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“Thinking Where Words are Still Missing”: Radical Listening as a Tool to Promote Creative Thinking and Interactional Self-Reliance

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Momo’s talent for listening

... what Momo was better at than anyone else was listening.

Anyone can listen, you may say — what’s so special about that? — but you’d be wrong. Very few people know how to listen properly, and Momo’s way of listening was quite unique.

She listened in a way that made slow-witted people have flashes of inspiration. It wasn’t that she actually said anything or asked questions that put such ideas into their heads. She simply sat there and listened with the upmost attention and sympathy, fixing them with her big, dark eyes, and they suddenly became aware of ideas whose existence they had never suspected.

Momo could listen in such a way that worried and indecisive people knew their own minds from one moment to the next, or shy people felt suddenly confident and at ease, or down-hearted people felt happy and hopeful. And if someone felt that his life had been an utter failure, and that he himself was only one among millions of wholly unimportant people who could be replaced as easily as broken windowpanes, he would go and pour out his heart to Momo. And, even as he spoke, he would come to realize by some mysterious means that he was absolutely wrong: that there was only one person like himself in the whole world, and that, consequently, he mattered to the world in his own particular way.

Such was Momo’s talent for listening.

Michael Ende. *Momo*
Translated by J. Maxwell Brownjohn

Radical Listening: listening with the intention to be a vessel for your partner, to be a sympathetic witness so that unspoken meaning may have room to find words. Radical listening encourages both speaker and listener to reside in the moment non-judgmentally.

Listener's role

- Wish to be helpful
- Quiet your mind and heart
- Hold the space for the speaker
- Express your attentiveness non-verbally
- Note the speaker's non-verbal communications
- Write down loaded words and phrases exactly as they come
- If the speaker does not speak, listen encouragingly to their silence
- If and when asked to help, try one of the following:
 - reflect to the speaker his/her exact own words any loaded words, phrases or even nonverbal communication that seems appropriate right now
 - encourage the speaker to express the issue in different words
 - encourage the speaker to stay with the "stuckness" and observe what comes up
- Refrain from making any comments, interpretations, comparisons, suggestions, etc.

At the end of the session, hand your notes to the speaker

Speaker's role

- Describe an issue, conundrum, situation, conflict, concern, etc. in your professional life
- Use fresh words to describe the issue
- Pay close attention to "loaded" phrases, i.e. words or phrases that trigger bodily sensations, rapid associations, or/and emotions
- Be patient and attentive when words are missing
- When words are missing or if you feel "stuck", you may try one of the following:
 - express the same issue in different words
 - pay close attention to your bodily sensation and express what is happening
 - ask your listener for help

Confidentiality

- All that is spoken in radical listening sessions is confidential
- The moment and the speaker are vulnerable and sacred
- Words spoken by speaker belong only to the speaker
- Further explication of any content from the radical listening session may only take place if initiated by the speaker