



Empathic Listening

Introduction & Overview



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INSIGHT STRATEGISTS



SO WHAT IS EMPATHIC LISTENING?

Empathic Listening is a form of listening in which you, the listener, pays attention to your own thoughts and feelings as you listen to someone else. It requires listening on two levels at the same time. Psychologists sometimes call it “listening with the third ear.” The two ears you have on either side of your head take in what the other person says. But an imaginary third ear is directed inward, monitoring your own thoughts and feelings as you listen to what the other person says.

In most settings, including research, we seldom think about how we listen. We just do it. And when we listen, we typically...

- Listen for Agenda
- Listen for Confirmation
- Listen for Advantage
- Listen Selectively
- Listen to Judge

In short, we listen for ourselves.

But when we listen empathically, we listen for ourselves and the other person. We listen on a level in which we experience the thoughts and feelings of the other person as if they are our own.

Why do psychologists practice Empathic Listening and why should you? Because it allows you to reach a much deeper level of understanding than regular listening. It allows you to empathize

with that person by finding a part of yourself that connects with their experience.

You see, if a person is telling you a story about an experience they had and you suddenly feel excited or melancholy or warm or anxious, that gives you a clue as what they

may have experienced. The emotions, memories and associations you have when listening to someone else become windows into the experience of the other person.

This approach to listening encourages you to focus not only on what is being said but on your own cognitive and emotional journey during the interview.

You are trying to feel empathically as close to what the interviewee’s internal experience is and has been at various times in his or her life. This requires listening in a special way—with your heart and your head.



In fact, clinical psychologists use their own emotions as “data” to understand the experience of the client. We encourage our observers to do the same thing as they listen to interviewees.

Now, in regular listening, most people treat their own thoughts and feelings as noise in a conversation. We try not to let our minds wander. We do our best to ignore them in order to focus on the content of what the other person says.

But psychologists are trained to do both at the same time. They can process the content of what people tell them and, at the same time, monitor their own thoughts and feelings. And, as Dr. Hopper once said, use their own thoughts and feelings as “data” or “clues” to better understanding their conversation partner.





THREE LEVELS OF INSIGHTS EXPERIENCE

As marketing researchers, we tend to process insights on three levels. These three levels apply regardless of the method we are using (focus groups, ethnography, individual interviews, etc.) The first two levels are pretty common these days. The third level is the level at which Empathic Listening is important.

1. Cognitive Level –This is the collection of data with which we all are familiar. We record what respondents say and do. (In this level, we explore what people think.)

2. Cognitive/Emotional Level –This is the collection of data on respondents' emotions. Oftentimes these data are derived through projective techniques. Much of the focus today in marketing research is on this level. (At this level, we explore what people feel as well as what they think.)

3. Intrapsychic Level –This is the level at which Empathic Listening operates. It is about not just understanding a respondent's thoughts and feelings, but tracking our own thoughts and feelings throughout the process. By tracking the depths of our own cognitive and emotional experience, we gain deeper insight into what respondents think and feel. (At this level, we explore what WE think and feel, as well as what respondents think and feel.)

WHY SHOULD YOU LEARN EMPATHIC LISTENING?

In marketing research, Empathic Listening can be particularly useful. It allows us to go beyond a surface level understanding of the people who interact with our brands so that we can anticipate their needs better. You'll be better able to predict how they'll react to your new product concept, advertising campaign or package design.

But beyond that, Empathic Listening creates a greater level of engagement between

brand teams and the human beings who use their brands.

In typical qualitative research, observers sit behind a two-way mirror and observe their consumers on the other side of "the glass." This

voyeuristic context and the barrier the mirror creates make it easy for observers to judge—sometimes harshly—the people they are observing.

In this environment, we observers are protected and anonymous. While we can see and hear the people on the other side of the mirror, we are separated from them physically. We can see them but they can't see us. We also are separated emotionally. We listen and watch with detachment, which often encourages us to criticize and dehumanize. Instead of creating an environment of connection, this context creates separation. Instead of facilitating understanding and empathy, it creates barriers.

Empathic Listening encourages a personal, often intimate connection with respondents. When Empathic Listening is applied to qualitative fieldwork, observers are asked to share with the rest of the team their own thoughts, feelings, memories and associations. It's not unusual for observers to spend more time talking about themselves after interviews than about respondents.

