Conflict Resolution Month 2023 Listening Prompts

Drawn from / inspired by *Listen Like You Mean It* by Ximena Vengoechea

1. **BODY SCAN:** Check in with your body to bring awareness to any tension. Breathe into those spaces to release and relax. What is your body telling you? Center yourself with a body scan.

2. **CURIOSITY IN DIALOGUE:** The next time you are in dialogue, notice how you show up. Are you tempted to change the conversation (pivoting); find ways to not engage (distractor); physically or mentally check out (withdrawer); or seek understanding of the other’s experience (explorer)? Consider what is driving that behavior.

3. **DEEPEN CONVERSATION:** Try one of the following methods to take your conversation to the next level (by giving your undivided attention):
   - **Remove devices from view.** Even phones not in use, just sitting on the table, can lead to a sense of disconnection from the person you are engaging with. Try putting your phone away to show your dedication to and presence in the conversation.
   - **Choose a good environment.** Noisy restaurants, TV screens, kids and pets all can cause unintended distractions and interruptions. By intentionally choosing places, you can limit the distractions and focus wholeheartedly on the conversation.

4. **LEVELS OF LISTENING:** Listening can be elevated beyond the words we hear. Consider not only what is said, but what is meant and what is felt. The literal, subtext and emotion of a conversation are all important contributors to open and honest communication. Push yourself to move beyond surface listening to practice empathetic listening.

5. **PRACTICE PRESENCE:** Staying present in conversation requires self-awareness, trust and patience. Think about the things that help you stay present (or that you know distract you). Through awareness, you can create more opportunities to connect with your conversation partner and remain engaged in conversation.
6. BODY LANGUAGE: What is your body communicating in conversation? Listen to, and notice what your physical presence is communicating to you, and those you are in conversation with. Receptive posture (arms open, uncrossed or outstretched; feet facing conversation partner; regular eye contact) communicates an openness to conversation. Protective postures (arms crossed; feet pointing toward an exit; minimal eye contact) can signal disinterest, distraction and defensiveness. Nonverbal gestures (p. 73, *Listen Like You Mean It*) provide valuable information – whether in alignment with or counter to what is communicated by your language.

7. ZOOM OUT: When we focus too much on the details, we miss much of what is being said. Practice expanding from a microscopic view to a telescopic view (p.48, *Listen Like You Mean It*) in order to move beyond the minutia to connect with the larger picture and emotion of the conversation.

8. MANAGING INTERNAL DISTRACTIONS: Our own thoughts can be the culprit of distraction and attention leaks. When you notice your own thoughts pulling your focus away, consider how urgent and important they are. Let go of thoughts that are not urgent and not important or urgent but not important. Trust you will remember thoughts that are important but not urgent. Act on thoughts that are both urgent and important. (p. 52, *Listen Like You Mean It*)

9. DECODE VOICE CUES: The sounds of our emotions communicate a lot. Bright, musical and smooth sounds often signal positive emotions, while somber, dissonant and wavering sounds can be indicative of negative emotions. Test your skills in decoding voice cues with this simple exercise: Ask a friend to hum through a conversation to see what meaning you can glean. In the absence of words, worry less about the details you may be missing and aim to understand emotions instead. What can you learn from a simple hum? (p. 86, *Listen Like You Mean It*)

10. SPEAKING PATTERNS: You can learn a lot from speaking patterns. Pay attention to the pitch, pace, volume, expressiveness, rhythm and tone of your next conversation. Variances in voice can serve as clues, cues and indicators of our own and other’s experiences. Consider: What emotions might be driving those changes. In whose company do these changes occur? On what subjects are these changes apparent? What might these changes signal overall? (p. 91, *Listen Like You Mean It*)

11. LISTENING MODES: Each of us has a default, habitual listening mode we tend to fall back on in conversations. Read pages 98-102 of *Listen Like You Mean It* to identify your default listening mode. Reflect: In what ways, if any, does the way you show up as a listener change based on who you are in conversation with? In what situations are you more likely to operate outside of your default mode?
12. CUES FOR NEEDS: When unclear in conversation, try listening for cues that help uncover your conversation partner's needs. You can listen for hidden needs (p. 110 of *Listen Like You Mean It*) to extract meaning and help you understand what type of listening might be best in that situation. For example, “I wish that.”, “If only I could...”, and “In an ideal world...” might communicate desire, opportunity, lack or shortcoming. “I'm going out of my way here,” and “I'm doing the best I can” may be a signal of plea for recognition.

