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The ART of INSIGHT



HOW TO HAVE
MORE AHA! MOMENTS

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Practicing Insight Listening with One Other Person

One of the most effective methods for practicing Insight Listening is to do so deliberately with one other person. In one-on-one Insight Listening, both parties are informed and fully enrolled in the process and the result is entirely different from normal conversations.

Below are some simple exercises you can practice with a friend or colleague. Video demonstrations are available on our website, TAOI Online Learning. We have found that it is generally easier to grasp the approach of TAOI when you are working with another person. On the other hand, you may find that recruiting a partner to practice with is more work than you would like to undertake right now. If this is the case, then read through the next few sections to get a sense of how these paired conversations should unfold, and then practice with an unsuspecting partner, but be sensitive to the fact that the other person isn't in on your little game.

EXERCISE:

Listening with Nothing on Your Mind

OVERVIEW

The objective of this exercise is to be present with your partner and her thinking with as little of your own thinking going on as possible.

The Art of Insight

PREPARATION

First, review with each other the purpose of the practice session, which is for the listener to listen with none of her own thinking going on to the extent possible. It helps to start out by taking a moment to discuss what the terms *insight* and *fresh thought* mean to you. This will help naturally point you toward an insightful state. Finally, you should take a moment to describe to each other what an Insight State of Mind feels like so that you will notice when it arrives. This important process serves to bait the hook and aim your unconscious mind in a productive direction.

THE EXERCISE

There are two roles (one speaker and one listener). Choose who will start out as the speaker, and have the listener monitor the time.

The speaker should take three minutes to describe a topic he is interested in. It can be something he is excited about, like his daughter's soccer game, or something he's recently enjoyed, like a movie or a new restaurant. For this exercise, it's best not to use a problem that is inherently mood lowering. Instead, the speaker should focus on a current business or personal issue on which he would like an insight. The listener should listen with nothing on her mind. That is to say, whenever the listener has an old thought or association about the topic being described, she should drop that thought and return to Insight Listening. For the most part, the listener should stay quiet, both verbally and mentally. Many people find this to be a challenge.

It is important that both partners keep their fingers on the pulse of the feeling of the conversation. If it drifts away from a good feeling, one of them should mention this so they can find their way back.

After the three minutes is up, take a few minutes for the listener to answer the following:

- What was that like? How did it feel?
- How much of the time were you able to remain mentally quiet?
- If you got caught up in your own thoughts, what happened? How did you find your way back (if you did)?

Occasionally during this exercise, you may encounter an awkward silence. Don't be discouraged; this is common the first time around! Soon you'll notice that the pauses encourage Insight Listening and allow space for fresh thoughts to arrive.

Switch roles so that you each get a chance to play both roles. By the end, you should have a better handle on listening with nothing on your mind. As you progress through the rest of the exercises we share with you in this chapter, you will find this getting easier.

Distractions and Dropping Thoughts

Almost inevitably at some point, you will notice yourself having a conversation in your head. When this happens, try to set it aside and return to empty-mindedness. These internal

conversations interfere with the occurrence of insight. It's easy to get carried away by a fresh thought and go off on your own line of thinking. If you catch yourself doing this, stop and go back to listening with nothing on your mind. This may seem and often is challenging, yet we do it all the time. Imagine you are in the middle of a horrendous fight with someone when the phone rings. Are you going to pick up the phone and fight with whoever is on the line? Of course not. You switch your thinking; it's both automatic and unconscious. Another example of this might be if you've just finished a troublesome phone call. Your adrenaline is still pumping and you are distraught. Perhaps you've hung up furious at the caller. With your next appointment waiting in the hall, you might take a minute, breathe deeply, and settle down. When you start your meeting, you might even mention how wound up you are and excuse yourself for being a bit distracted at the moment.

One manager, in the middle of a very ugly lawsuit, found himself incessantly stewing over the suit, furious at what the other party was doing and concerned with how he was going to defend himself and retaliate. On his morning walk, he noticed that he was boiling again about the lawsuit and annoyed at how it had taken over his thinking. He consciously pushed all thoughts of the suit out of his mind and committed himself to not ruining his walk by agonizing over it. Not two minutes later, he was completely consumed by these thoughts again. He recommitted to dropping all thoughts about the suit, but a few minutes later, he was caught up once again. This pattern continued for a while, and each time he would redouble his efforts, trying not to be seduced by the dialogue going on in his head.

Then something odd happened. He was enjoying himself and the glorious nature around him on his walk. It had been twenty minutes or more since he had thought about the lawsuit.