The goal of this is to allow observers to find a part of themselves that connects with the person on the other side of the observation mirror. In sharing their own thoughts, feelings, memories and associations, observers realize in a tangible way how their own life experience – and the life experiences of their colleagues – connects with the life experiences of respondents.

Empathic Listening also can be applied within organizations to create better teams. To get the most out of teams, everyone needs to share ideas and participate at equal levels. But too often, individual team members either Dominate or Abdicater when decisions are made.

The Dominate/Abdicater dynamic is pervasive in organizations because it's an easy way out. When one or a few team members take over decision-making, and others Abdicater their responsibility to participate, the cumulative brain power of the team isn't maximized. For teams to make the best decisions possible, everyone's input should be heard. Empathic Listening can create an environment in which all team members feel both a responsibility and sense of comfort to share their input.

Those who tend to Dominate empathize with others' complicity in letting them do so and give those people a chance to participate. Those who tend to Abdicater empathize with the burden placed on Dominators to carry the full load of decision-making.

Through Empathic Listening, all team members can better understand where everyone else on the team is coming from and the team's full potential can be put into action. Empathic Listening training can be beneficial in the following situations:

- [Team building workshops](#)
- [Team problem solving meetings](#)
- [Ideation/Brainstorming sessions](#)
- [Cross-Departmental project work](#)

Empathic Listening can improve the process any time teams need to make decisions together.



“ We are all tellers of tales. We each seek to provide our scattered and often confusing experiences with a sense of coherence by arranging the episodes of our lives into stories. This is not the stuff of delusion or self-deception. We are not telling ourselves lies. Rather, through our personal myths, each of us discovers what is true and what is meaningful in life. In order to live well, with unity and purpose, we compose a heroic narrative of the self that illustrates essential truths about ourselves. ”

— Dan P. McAdams
Professor and Chair
Department of Psychology
Northwestern University.

NARRATIVE IDENTITY & THE IMPORTANCE OF LISTENING FOR STORY

When we listen empathically, what exactly should we listen for? In short, stories. Psychologists tell us that we are all storytellers. We construct our identities, our sense of self, by telling ourselves stories. Psychologists call this process Narrative Identity.

As such, we are all creators of our own myths—myths through which we try to give meaning and consistency to who we are in the world. We may create myths about being The Devoted Spouse, The Athlete, The Entrepreneur, The Artist, or The Expert. We may imagine a past in which we were The Popular Kid or The Serious Student. And we may hope for a future in which we become The Perfect Parent, The Steadfast Survivor or The Triumphant Professional. There are countless personal myths that all of us have in our heads every day.

But our mythmaking isn't always cut-and-dried. Nor is it easy. We struggle to create coherent stories from the raw materials of our experiences, memories and an endless stream of cultural resources.

