the difference in point of view occurs because of competing goals. The other person wants something that agreeing with your position will prevent him or her from having something they want. For example, currently there is a controversy in the United States regarding drilling for oil off the coasts of the country. The side opposed wants to protect fishing, recreation, and the environment for some species. Those in favor of drilling wish to keep the US from being dependent on others for its oil supply and of course some want to make money from drilling for the oil. Some openness to adjusting positions at least slightly must occur before any alternative solutions can be considered. Is this an all or nothing situation or can there be a search for solutions that take care of the desires of both sides?

If any change in position from either side would require giving up some portion of their goals, to suggest that a solution lies in listening to each other may be seen as asking them to give up on their goal. When we ask two competing parties to listen to each other and believe that this act will

resolve the problem, we are often forgetting we are asking for one or both parties to give up on a portion of their goal. Doing so requires a major shift in someone's view of the world and may be one of the most difficult things one can be asked to do. In some ways such a situation is asking someone to conclude that the other's view of the world is better than one's own. That can be a big pill to swallow.

Such differences can also be based in competing value systems. Or what can be worse, the belief that value systems are opposed to each other when they may not actually be. Thus the real issue turns out to be something like who shall be in power.

Therefore, if someone wants another to change their position on such an issue, the first efforts must be to open to at least understanding the other's position and to try to develop a positive (trusting?) relationship with that person so that the possibility of a thoughtful conversation might develop. Doing so is no guarantee that the other will eventually make the desired change in perception, but not doing so will surely work against them choosing to listen to a different point of view.

We should also acknowledge that phrasing the claim this way, i.e. "If they would only listen," suggests that it is the other person who needs to listen, not the you. Assuming we are not in physical control of the other person, the only person any of us can control the behavior of is our self. Therefore, focusing on changing the behavior of the other is most likely a waste of time. Thus trying to develop a positive relationship with this person is the most promising route to any positive change. The other possible focus that occurs to me is to spend one's efforts in trying to attract others to his/her point of view. Send a message out and hope that it will reach someone who chooses to join you. Perhaps if there are enough people who join you, the social situation changes.

I believe that listening can at least provide the opportunity to see an opposing view as coming from a person with honorable intentions. And if by some chance both sides manage this, there might at least be a reduction in the tension between the parties. Whether a solution develops that both sides can accept may need other surrounding issues to shift in a way that gives one side or the other a way to adjust their position. Sometimes, at least in the short run, such an outcome is the best we can hope for.