Deep Listening Quick Guide

Deep listening helps us understand others' inner experiences as they approach their goals.

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This brief guide aims to give you the information you need to begin practicing deep listening on your own and with others in the MaP Community.

Understanding Deep Listening

Deep listening means setting aside our own thoughts entirely to understand someone else's perspective. Deep listening asks us to pause our natural impulses to respond.

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There's a lot of advice out there about listening that puts considerable emphasis on the listener. While well-intended, any practice that encourages us to divide our attention (e.g., "Listen with your whole body" or "Listen with a willingness to be changed by what you hear") undermines our ability to focus on the other person.

If you're trying to appear as if you're listening or comparing what the person is saying to your existing beliefs, you're not listening deeply. You're thinking about yourself.

Why This Matters for Museum Professionals

More museums are shifting from being product-focused to being people-focused. To support people effectively, we need to understand their underlying motivations. Deep listening unlocks our understanding of people's motivations and the mental models that inform their decision-making.

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Deep Listening helps us:

- Move beyond surface-level descriptions to understand underlying motivations
- Challenge our assumptions about what others think or need
- Build stronger relationships with colleagues, community members, and stakeholders

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What Makes Deep Listening Different?

In typical conversations, we naturally:

- Share similar experiences (“That happened to me too!”)
- Offer solutions or advice
- Think about what to say next
- Make judgments or assumptions

Deep listening asks us to pause these impulses to truly understand others.

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When you're listening deeply, you're listening to understand the other person's *interior cognition*.

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“Interior cognition” refers to three elements.

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Three elements:

1. Inner Thinking: What went through the person's mind
2. Emotional Reactions: How they felt in the moment
3. Guiding Principles: Personal rules they follow

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Element 1: Inner Thinking

Inner thinking is what went through the person's mind when they were trying to address their goal.

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Inner thinking is *not* what a person "usually" does when trying to achieve a goal. Nor is it an opinion about how to approach a goal or solve a problem. When a person tells us a story about a time when they were trying to make progress toward a goal and they share what they were thinking *at that time*, that is inner thinking.

Example of Inner Thinking

If the goal we're interested in is "Navigate a difficult conversation at work", then an example of inner thinking would be:

> … When he asked me if I knew who was responsible for the mistake, I remember thinking, 'Oh, my god. Am I going to lose my job is I tell the truth?'

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In this example, the person is recounting a specific thought they had at a time when they were trying to address their goal. Notice how it's past tense — not a generalization or an opinion about what they think a person "should" do under certain (imaginary) circumstances.

Element 2: Emotional Reactions

Emotional reactions the feelings the person had during a time when they were trying to address their goal.

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Emotional reactions are perhaps the easiest of the three elements to identify when listening. Just as with inner thinking, the emotions the person expresses should be those felt in the past — when they were trying to make progress on their goal.

Example of an Emotional Reaction

If the goal we're interested in is "Navigate a difficult conversation at work", then an example of an emotional reaction would be:

> ... I was filled with dread. All morning, I sat at my desk, and my stomach was tied. I couldn't focus on anything, and I just couldn't wait for us to just have the meeting and get it over with.

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In this example, the person is recounting specific feelings they had at a time when they were trying to address their goal.

Element 3: Guiding Principles

Guiding principles are the rules an individual (more or less) adheres to when addressing their goal. If a person were a computer, guiding principles would be the programming instructions that dictate their behavior.

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Guiding principles are the most challenging of the three elements to identify. As with the other elements, a guiding principle is expressed in the past tense as part of a story when the person was trying to address their goal.

Example of a Guiding Principle

If the goal we're interested in is "Navigate a difficult conversation at work", then an example of a guiding principle would be:

> ... I decided to tell them anyway. I knew that if I didn't share what I knew, I'd feel awful about it later.

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In this example, the person shares a principle that informed their decision. Guiding Principles can often seem like inner thinking (and vice versa). The good news is we don't have to worry about which element of interior cognition we're hearing while listening to someone. We just have to know whether it is interior cognition or exterior cognition.

What to avoid: Exterior Cognition

Exterior cognition is less valuable to us as we try to understand how people approach their goals. Exterior recognition includes:

- Generalizations
- Opinions and preferences
- Conjecture
- Statements of fact
- Explanations

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We can discuss these in greater detail during our practice session.

What to avoid: Trying to identify which of the three elements you're hearing as you listen

When we practice deep listening, we're just trying to help the other person share their interior cognition as they've tried to make progress in the past. It doesn't matter if what we're hearing is an emotional reaction, a guiding principle, or inner thinking. At the moment, our only job is to elicit interior cognition (not exterior recognition) from the speaker.

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That may sound difficult, and it is a skill that has to be developed, but it's actually much easier to pay attention to the other person using this framework. You do not have to think about your body language or whether you agree with the person or what you will say next. When the only thing we have to do is think in binary terms about what we are hearing, things become simpler. When you're listening deeply, you'll think: "Am I hearing interior cognition or not?" If not, then we need to go deeper.

The Value of Practice

Deep listening is like playing an instrument — mastery comes through consistent practice, and there's always room to grow deeper.

A single practice session can:

- Challenge how we think about listening
- Help us recognize our assumptions
- Show us new ways to understand others

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The goal isn't perfection — it's progress.

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Acknowledgments & Further Learning

This practice builds on the groundbreaking work of Indi Young in developing listening techniques that help organizations truly understand the people they serve. You can continue learning through Indi's course on Listening Deeply .

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https://community.museumprogress.com/c/listening-deeply-in-museums