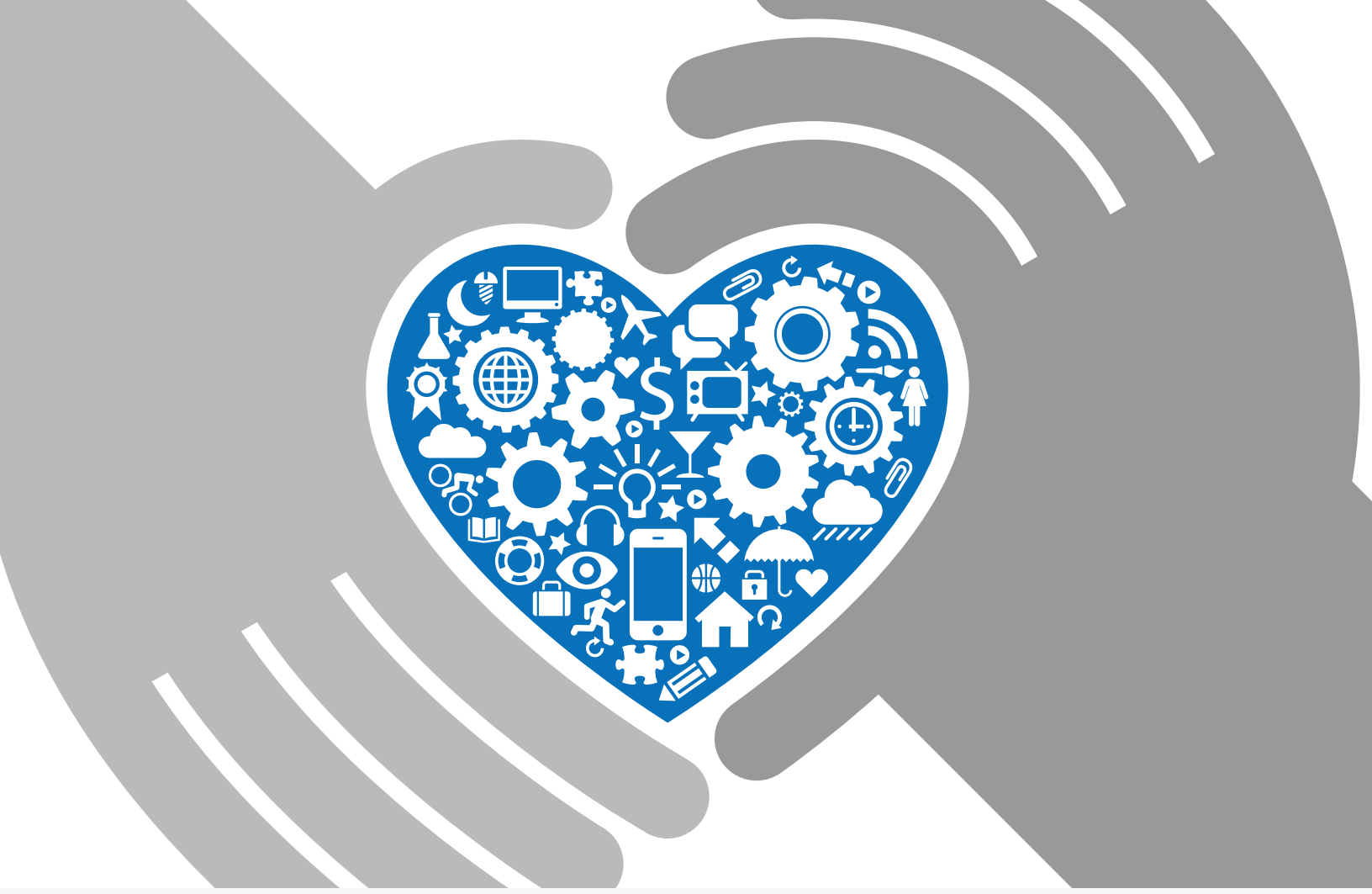
There may be parts of our current self—beliefs and behaviors—that don't fit the story line we're trying to create. We may have an image of our future self that has been elusive for years. And there may be

parts of our past selves that don't necessarily fit the narrative we want to create. We call these contradictions and inconsistencies Identity Tensions.

As we create our Narrative Identities, we try to resolve these Identity Tensions. This process continues every day of our lives. We aren't creating falsehoods. Rather, we choose to emphasize some bits of our experience and deemphasize others in order to create narratives that make sense to us and give our lives meaning and consistency.

Brands help us create Narrative Identity and manage Identity Tensions. We use them to help us smooth over the inconsistencies and contradictions in our stories. We write brands into our personal narratives to help us become the characters we want to become in the stories of our lives. The most meaningful brands are those that play some role in our Narrative Identity.

In short, we use brands to help tell ourselves stories about who we are.



A “FELT” EXPERIENCE

Whether it’s applied to research or team-building, the goal of Empathic Listening is to create a “felt experience” for brand team members. This means that instead of understanding other people, you “feel” them. You experience the same emotional reaction to what’s happening as they do. And by doing so, you gain a deeper, shared understanding of their experience.

The great thing about Empathic Listening is that psychologists – and dogs – aren’t the only ones who can do it.

You can learn to do it, too.

Almost all of us are born with the ability to listen empathically because of something called Mirror Neurons.

THE MAGIC OF MIRROR NEURONS

The reason why almost all of us can learn Empathic Listening is because we’re all hard-wired to do so. Mirror Neurons are a special kind of brain cell that we all possess that allows us to respond equally when we perform an action and when we witness someone else perform the same action. It’s why we cringe when we see someone else stub their toe. And it’s why babies stick their tongues out at us when we stick out our tongues at them.

In many ways, Empathic Listening is about freeing your mind to do what it’s already programmed to do – empathize with other people!



