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Defining the 3 Forms of Listening

The Short Definitions

Discovering directs attention outwards towards open-mindedly finding out what others believe, think or feel.

Differentiating draws attention inwards towards making sense of incoming information, sorting out whether or how it modifies the listener's previous understandings.

Determining pulls attention towards action, deciding what to do, whether and how to respond to what the listener perceives.

The Fuller explanations

Discovering is the most open form of listening. The listener's attention is directed outwards towards other people, what they are saying and how they are saying it. Attention is given. Discovering is other-focused. Engaging with others in this way entails open-mindedness, patience and concentration, overcoming the many competing demands for the listener's attention, including the distractions spontaneously generated by their feelings, reflexive reactions, thinking and self-talk. The potential benefits for the listener of listening to discover are fresh information and the opportunity to develop (or not) their relationship with the speaker and others.

Differentiating is a narrowed form of listening. The listener's attention is turning inwards, starting to work with what is being said, relating it to what the listener already thinks, feels, believes or understands. Attention is divided, between what the speaker is saying and the listener's own responses. Differentiating is understanding-focused. The benefit for the listener is improved comprehension. The relationship may also be improved, but this will depend on whether the speaker also feels themselves to be benefitting from the listener's divided attention.

Determining is the narrowest form of listening. The listener's attention is predominantly focused inwards, on making judgements, deciding about or acting upon what has been - or is being, or even is about to be - said. Attention is directed towards the listener's rather than the speaker's concerns, agenda or priorities. Determining is action (or inaction)-focused. The potential benefit for the listener is the opportunity to make up their mind privately, without actively involving others or having to reveal their own responses or intentions. But going too quickly (or lingering too long) in this very constrained form of 'listening' can leave the listener 'out of touch' not only in the currency and completeness of their understanding but also in terms of trust and trustworthiness in their relationships.

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