



Story listening - The counter-story - Part 2

Where do these counter-stories come from?

Well, remember the difference between speaking and our brain's processing power?

Yes, we talk at around 120 words a minute. Still, our reptilian 'Gecko' brain can process information at 400 to 800 words a minute. That's faster than you can blink.

Scanning the past

While you are listening to the other person your brain is scanning past events selecting one that has a similar theme and presents that story together with the emotion you experienced at the time to your conscious awareness.

As the stories move from data back then to feelings now, the emotions we experience become far more intense.

The downside of the counter-story is when we tell it because it can block communication by shutting the other person down.

They do not get to tell their story or expand on what they wanted to talk about. Your story (or their story) takes over leaving the story-teller frustrated thinking what's the use they're not interested in what I have to say anyway.

This is damaging for any personal or professional relationship.

But the upside is compelling because the feelings generated in you by your story will be similar to what the other person is feeling. If you listen to your emotions, you have a good insight as to what the other person is experiencing.

Example

One young man was telling his grandparents about his recent overseas school trip, and, being well-travelled, they immediately shared their travels. He never did get to talk about his fantastic adventure. Imagine how he felt.

I asked him about his experience, and he felt that they weren't interested in his experience. It also triggered feelings of insignificance.



Did his grandparents do that on purpose? No, they didn't, but that is the effect they had on their grandson.

We return to choice. Now you know what to listen for you have the power of choice. You can choose to ignore the counter-story or use it productively to get the full story.

The power of emotion

The amygdala (your 'gecko' brain), is your emotional control centre.

If the story is linked with emotion, it is stored in the mind's long-term memory making it easy to recall.

If you were sad back, then you will experience sadness now. If you were happy, frustrated or angry, then you will experience feelings of happiness, frustration or anger and so on.

So the storyteller has just triggered a story and an emotional response inside you.

This gives you a strong basis for your perception check.

Storytellers become your therapist

That may seem like a strange thing to say, but it is accurate, and it's because of your counter-story. If you listen to your story and the feelings it has generated inside you and notice that you are feeling tense, angry, frustrated or vulnerable remember the topic and flag it for consideration at a later time.

DO NOT tell your counter story. Let the person finish their story.

The big one is when there is a sudden change of subject.

When listening to someone if I suddenly change the subject, I make a mental note asking myself – What did they just say that caused me to change the subject? I am then able to direct the conversation back to them, knowing that I can deal with the issues in my own time.

Conversely, if a person changes the subject for no apparent reason, pay attention to what you were talking about when they changed the topic. This is a solid clue that the issue you were discussing is deeply troublesome for them.

If you have a high level of trust with the person, you can bring the conversation back to the same topic but be gentle because the pain level is likely to be high. However, don't avoid the moment



because it could be a problem they need and want to resolve. They may need someone to stick with them while they tell the story. Be careful not to offer them a solution but help them discover their own.

Exponential increase in self-awareness

I was chatting with a friend explaining what the transition story is about when I started laughing.

I was explaining that the problem is not the change; it is the transition, and every transition has three parts. It starts with an ending, moves to a time of confusion before a new beginning can be made.

As I was speaking I was also listening to myself and I had an aha moment.

I realised that I had been in the 'confusion' stage of transition for 7 years because that's how long I had been talking with my friend about converting this course into an online course.

That understanding cause me to make a substantial and profound change in my professional life. All because I was able to listen to myself!

That was the moment my friend Lorraine inadvertently became my therapist, business coach and personal development coach.

Change of subject

When a subject starts to cut to close to the bone, we will all change the subject for no rational reason.

The point is simple. If you have suffered a business failure, marriage breakdown, problems with teenage children, or the loss of a loved one and someone talks about one of them you are likely to change the subject on them.

If you have acknowledged and worked through the pain as best you can, then you will be better able to stay with the person who is currently sharing their story with you.

The deeper you can enter your own personal emotional pain, the deeper you can stay in touch with the pain of another. But we all have a limit.

Story listening summary

The purpose of story listening is to hold a mirror up for the person so they can see themselves.



When you listen mindfully to the repeated words and phrases and metaphors in the stories people tell you; you can help them realise their true potential.

You can help them find new energy, make a fresh start in life, enjoy new creativity, new hope, higher productivity and happiness.

You can change their world and yours one conversation at a time.

Hard yakka?

Right now you probably think that listening is hard yakka and that your extra brainpower will be full to over-flowing. I remember having the same thoughts, but I have been surprised at just how much information you can process as I'm sure you will be.

Remember the 4 steps of learning and be aware of what stage you are at and persevere.

When you reach the stage of unconscious competence, you will experience the thrill of knowing that you have helped make a difference in someone's life.

Stick with it because the rewards are great.