

ADVENTURES IN BEHAVIOUR CHANGE - RALPH CAMPBELL

(Katie Elliott & Ralph Campbell)

Ralph Campbell has spent more than 25 years in leadership consulting, diversity awareness training and youth mentoring. He is passionate in his belief that all individuals have the capacity to be leaders and has dedicated himself to extensive research and training in the field of performance enhancement.

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Welcome Ralph Campbell. It's wonderful to be with you today.

It's wonderful to be with you too, Katie.

And welcome back - so we had an attempt at recording a podcast a little while ago before COVID, before the world changed, and for technical reasons, it didn't quite happen. So we find ourselves back here again, but I'm so pleased that we get to talk a second time.

I know, it's been months, I'm honoured to be back.

And I feel like we'll talk about similar things, but maybe in a slightly different way, because things look different now.

Very different.

We were talking before a little bit about the work that you do around assumptions and listening. And it strikes me that right now, listening is a very precious, transformative act in the world. I'd love to know a bit more about your work around listening. What is it that you do?

I've been fascinated with leadership all my life. And so I'm an executive coach. I coach people to follow their dreams and to have what matters most to them. And one of the first frameworks that we begin with when I coach high growth individuals and high growth organisations, it's the art of, mastering the art of listening. I've been fascinated all my life about listening because I was a horrible listener growing up. So I learned the hard way, you know, failing classes and having my mother come to my school to discipline me. And it was not because I wasn't smart at my work, it was that I wasn't a good listener. And so by the time I got to college, I decided to start working on how I listen. And I've been working on that for the past 30 years.

30 years of exploring the art of listening. Wow. I really want to know, what have you

learned - tell us?

Oh man. Well, I've learned a lot of things, but I'm just going to share a few nuggets that were my most valuable. One: human beings listen faster than we speak. There's a lot of data to support this argument that we actually listen three times, up to four times faster than people actually speak. Most humans speak between 125 to 175 words a minute. Our brains are able to process information and listen to almost up to 600 words a minute. So what does that mean? What that means is that we have a good chunk of time where our brains are wandering. We're bored. We're not listening. And so that's not that you're a bad person. That means someone never taught us what's happening in our brains, on how we process information, from a listening perspective, faster than we speak. And so what that happens is you have a gap. And so when I became aware that there's a gap, then I really got clear there's nothing wrong with me, that I get to slow down my brain and practise being more aware because the brain - because it listens so fast - it tends to wander and jump to something else, if it can pick up the pattern of what it thinks you're saying. And so that's the first thing, we listen faster than we speak. The second thing is that most human beings have this built-in default that I call 'already always listening'. Before I'm listening to you I already am thinking about what you're going to say. And it's always there already, always there. And it's based on my past conversation with you, or if you remind me of somebody, or if you symbolise something to me - all of us have what we call an 'already, always listening'. And that is very, very helpful because the brain wants to be efficient. And so what the brain is doing is, "Oh, I already know what Katie's going to say, so let me respond". But you, as the person speaking, oftentimes that may not feel good because you're being cut off. Or if you've noticed people nod their head or like my mother - sorry, mom - she'll say, "Yeah, yes. I got that. Yes. I got that." Well, I haven't finished my sentence. And most of the time, Katie, she's a hundred percent accurate about what I'm sharing because she's my mom. She has an 'already always listening' of me. So for me, that's fine. But can you imagine in a business meeting, in a business setting, when you're working on teams and you're starting to make all these assumptions and guesses? You're not really listening. And so those are the two nuggets. One: we listen faster than we speak. So slow down. Slow is fast - fast is slow. Then number two: notice you're already always listening. So when you see someone, suspend the judgment you have, suspend what you think they're going to say and just listen.

Oh, that made me laugh. Partly because I'm really enjoying what you're saying and partly because now I'm in a kind of state of meta-listening. So I'm thinking about what you're saying and then I'm paying attention to my listening as I'm listening to you and the whole thing's getting really confusing. Um, I love what you said about your mum being pretty much right about what you're gonna say, but isn't it true that even if somebody is right about what we're going to say, it still feels better not to have people kind of jump in, even if they are spot on?

It does feel better because people feel listened to, right? When people feel listened to, they feel acknowledged, right? And we have that in the world today where people are, they don't feel listened to. They don't feel seen or heard. And so, yeah, that can have a negative effect.