To this day, he is not clear about what specifically happened in his thinking. The unwanted thinking probably wasn't banished, but at the same time, small moments of clarity were slowly finding a beachhead, expanding at each iteration. Whatever the case, his disciplined practice seemed to be a factor. Each moment of clarity enabled him to remember that equanimity was possible, even if only fleeting. From then on, even though thoughts of the lawsuit frequently returned, they no longer gripped his thinking in the same way. Years after this occurrence, this man still gets caught up in thought storms on occasion, but he knows that they are by their very nature temporary, and so he is no longer imprisoned by them.

Incidentally, bad thoughts are not the only thing that can be distracting. Our friend Terry Ann describes how fresh thoughts can derail you as well.

My inclination can be to get swept up with fresh thoughts, even when I'm really trying to listen and be totally present in a conversation. This phenomenon is more clear and less problematic when I'm walking along the river by myself or peacefully listening to an audiobook. Suddenly, I've checked out of the book as thoughts tumble one after another into my mind. They're usually new thoughts and are relevant to something I have been thinking about, and while this is a good thing, I don't hear the book anymore,

The Art of Insight

even though it's still playing in my headphones. When the thoughts stop, I check back into the book, and I have to rewind because I have heard nothing. When I'm on my own, this is exciting and great, but when it happens in a conversation, it is not necessarily so.

Be alert to what you allow yourself to take in with your listening. You don't have to "do" Insight Listening as much as you step back and let it occur without interfering with it. It's like lying on the beach with nothing in particular on your mind and then something comes along that distracts you. If you get upset about being distracted, the distraction will grow, and you will wind up in a messy conversation with yourself about the distraction. Your other option is to wave as it passes by and return to your beautiful day at the beach, blissfully present.

EXERCISE:

Fresh Thought Hunt

OVERVIEW

You may be wondering when you get to listen for insights. Soon, we promise, but there's one last thing we'd like to cover: learning to listen for fresh thoughts. In this exercise, don't worry about whether you are having an insight or not. Just get familiar with noticing the arrival of fresh thoughts. The insights will take care of themselves. If you are focused on trying to create an insight, you are actually working your mind, and this will interfere with insight generation.

Instead, get comfortable with inviting fresh thoughts in. Odds are that one of them will be an insight. The better you get at pointing your awareness in the direction of freshness and the unknown, the more likely you will hear the insight when it arrives. Video demonstrations are available on our website, TAOI Online Learning.

Listening for fresh thoughts has a certain intentionality to it, but it is not hard work like most conscious actions. It's more akin to reading a book, watching a play, or listening to music.

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PREPARATION

In this exercise, you will practice with a partner, listening for fresh thoughts. First, go over the ground rules and be clear on the purpose of the practice session, which is to generate as many fresh thoughts as possible and to notice the feeling that accompanies each when it arrives. It's a good idea to take a moment to discuss what the terms *insight* and *fresh thought* mean to you. This naturally steers you toward an insightful state. Finally, take a moment to describe to each other what an Insight State of Mind feels like so that you will notice when it arrives.

THE EXERCISE

There are two roles (one speaker and one listener). Choose who will start out as the speaker, and have the listener monitor the time.

Part 1

The speaker should describe to the listener a current business or personal issue on which he would like an insight. Take *only two minutes* to describe the situation; more time than this will get in the way. While the listener listens, she should do so with nothing on her mind. That is to say, whenever an old thought or association about the topic arises, it should be dropped, and the listener should return to Insight Listening.

Part 2

At this point, the speaker will go on a Fresh Thought Hunt. For three minutes, the speaker, to the best of his ability, should voice *only* fresh thoughts about the situation as they arise. This generally means that there will be lengthy pauses, followed by short phrases. This may feel a bit unusual as the cadence will be nothing like a normal conversation. Still, the speaker ground rules are simple: you are either voicing a fresh thought on the topic, or you are listening with nothing on your mind, looking for a thought that you have never had before.

During part 2, the listener should listen with nothing on her mind and notice when something strikes her as fresh. It might be something the speaker has said, but it might also be something that *she* has never thought before. In either case, a mental note should be made that something fresh happened. If something the speaker says strikes the listener as fresh, she might acknowledge it out loud (“Wow, that sounded really fresh”). This can help encourage the speaker, but for the most part, the listener should remain silent.

It is important that both partners keep their fingers on the pulse of the feeling of the conversation so that when it drifts away from a good feeling, one of them can mention this and they can find their way back.

Part 3

Once the speaker has concluded his three-minute Fresh Thought Hunt, together the partners should talk about what that experience was like. Both the speaker and the listener should share the items that they felt were fresh thoughts.

The three parts form one complete round of a Fresh Thought Hunt. If you like, at this point you can switch roles and repeat the exercise.

