

# Power Listening

Tap the power of the third ear.



by Howard M. Guttman

THE CEO OF A consumer packaging company met recently in Europe with his divisional presidents to roll out a new global strategy. The initial response was enthusiastic, but one executive kept raising questions. When this occurred, several team members interjected, “Good question” or “That’s a good point.” Listening with both ears, his colleagues heard only the words, indicating he was searching for information.

The session’s facilitator, listening with his third ear, heard something different: All the questions were a veiled challenge to the CEO and his new strategy. So, the facilitator wisely said, “I get the message that you’re not

on board with the new strategy, but rather than state your objections, you couch them by posing questions. Why not just disagree?” And, of the other team members, the facilitator asked: “Why the collusion? Why are you pretending that he’s asking the questions in good faith—rather than to sabotage the rollout?”

The facilitator’s questions exposed the subterfuge, and after honest discussion the colluders admitted that they had played along in hopes that he would come around to the CEO’s way of thinking. The doubting Thomas admitted he had some concerns, and he and the CEO agreed to discuss these “off line.”

## Developing Your Third Ear

Communication involves implicit and explicit messages. *Explicit* messages are those that hit the ears. *Implicit* messages are the meanings behind the words. These may be conveyed through sound—in the degree of

resolve or strength in a statement, for example—or through body language, posture, and eye movements. Such messages aren’t always audible; they are the subtext of communication.

Penetrating though to the nuance of a message requires an ability to listen with the “third ear.”

Good coaches and facilitators have a keenly developed third ear. Their finely attuned sonar catches everything: where people are seated, how they are dressed, who has an arched eyebrow, who is turned away or avoiding eye contact, who is trying to catch the eye of a colleague.

These messages are often as potent as the spoken word.

To develop the power of your third ear, try these tips:

- Take the bird’s-eye view of a team by mentally “flying” above it.
- Be with the action, not in it.
- Let go of your own agenda and focus on the person or team you work with.
- Watch how team members interact; focus on the flow, not the content.
- Don’t be drawn into content discussions. Share your point of view, then quickly step back into the role of observer.
- Try not to focus on any one individual; observe everyone in the group.
- Look at people when they don’t have the floor; their actions and *reactions* often speak louder than words.
- Pretend that you are a reporter and sum up, in a headline, the interaction. What other messages need to be expressed?

## Decoding the Message

When people speak to one another about charged issues, they often “encode” the message rather than “let it all hang out.” The facilitator must decode the message and feed it back to the speaker to ensure that he or she has it right.

In the case of the CEO and the strat-

egy rollout, the facilitator told both the doubting Thomas and his colluders exactly what he had heard behind the words. He then communicated his understanding of the subtext of the messages. Those involved acknowledged they had been playing a game. Once both sides’ messages had been decoded, fed back, and acknowledged, the group was able to deal with the issues openly and effectively.

## The Moment of Truth

At certain times in every coaching engagement, you must “tell it like it is” or risk becoming a colluder or co-conspirator in dysfunctional behavior. This is the moment of truth, and walking the line between confronting and alienating others can be a perilous high-wire act. By accusing rather than reporting, blaming rather than explaining, coaches and facilitators risk losing the trust and respect of the people they’ve been hired to help.

Skilled coaches or facilitators are masters at giving feedback.

- First, they depersonalize feedback, presenting the facts without judgment.
- Next, they carefully formulate their comments to avoid value judgments. Whenever possible, they relate conclusions to observable behavior: “You say you are in agreement, but your tone of voice is angry and aggressive” or “You have told me you want to change your style, but in the last meeting you cut off discussion several times.”

• Third, effective coaches and facilitators present the facts and then ask the individual or team to confirm or refute them. This keeps them from being perceived as judgmental.

The challenge for any coach or facilitator is to make the individual or team 100 percent accountable for the outcomes of their interpersonal relationships. And the charge for any coach is to develop the ability of others, by a combination of role modeling and skills transfer, to interact authentically in order to accelerate performance. Without a keen ability to listen with the third ear, a coach or facilitator is unlikely to help his or her client change behavior and move rapidly ahead. EE

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**ACTION:** Try listening with your third ear.

