

Judo Listening¹

What is judo listening?

Many of us are familiar with *active listening* where the focus is on attentiveness to another person. Some of us may also be familiar with *empathic listening* where the focus is on what the other person is feeling. Judo listening builds upon these two styles of listening. It suggests that attentiveness and concern for another person's feelings will be included. Judo listening adds a focus on uncovering, clarifying and acknowledging values. Judo listening is invaluable in situations where emotions are high, and conversations may be confrontational.

Why is it called judo listening?

Judo is unlike other martial arts. In other self-defense forms, when opponents come face-to-face, the usual posture is to strike your adversary in an effort to subdue him or her. Judo practitioners however, allow their adversary to come with all their energy and instead of resisting or defending against this energy, the judo student uses the adversary's momentum to sweep and throw them. Judo uses the force and energy already present in an attack and re-directs it.

With judo listening, the focus is on disarming high emotion from another person by making sure we clearly and accurately hear and acknowledge his or her values. In judo listening we are concerned about going past the first wave of energy and emotion to name and acknowledge the values which are driving the other person's reactions.

When do you use judo listening?

Judo listening is a wonderful compilation of listening skills and can be used anytime including situations where:

- You want to show respect for the other person.
- You want to diffuse high levels of emotion.
- You want to clarify values for both yourself and the other person.

What are the benefits of judo listening?

- Lessens the confrontational level of a conflict
- Affirms both parties as logical rational people
- Focuses more on values than positions
- Promotes clearer thinking and exploration of common ground

How do you do judo listening?

Actively choose to judo listen

The purpose here is to gain understanding and to honor the other person without making the situation more confrontational or falling into a defensive posture.

¹ I developed this material after reading "From the Language of Complaint to the Language of Commitment" Kegan, Robert and Lisa Laskow Lahey. *How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work: Seven Languages for Transformation*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001. pp. 13-31.

Listen past emotion to get to the essence of the complaint

When most people come to complain about something, they are really telling us about something they *cannot* stand. As listeners, we must be able to clearly focus on the essence of the complaint, rather than just the emotion. It takes effort to get past the emotion, especially if we feel we are being attacked. Remember the focus here is to understand the central/main complaint. Note: In many situations, the first complaint out of someone's mouth is not really the issue that has him or her so emotional. Judo listening takes some patience and skillful adapting. It may take asking questions and playing some "pitch and catch" to make sure that you are understanding the real complaint.

It is important to always keep the words *understanding* and *acknowledging* in the forefront of your mind as you use judo listening. Do not dismiss or explain away the complaint or attempt to defend your position. You actually should not speak at this point.

Example 1: A parent calls complaining about the number of meetings for Confirmation preparation. She is upset because she does not like coming to the meetings. She does not understand why these meetings are necessary; when she was confirmed, her parents never had to come to meetings. (You get the picture.)

Instead of defending the current program or policy, or re-directing the attack back toward the person ("Maybe this is why your little Johnny does not like coming to church because your attitude shows..."), focus on what you hear "between the lines": this parent values her time; she likes things convenient. She does not know what is going to be asked of her in these meetings and beyond. She seems to value the simple way her Confirmation preparation was handled.

Example 2: An employee comes to you upset about the high amount of gossip in the workplace. She tells you that people are constantly running one another down with petty and snide comments. When a co-worker has issues with someone, they do not go to the person directly, but choose to talk about it with other people. Your employee feels that her work environment is charged with unnecessary drama. She believes someone should deal with the problem directly and fix this situation.

Instead of focusing on specific people or topics, listen for the deeper issue which is causing the discomfort. Remember that the employee would not be complaining about something if she did not care about something.

Shift the complaint to what is valued

Here is where judo comes in to play. Our task is to shift the emphasis from the negative (complaint) to the positive (value held). Once we have accurately named the values held, we can acknowledge the other person for seeing them as important.

Example 1 (my response): "I appreciate your concern about the number of meetings and your presence there. I know time is precious and family life is busy. While I want to make this as convenient as I can for the 100 families of this parish, I also want to help inform, prepare and discuss issues with them at a few different times throughout the

Confirmation process. I share the value of not having unnecessary time drains on anyone, including myself. I'm going to work to keep meetings effective convenient and as simple as possible to honor your time, as well as honoring the parish and diocese's requirements."

Example 2: It is clear to me you are bothered about this because you prefer open and direct communication especially here at work. You believe our office should be a positive environment where we work through challenges together and not through behind-the-back chats.

Some disclaimers:

- While people usually do appreciate having their values acknowledged, judo listening does not resolve all conflicts. I have found that eighty percent of the emotional energy or tension behind complaints seems to dissipate when I use judo listening. The practice allows more civil conversations to take place. Sometimes people just want to be heard. Judo listening helps that to take place.
- Some people will not respond to judo listening. Do not take this as a sign of failure. Remember that judo listening is a good way to honor someone else while lessening our own natural defensive reactions and the stresses which can come with confrontation and conflict.
- Just because someone names something as their highest value does not mean that you will do the same. People will not understand how you prioritize your values, nor will you understand their ordering of values. Perfect agreement rarely exists. There will be cases where you will have to agree to disagree, but it can be done agreeably. Judo listening facilitates an agreeable way to share values.
- When the conversation stalls or the person complaining remains in a high emotional state, you may have to refer them to your supervisor if this is a work situation. (Note: It is always best to alert your supervisor that such a call is coming.) In personal situations, it may be best to take a break and attempt another discussion on the issue at another time, or the parties may simply have to agree to disagree.