THE MIND'S MIRROR

A new type of neuron – called a mirror neuron – could help explain how we learn through mimicry and why we empathize with others.

By LEA WINERMAN – American Psychological Association Monitor
October 2005, Vol 36, No. 9

You're walking through a park when out of nowhere, the man in front of you gets smacked by an errant Frisbee. Automatically, you recoil in sympathy. Or you're watching a race, and you feel your own heart racing with excitement as the runners vie to cross the finish line first. Or you see a woman sniff some unfamiliar food and wrinkle her nose in disgust. Suddenly, your own stomach turns at the thought of the meal.

For years, such experiences have puzzled psychologists, neuroscientists and philosophers, who've wondered why we react at such a gut level to other people's actions. How do we understand, so immediately and instinctively, their thoughts, feelings and intentions?

Now, some researchers believe that a recent discovery called mirror neurons might provide a neuroscience-based answer to those questions. Mirror neurons are a type of brain cell that respond equally when we perform an action and when we witness someone else perform the same action. They were first discovered in the early 1990s, when a team of Italian researchers found individual

neurons in the brains of macaque monkeys that fired both when the monkeys grabbed an object and also when the monkeys watched another primate grab the same object.

Neuroscientist Giacomo Rizzolatti, MD, who, with his colleagues at the University of Parma, first identified mirror neurons, says that the neurons could help explain how and why we "read" other people's minds and feel empathy for them. If watching an action and performing that action can activate the same parts of the brain in monkeys—down to a single neuron—then it makes sense that watching an action and performing an action could also elicit the same feelings in people.

The concept might be simple, but its implications are far-reaching. Over the past decade, more research has suggested that mirror neurons might help explain not only empathy, but also autism and the evolution of language.

Psychologist V.S. Ramachandran, PhD, has called the discovery of mirror neurons one of the "single most important unpublicized stories of the decade."

AN EMPATHIC LISTENING CASE STORY

The client, a state government health insurance marketplace, already knew that a significant number of people who were eligible for subsidies under the Affordable Care Act had not yet signed up for coverage. They hypothesized that these people had a “Young Invincibles” mindset, believing that they were young, healthy and didn’t need health insurance. The client had become increasingly frustrated with and pessimistic about these

healthcare consumers. In meetings, the team’s frustration sometimes boiled over into ridicule – blaming these healthcare consumers for not acting in their own best interest.

Through a series of Psychological Interviews, we learned that this was not about a perception of invincibility. It was about being overwhelmed by life. Many who qualified for subsidies were single parents, working multiple jobs. They were stressed, overburdened and struggling. Most recognized the importance of health insurance but found it difficult to carve out even a few hours to enroll for coverage.

This realization really hit home with the client team because, prior to interviews, they had been trained to Listen Empathically. During fieldwork, team members shared moments in their own lives when they put off doing something they knew they needed to do because they were overwhelmed and confused.

After that, the client shifted its messaging focus from the penalties of not signing up, to outreach programs to help busy, intimidated people feel more comfortable signing up. The result was one of the most successful state-run ACA programs in the country that was written up in national media as an example of how the program could work if it was run well.



CONCLUSION

So, the focus of Empathic Listening Training is to help teams connect with the Narrative Identity of their consumers and colleagues alike, to inspire innovation and facilitate collaboration that will make their brands a more meaningful part of people’s lives.

Like any skill, Empathic Listening takes time and practice to develop. But the work is worth it. Once you master the technique, you can apply Empathic Listening to a range of social interactions – both professional and personal – and reach a deeper, more human level of understanding of other people.

PARTNERS



JIM WHITE

FOUNDING PARTNER

Jim White started his professional career as a newspaper reporter and, in many ways, has never stopped thinking like a journalist. He still digs “to find the story.” He believes that good research, like good reporting, is about finding “the lead” – that single-most important insight – and conveying it in a simple yet compelling narrative.

Jim W. has 20+ years of experience in consumer insights, marketing and brand strategy. As an advocate of online qualitative research and analysis, he has been instrumental in the design and development of Aha! and analytical approaches for RealityCheck. He holds a doctorate from Northwestern University in Communications Studies and has taught courses in Communications Research Methods, the Psychology of Attitudes and Persuasion, Popular Culture and Brand Strategy.



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