Sometimes people don't mind it, but that's because we've already made agreements. We've already made agreements with each other that, "Hey, we've been married for 15 years or we're best friends". You know, best friend often brag about, "We finish each other's sentences", but that's the minority. And oftentimes we take those relationships and we think we can just transfer them to everyday life. And it really doesn't work that way. And so slow is fast, fast is slow - and it really takes a concerted effort to stay present and be curious, even if you know you have the right answer. That's not listening, that's ego and it doesn't add to the relationship.

Well with that in mind, what do you know about types of listening that do add to the relationship? What helps us to feel closer and feel more connected to one another?

Yeah. You know I have a framework and I call the Five Levels of Listening and I'm going to go through it very, very quickly. There are five steps to listening and as you go up the steps, you can practise becoming a better listener. And the first level of listening is level one. That's when we are Ignoring: where someone's talking and you haven't heard a single word. You're listening to respond, you're totally ignoring them. Level two is Pretending. You start off listening, but it sparks your thinking about something else and you miss everything else. That happens to me sometimes, where I'm listening, I'm so curious about what you're saying, and then you triggered me - because the brain listens for pattern recognition. Again, understanding the brain and how the brain works is very important to listening, and I do a lot of workshops on neuroscience. So we start off listening, but then we think about something else. And then we're going back and forth - we're like multitasking with our listening. And as you know, Katie, multitasking doesn't work. The data is overwhelming, but we still believe it does. And people that multitask less are more productive. And so those studies are out there and there's millions of them, but same thing with listening, we try to multitask and listen, and that doesn't work. Then we have level three, that's called Selective Listening, and that's where most of us fall. Most of the time you're fully engaged in the conversation, but you're waiting for a gap. So you can jump in with your comments. So you're really, really excited. You're in the conversation and you can't wait for Katie to just close her mouth and you jump in like you need to respond. And oftentimes you already have this response prerecorded based on what was said. So you're missing probably half of the conversation because you're just waiting to get your, what we say, your two cents in. And a lot of us fall there. And then number four, the fourth step of listening is Attentive Listening. And this is one of the higher ones where I try to practise most of the time and it's called Attentive Listening. You're listening to everything that people are saying, but you're interpreting it through the lens of what it means in your world. So you're hearing what I say, but you're filtering it through where you live, through your culture, through your language, through your customs, through your religion, through your life experience. There's nothing bad with that except - what if my world and your world are radically different? We're going to have two different interpretations. You're going to hear one story based on your world. And I'm sharing another story. If you think about the world that we're living in now with systemic racism and institutionalised racism, we have two worlds oftentimes where people aren't understanding the other people's culture. And so that causes obviously conflict and where people aren't actually listening. So I coach people on

what we call collective empathy. So collective empathy is slowing down and imagining and working hard to live in someone else's experience. Although we can't, 'cause you're not Ralph and Ralph's not Katie. However, I can step inside your world in the UK and ask a lot of questions and ask a lot of questions and ask a lot of questions. And we know from neuroscience that we actually can begin to have the same type of neural processing when we connect to another human being. So the data tells us, and the science tells us, we actually can experience someone else's experience. We don't physically have to be there. We can actually experience each other if we begin to ask questions and allow ourselves to step inside their world. So that's the most popular one that I work on, obviously, where I really want to be is level five, Empathetic Listening. And that means you're listening without applying the filters of your own experiences, judgements, values, or needs. And you are totally focused on understanding what it means to be in their world. So it's very similar to Attentive Listening. With Attentive Listening you're listening from your world, now with Empathetic Listening, you're going, "Okay, I'm suspending my history, my judgements, my opinions on whatever the topic we're talking about or whatever you're upset is that you want to share". And I'm totally going, "I want to know what it was like for you in your world", and your focus is on understanding and understanding comes from being curious. And I can't harp this enough, asking a lot of questions so that you understand. You know, Stephen Covey had a book years ago, 30 years ago, The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, Katie, it's just celebrated its 30th anniversary, and his fifth habit was Seek First to Understand. So those are the five levels of listening. Hopefully I didn't complicate everybody, but it's in steps.

Wow. They all feel so familiar in different ways. I'd like to say that I just hang out in five, but, but clearly not. But I just wanted to share with you, I had a listening experience the other day, which feels like it relates to those higher levels of listening, which was really profound. I was in a group of people and we were invited to listen to a piece of music together. And then afterwards in pairs, we got to tell another person what came up for us when we were listening to that piece of music. And then we got to listen to the piece of music again, but from the perspective of what the person had told us about their experience. And I've listened to a lot of music in my life, but there was something about holding someone else's experience that they'd been kind enough to share with me whilst listening to this piece of music and their interpretation and their feelings were so different from mine, but it brought this incredible richness. And I felt really connected with someone that I met just a few minutes before. It was profound.