KEEP IN MIND

By the end of this exercise, you should have a pretty good idea of what a fresh thought feels like, and you should have further developed your ability to listen with nothing on your mind. Here's how it might look: You are listening to the speaker with nothing on your mind and feeling quiet, passive, reflective, and uncritical. You will likely enjoy what he has to say. When he says something fresh, you will feel it. It may not be an insight but if it is new for either of you, you will at least notice a difference from typical thought. Something behind what is being said will affect you. At this point, you will feel a pull to start actively thinking about what has just been said; avoid this and return to a quiet mind. Once again a fresh thought will appear, and you will get impacted. This will continue for

the duration of the exercise, and at some point, one of you may have a genuine insight.

EXERCISE:

Coaching for Fresh Thoughts and Insights

OVERVIEW

This exercise builds on the previous two and has two objectives. The first is for the speaker to have some fresh thoughts about something he is interested in. The second is for the listener to learn to coach and otherwise help the speaker have more fresh thoughts. Watch a video demonstration on our website, TAOI Learning Online.

PREPARATION

In this exercise, you will practice with a partner once again, this time listening for fresh thoughts and coaching for fresh thoughts. First, go over the ground rules and be clear on the purpose of the practice session. Also, before you begin, take a moment to describe to each other what an Insight State of Mind feels like so that you will notice when it arrives.

THE EXERCISE

There are two roles (one speaker and one listener). Choose who will start out as the speaker and have the listener monitor the time.

Part 1

The speaker should take two minutes to describe something he would like some fresh thought on or insight into.

The listener should listen with nothing on her mind. This sets the stage.

Part 2

The speaker now has four minutes to go on a Fresh Thought Hunt to look more deeply into what he wants. The listener will be the speaker's coach. She will again be listening with nothing on her mind as best she can.

The two parts form one complete round of the Coaching for Fresh Thoughts and Insights exercise. If you like, at this point you can switch roles and repeat the exercise.

KEEP IN MIND

Above all, when you're the listener/coach, you want to maintain rapport and be very careful of anything that feels confronting or that might add any sort of pressure on the speaker. You want to encourage the speaker to discover a new, fresh perspective on his desires. It's quite okay to ask questions about the speaker's thinking ("Was that a memory or a fresh thought?"), and it's also helpful to acknowledge when something the speaker says strikes you as fresh. You can offer a thought if it is truly fresh, but generally, coaching should be used sparingly.

Stay away from questions about the content or the specifics of the situation. Getting consumed in the content of the speaker's words will impede your ability to be helpful and spark insights. You may have been able to recite all the facts he had given you, and you may even be able to give him some advice or even your best answer for the situation, but there likely would have been no insight.

Don't screen the speaker's words with your intellect, or else you will screen the feeling out and probably the insights along with it. The practice of Insight Listening requires tuning in to what lies beyond the speaker's words. What is he really communicating? The feeling of the conversation is as important as its content.

Do not offer anything that remotely resembles advice. Do not try to solve the speaker's problem or offer solutions of your own, no matter how good your idea may be. You can do that after the exercise is over. When you try to solve a problem, more often than not, you are consciously accessing memory and trying to fit pieces together. Perhaps more importantly, you are working within the framing your partner has provided you. You want to avoid that kind of limit. You might end up offering a fresh thought that's out of left field and seemingly irrelevant, but it might be just the thing that triggers an important insight in your partner.

You may need to gently interrupt the speaker if he goes off on a memory-based thought train. You might say something like, "Pause for just a second, Jim." Here are other phrases you might find helpful: "Give me another fresh thought about that." "What's another way of looking at this?" "What's a question you have about that?" "I'm wondering what you are thinking right now." And our personal favorite: "If you weren't thinking whatever you're thinking right now, what would you be thinking?"

Even though you are not deliberately listening to the content, you will often realize that the speaker has related certain facts that seem at odds with each other. If you gently ask about the contradiction, he too may see the discrepancy,

which may be at the root of his inability to find a solution. Often the challenge is not in the reality of the situation but in how it's being thought of. Or you may pick up on what seems to you to be a missing piece to the puzzle, and by mentioning the missing piece, the speaker can make new connections and follow a fresh train of thought.

Imagine for a moment that you are the listener/coach and your partner is a few minutes into reporting the details of his situation. As he is describing the complexity that makes the problem hard to solve, you listen without paying close attention to the details or content. Instead of the content of his description, what registers inside you is his frustration. When you mention this fact, your partner feels somehow relieved. He says, "Gee, that's right. Thanks for seeing that." The rapport between you increases, and his mind settles down. The subject of the conversation has actually changed. The listener might ask, "Well, what do you think about that frustration?" Hopefully, something will occur to the speaker that mitigates his frustration, and if you're lucky, he may have a lasting insight into his original problem.

