



Sherlock Holmes and Listening

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Recently I saw a TV show featuring a medical examiner who went beyond interpreting evidence when investigating a homicide. She and her father, a retired police officer, acted out what they thought happened. She played the part of the crime victim. In 1998, I coined the term **Investigative Listening** to describe high-level listening skills. The medical examiner demonstrated a key element of Investigative Listening: putting yourself in the place of the person you're attempting to communicate with.

Certainly, communicators are luckier than murder investigators. The people we're trying to hear and understand can speak—we don't have to rely solely on puzzling evidence. But do we always get all the information we need through the words that are spoken? Probably not. Good listeners remain as alert for every clue as Sherlock Holmes.

Empathy, according to Webster means "identification with or vicarious experiencing of the feelings or thoughts of another person." It does not mean personalizing and people-pleasing which will cause you to become emotionally drained and weakened. Empathy can accompany strength and a healthy degree of detachment. It allows you to discover key insights you need, especially in challenging communication events.

Think of a time when a misunderstanding took place because you failed to listen well. Did you make assumptions? Were you unwilling to step out of your position to move toward the other person's position, seeking realms of possible agreement and connection? Were you unable to see the situation or issue through their eyes?

Techniques for listening can help, but only to a point. It's interesting that the subject of listening gets so much lip service with tips like *you've got two ears and one mouth, so listen twice as much as you speak*. My question is: If you simply listen more, though it may improve your understanding a little, are you listening effectively—**investigatively**?

You must examine more than what you **DO** when listening. Look carefully at what you **THINK**. We've established that to develop investigative listening skills, you need empathy. Listening in an empathetic fashion, without becoming emotionally depleted, requires a genuinely strong self-esteem.

It takes confidence to step into another's shoes and move away from thinking only of your interests and your viewpoints. Avoid personalizing the encounter, by staying focused on the issues at hand. Work to build a wide array of communication skills and refuse to feel intimidated.

The rewards of authentic, investigative listening are many. Even a short walk in someone else's shoes will stretch you, strengthen you and help you grow as a communicator. You will ultimately learn a few new things about yourself and others. Every person has a gift for you, in the form of a life lesson. Investigative listening remains one of the best ways to receive that gift.

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