That will be level five listening.

And I'm wondering, have you got any tips for us? How do we get better at all of this? Cause we can see the benefits of learning to listen more deeply, but, but how do we develop those skills?

You know, for me, it's about honouring another person's dignity. And what I've found is when people feel their dignity is being honoured, it's a lot easier for you to be a better

listener of that person. And I'll give you the definition of dignity. Dignity is our inherent value and worth. When we listen from 'the other person is valuable and worthy', we become better listeners. And oftentimes we don't treat each other with dignity and that happens implicitly, unconsciously, but when we do, we're able to become better listeners. And I follow the work by a woman by the name of Dr. Donna Hicks out of Harvard Medical. And she is an international conflict resolution specialist. I mean, she's been in Israel and she's been in Northern Ireland and Sri Lanka, and so she has really worked on supporting people resolve conflict. And what her data tells us after thirty years is that there's ten steps of dignity violations. And so in any time human being feels that their dignity is being violated, it's really hard for us to listen to that person because that causes conflict. So I won't go through all ten, but I'll give you a few. You know, when you're listening to people, give people the benefit of the doubt. If you can listen from 'I'm going to give you the benefit of the doubt', you'll be a better listener. Oftentimes we listen from skepticism. We listen from, 'I don't trust you'. Then you're not listening. You're on level one or level two. Listen from, 'I see you'. You know, 'How are you?' not, 'What do you do for a living?' but 'Where are you from? Tell me about your past.' Very different questions. When you have those type of questions, we tend to be better listeners versus being judge and jury of what someone does for a living. The other is 'recognise people', you know, recognise when you're in relationship when people do things good or unique, recognise them. By focusing out on other people, we become better listeners. We become horrible listeners when we're internally focused. When you're stuck on yourself and you don't know it, you're saying I a lot - first person singular. I always coach people saying, "Hey, I want you to say first person plural. We, we, we!" And then the last thing is, make people feel included. When you are speaking to people and they feel included, you become a better listener. Include people in your conversation and that comes to the ability to ask beautiful questions. And so benefit of the doubt, recognise people, acknowledge people and include people, include people in your conversation. And if you're doing that - you notice all of these acts are externally focused, Katie, they're not internally focused - bad listening comes from 'me, myself and I', good listening comes from 'we, them and they'.

This is so helpful for me. Thank you, Ralph. I find myself wondering, as you've improved your listening, as you've developed this skill over the thirty years that you've been exploring it, what's changed for you - because it must have had some impact?

For me, what's changed is relationships. I found that when I began to be a better listener, I did much better in my career. I spent twenty-five years in the insurance business - I was selling insurance. When I was a horrible listener, I didn't do well! And when I started working on my listening, I became one of the top reps in my company. I went on to run a big insurance agency. And now of course I coach listening for a living. So I'm still a student of it. There's days where I'm at a one or two, you know, this isn't a binary, this isn't a hundred metre dash, this is a journey. And the one thing about listening is, listening is like a mountain without a top. If you're a student of listening, you can't get to the top of the mountain. It's all a journey, it's being present in the moment. And so that's what I've continued to practise. How do I create relationship? How do I find common ground? And when I operate from there, my judgements, my opinions, my evaluations, all of this

unconscious bias that comes up for all of us oftentimes seems to disappear because, again, I'm leaving myself and my ego and I'm focusing on other people.

And that question of unconscious bias, which I know we talked about when we chatted before - it strikes me from what you're saying, that if we're really present with someone, if we're really curious about someone, that can help us go some way to kind of pushing aside the assumptions that we're making. Is there more that you can say about that?

