

ARTICLE 2

Unproductive Patterns of Listening Autobiographical Listening

Autobiographical listening occurs when our brain exercises its associative powers and the speakers' story stimulates us to think of our personal experiences connected with those being addressed by the speaker. Oh, how we love to tell our own stories when what we want to be doing is listening fully to the thinking of the speaker.

As an effective and committed listener, we set autobiographical listening aside as soon as we become aware that our attention has drifted away from the speaker and into our own story. This listening pattern has the potential to lead us to the place of making judgments, forming comparisons, or totally breaking down our ability to attend to the speaker's thoughts. We must constantly monitor our thinking to make sure we are staying with the speaker.

For example, Sharon was being consoled by a friend after the death of her mother. What Sharon needed from her friend was a space to talk and reflect back on her mother's life and death. Instead, the friend, meaning to be supportive, began to share about her own mother, going into much detail about her mom's illness and subsequent death. What happened? The friend unintentionally hijacked the conversation and went off on her own story, staying there for most of the remaining time of the conversation. The friend thought she was showing compassion by sharing her personal story and most likely left the conversation thinking she had provided much support to Sharon, but in fact, Sharon left the conversation feeling "unheard" and empty. We are not suggesting that a person never share a personal story or example as they are intentionally listening to another, but to use discernment and monitoring. If the friend had told a brief personal story as an extension of Sharon's story or as an illustration of something Sharon had shared, it might have been beneficial, serving as a way of empathizing with Karen's emotions.

Autobiographical stories offer the possibility of connecting to others in a way that shows caring and understanding, but without monitoring, they can also hijack another's story and turn the focus away from that person. The committed listener

will know exactly when it is time to return to the story and situation of the others. The speaker will feel empathy when someone is fully listening and attending.

Examples of autobiographical listening include thoughts or words similar to the following:

- “You think that’s a challenge? You should have seen ___. Let me tell you...”
- “I remember when I felt like that. Let me tell you when I...”
- “She thinks she works hard; well, I remember when I first became a supervisor and...”
- “Well, when I was in that situation, I ...”
- “That’s great. I’ve got one better. ...”

Kee, K. (2017). *Results coaching next steps: Leading for Growth and Change*. Corwin A SAGE Company.