The amount of conversation management depends very much on the context and aim of the conversation. When listening this way with his children, one colleague sits down, connects, and listens deeply for whatever comes to him. To the extent that he has an agenda, it's only to be with the children, not to look for an insight. When he's on a business call with a client who has a specific problem, then the goal is absolutely to look for an insight. Listening with that in mind, he will frame the conversation and question based on whatever feels fresh and relevant in that moment.

Trio Exercise

Working with Others Is Powerful

Hunting for insights with more than one person is particularly effective. Fresh thought from multiple perspectives can help free us when we have become too familiar with an issue.

EXERCISE:

Working as a Trio

OVERVIEW

One of the most popular exercises we use with our clients involves two people helping a third have insights into a problem or topic of interest. This is not unlike the Insight Listening exercise from chapter 3 with one other person, except that you will have twice the minds on the job and a very different overall dynamic. An illustration can be found on our website, TAOI Online Learning.

The Art of Insight

PREPARATION

Find two people who are interested in helping you have an insight on a particular issue. While preferable, it is not necessary that the participants have knowledge or training in Insight Thinking. You may be surprised to learn that it is generally better if the two people do not know much about the topic that you are bringing to the table.

Begin by describing what an insight is to you and what your Insight State of Mind feels like. All the three participants should engage in this conversation, trying to speak with fresh thoughts and staying in a quiet mind. Don't describe a moment of insight that you have thought about dozens of times before. Do mention any thought that feels new and fresh.

THE EXERCISE

There are two roles (one speaker and two listeners). Have one of the listeners monitor the time, or set an alarm using a watch or phone.

Part 1

The speaker describes his issue in sixty seconds or less while the other two people listen quietly. They should remain completely silent and refrain from asking any questions. For part 1 of this exercise, the listeners face their chairs toward the speaker, as shown in figure 1.

Part 2

Once the sixty seconds is up or the speaker has finished (whichever comes first), the listeners should swivel their

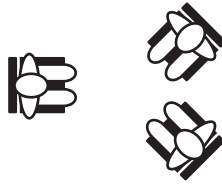


Figure 1 Listeners face speaker

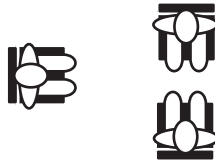


Figure 2 Listeners face each other

chairs to face each other (preferably with the speaker out of their line of sight) as shown in figure 2.

The listeners in this part should be looking for a good feeling, not barking out the first thought that comes to mind. In fact, the period allotted for sharing fresh thoughts begins in a silence that lasts until a light bulb flashes for one of the participants.

Now, begin to reflect on the topic that was just described. Similar to the two-person exercise from chapter 3, the purpose here is to spend five minutes sharing only fresh thoughts on the subject. Each time either listener has a truly fresh thought on the subject, she shares it with the other listener while being “overheard” by the speaker.

Remember that the purpose is neither to solve the problem nor to give advice, both of which will bring everyone back to memory thinking. It is rather to generate fresh thought around the subject and help facilitate an insight in the speaker. If a memory thought must be spoken to get it out of the way, identify it as you speak it, and then move back into fresh thoughts.

The speaker, throughout this part of the exercise, sits aside. His instinct will be to analyze, correct, or dismiss what the others are saying, but instead, the speaker must remain quiet and look for fresh thoughts and insights, perhaps jotting down on a notepad the thoughts that seem particularly fresh.

The speaker must be careful not to judge the listeners based on their lack of knowledge or experience in the subject. People with a lifetime of relevant experience often have profound insights into their business based on a simple remark from someone in a completely unrelated field of expertise.

Part 3

After the listeners have spent five minutes sharing their fresh thoughts on the subject, the speaker may step back into the mix and comment on the experience.

The speaker should now take two minutes or less to report any new insights that may have occurred during the exercise and comment on what it was like listening to the others discuss the topic using only fresh thinking.

After the speaker has described his experience, the listeners should join the conversation and describe what the experience was like for them. In this last part, everyone should continue to speak only from fresh thoughts and avoid giving advice, and the speaker should talk only around 10 percent of the time. The tendency will be for the speaker to talk as much if not more than the two listeners, but this should be avoided to get the best value from the exercise.

The three parts form one complete round of the trio exercise. If you like, at this point you can switch the role of speaker and repeat the exercise using a new topic.

KEEP IN MIND

This exercise works wonderfully when people follow the structure closely. By offering a very brief description of the problem (perhaps even in thirty seconds instead of sixty) and then stepping aside, the speaker should be able to remove himself from a setting where in most cases he would be inclined to hijack the discussion. When we hear people talking about something that we have a stake in or consider personal, our tendency is to jump in and correct the line of thinking by guiding it back toward the direction we originally had in mind. As soon as we start leading the conversation, listeners are inclined to follow and the result is that everyone gets on the same page, curtailing the likelihood of anything fresh!