13. EXPLORATORY QUESTIONS: Sometimes the questions we ask tell more about ourselves than the person whom we are asking the question. To keep the focus on your conversation partner, try framing your question in a way that enables them to guide the conversation by asking open-ended “how” and “what” questions that don't presume or limit response to a yes/no, either/or outcome. (Ex. How would you approach...? or What would you do if...? (p. 125, *Listen Like You Mean It*)) See where the conversation takes you. Notice if the direction it goes is different than what you may have expected or imagined.

14. ARE YOU CONNECTING?: Disconnecting questions elicit a specific response based on what the asker believes, desires or presumes the answer to be. They lead, expose and diagnose (Ex. Are you upset? (Assumption: You're upset.)) instead of enabling your conversation partner to share their perceptions and experience. Check yourself for assumptions or beliefs you might be inadvertently baking into your questions. Try to step away from close-ended “Is,” “Are,” and “Do” questions that assume an outcome, and instead use “How” and “What” to make your questions more open-ended. (p.136, *Listen Like You Mean It*)

15. IMPORTANCE CUES: There are some verbal signals that can help us distinguish extraneous details from essential ones and tangents from main ideas...Importance cues are specific phrases that indicate we should listen up...Phrases like “Going back to your point,” “To add to that,” and “As I was saying earlier” can also signal importance: frequency or repetition of an idea are cues something pivotal is being said. The same idea expressed in multiple ways may also be an expression of importance. (p.163, *Listen Like You Mean It*) Listen for importance cues in your next conversation.

16. READ THE REACTION: When reflecting back what you heard, your conversation partner's reaction can help you know whether you got it right or need to try again. Notice if they look affirmed and validated or confused, disinterested, disappointed or frustrated. Use these reactions to confirm or correct your understanding.

17. REDIRECTING: When you can tell that a conversation has become unproductive or unsafe, you can tactfully employ redirecting phrases to guide it in the right direction. Having these phrases (p.185-207, *Listen Like You Mean It*) in our toolkit helps us stay active and engaged instead of tuning out or sitting back when our conversation partner needs us most. (p.210, *Listen Like You Mean It*)
18. MAKE AN EXIT: Have you ever wanted or needed to end a conversation but struggled to do so? From setting time limits or scheduling a conflict afterward to acknowledging it’s over or a need for a time out, there are many strategies to help exit a conversation. Think about when and with whom you struggle most to end conversations. Identify what technique you think might work and keep it in mind for when you next need it.

19. RECOVER RIGHT: Nourishing yourself after taxing conversations can help you recover and replenish so that you feel whole again. Create a recovery regimen with ideas of things you can do that help you feel better following difficult conversations. From time alone, to exercise, connecting with friends, or talking it out, there are many techniques that can aid in recovery. What are 5 things that help you rejuvenate?

20. COMBAT LISTENER’S DRAIN: Listener’s drain is described as “the exhaustion that results from focused and intentional listening, where you give yourself until nothing is left.” Use the following exercise (p. 272, Listen Like You Mean It) to recognize, respond to and recover from listener’s drain:
   ○ I know when I have reached my limit when I feel ___________. When this happens, my body starts to __________________________, and I begin to think thoughts such as __________________________. Certain kinds of relationships, like the one I have with _________, can make me reach my limit sooner. I’ve noticed that I am more likely to feel this way in specific contexts, such as when __________________________. Sometimes, I am caught off guard and reach my limit sooner than expected. This has happened when ____________.

21. BE OPEN TO BEING WRONG: Reflecting back what you’ve heard can help clarify and support understanding. When summarizing, don’t assume that you got it right. By summarizing what you think you heard and inviting corrections from your conversation partner, you open the door for better communication. Try out the following examples (p.169, Listen Like You Mean It):
   ○ It sounds like... is that a fair reading?
   ○ You mentioned that... Did I get that right?
   ○ Tell me if I understood correctly...
   ○ What I think I’m hearing is ... Does that capture it?
   ○ This seems important, and I want to make sure I’m getting it right...

22. NUDGING CONVERSATION: Small nudges can lead to big results when you encourage your conversation partner to say more. Try out the following encouraging phrases to deepen the conversation (p.127-128, Listen Like You Mean It):
   ○ Say more about that.
   ○ Tell me what this means to you.
   ○ Walk me through...
   ○ Tell me more.
   ○ What else?

Or utilize a pause to elicit more and expand the conversation (ex. It sounds like that was difficult for you. [pause]).
23. ENERGY AUDIT: How energized or drained you are impacts your ability to stay present. Pay attention to when you space out, get distracted, or let your mind wander in conversation. At the end of the day, ask yourself these questions to help you identify any patterns:

- When was I zoning out?
- When did I have great focus?
- What topics left me feeling great?
- What topics left me feeling exhausted?
- Whose company energized me?
- Whose company drained me?

Reflecting on your responses, what conditions enable you to be fully present and engaged? (p. 43-44, Listen Like You Mean It)