Yeah. There's a body of work by a woman - I keep citing people because I love citing people - her name is Lisa Feldman Barrett, and she's at Northeastern University, she's a neuroscientist. And she talks about the brain and she says, the brain is predictive, it's not reactive. Now, Katie, I was taught cause-effect: you touch me, I touch you. You yell at me, I yell at you, right? Cause-effect. And she says, well, from the psychological perspective, that's what happens, cause-effect. But she said, what's happening inside of our brains - these 86 billion neurons - is that the brain is predicting what it should do. And so our brains make predictions. Think about walking across the street. I know in America we drive really fast. And so you already know - I was taught, growing up, look to the left, look to the right, look to the left again. So it's unconscious, right? It's an unconscious act that I do every day. I wake up, I brush my teeth. There's certain routines we do unconsciously. Also when we're around certain people, our brain gives us predictions of what to do. Certain people you'll hug, certain people you'll just shake their hand, right? Certain people, you'll smile. Someone smiles at you, maybe you'll smile back. And that's because you've seen that or you've learned that in the past: your mom taught you that, or society taught you that growing up, this is how you talk to adults. These are all predictions. And so what you do today is what you've learned in the past. And she calls that the predictive brain. So most of what we do, we're making predictions. And guess what? When we talk about unconscious bias and implicit bias, they're all predictions. They're largely unconscious - up to 90, 95% - we're operating unconsciously. So there's nothing wrong inherently with implicit bias because you're not aware - it's understanding where it comes from. It comes from the past. You picked it up through mom, dad through your culture, through language, through school, through boyfriend, through all of life experiences. We pick up every day forms of implicit bias. The challenge is, when I discover a blind spot, which is the same thing as implicit bias, do I have the courage and vulnerability to confront my blind spot when it no longer serves me? A lot of implicit bias serves people. My implicit bias is that all human beings are equal. I don't have to think about it. It's implicit bias. Ooh. Now it's explicit. Obviously I'm joking. But I was raised that all people were equal. It was like automatic for me because of how I was raised. So the brain is predictive and it just picks up these historical patterns and then when it's triggered, it gives you what you taught it. And what's happened is people haven't understood that the brain is just making guesses and predicting. People weren't born to hate, you're not born a bigot - you pick that mindset up. You pick those sets of belief up. They've been passed down to you consciously or unconsciously. And now we're at a reckoning: well, now that I know I have this bias, am I going to do something about it and learn? And does it serve me? If it doesn't serve me and I'm saying something that's hurtful and hateful to a group of people, then I get to challenge my assumptions and challenge my beliefs once it's brought to my attention and then create

a new prediction on how to be with other people. People come to me all the time, how do we reduce racism? How do we reduce these cultural biases we all have? And the easy answer - easy answer, not always easy to do - hang out, meet people that are different from you, have different cultures. Learn about the culture, learn about their history, learn about them as a human being. What your brain will begin to do, your brain will begin to create new predictions about that person. So if you want to reduce bias that you had, that's built into every human being, you get to meet people that are different from you. It will cause you or force you to create different predictions. So next time you see a person, you have an experience of that person - guess what? Your brain gives you a new prediction. So it's called a predictive brain. I didn't want to confuse you there, but that's another framework that I coach people about.

That's so beautiful. So: curiosity, being with one another, paying attention, treating one another with dignity, really listening. All of these things are at the heart of learning to be more present and more human together.

As you know, Ralph, I always like to ask my guest for the day, if they can share a Little Challenge. I wondered, do you have a Little Challenge that we could try? Something we could be doing at home?

Yeah. I have a wonderful challenge. And the challenge is called the Core Four. Every morning, you wake up, you want to create your Core Four things: that are you-driven, that inspire you, that support your self-care. And so create four things. For me, my core four: one is I meditate when I wake up; I journal, I have a five minute journal; I read 30 to 45 minutes when I wake up; then I exercise 45 minutes to an hour when I wake up as well. So that's my Core Four and I try not to miss any day and if I do, usually I'll miss just one. So my challenge is, your listeners create your Core Four, and do that Core Four for at least fourteen days straight. And I promise you, you will see benefits in regards to how you think, how you sleep, you will have increased self-awareness and, because you're calming your brain down and you're producing those positive, happy chemicals, you will become a better listener.

I love that. Thank you so much, Ralph. And if people would like to know more about what you do and where they can find you, where's the best place to go?

Yeah. I have two companies. I'm excited to share this with you. My first company is called Learning Optimized and you can find about the work that I do. And the second company is called Cocelerate.com and we do a lot of webinars on listening and the neuroscience behind leadership. And so those are my two companies where people can find me. I'm also on LinkedIn and Twitter and you can just Google 'Ralph Campbell'.

Ralph, thank you so much for being with me today. I'm so glad that we got a second shot at this and it's always an absolute pleasure to talk with you. I hope we get to talk again soon.

Katie, thank you. And I wanna appreciate you - all the work that you've done. I've been watching you on social media and I'm amazed by how you're bringing people together of all walks of life and really making a difference in our world. So I wanna appreciate you.

Thank you so much.