



So...podcast – Episode 24

Oscar Trimboli

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John: My thoughts, Oscar, is obviously we are both podcasters so we really need to give some nice messages to people listening about how to bloody lesson. What are your thoughts, how do we do this?

Oscar: Yeah, well look, I don't know if this story is going to work so you are going to have to tell me about how listening gets you better sex. I got a phone call from Mick, he was a guy I was working with three years ago. I was driving to work and 8:16, I can remember the clock on my car, he brings me up and says you nearly cost me my marriage last Friday, and that was the opening line, John. It wasn't hello, good morning. I said, "Tell me more," and he says, "Last Friday, she said those words every man hates, 'Honey, we need to talk.'" And she said to him, "I know you are having an affair, just tell me who it is." And Mick, he just had no idea what to say, so he just said, "Umm, tell me more." And she said, "For the last 90 days, you've paid me so much attention, I know you are having an affair. Just tell me who it is, we can move on. And he said, "Look, it's not who you think it is, it's actually a man." And she burst into tears. And he went, "No, I've been working with this guy who's been teaching me how to listen and how told me not to use it at home because it would have unintended consequences." Now, John, what he told me next was that they had the best night since their honeymoon and the rest was pretty X-rated so I don't think we can use that in the broadcast, can we?

John: Well, not really. No, it's just ... yeah.

Oscar: You're a bit PG.

John: What's that?





Oscar: You're a bit PG, you know, parental guidance recommended rating on your podcast.

John: Yeah, well so are you. Let's be honest, we've got to be careful.

Oscar: All right, so we can't use that.

John: We want to give some nice messages to people about, because you know your stuff, I've got my version of listening, but I want people to listen to this podcast and say, okay, here is my take away messages. What's your plan, how do we do it?

Oscar: Look, most people think they are good listeners but they are not. 81% of us think we are above average IQ, 84% of us think we are above average car drivers and 83% of us think we are above average listeners. So the problem with listening is it is an awareness problem. Everyone thinks listening starts with the speaker, and it's not, you've got to actually start with you. And I think the most people if they are just conscious of what gets in their way when it comes to being a good listener, I think that would be a good way for us to have a conversation with everyone that would be useful for them.

John: And you and I both know, we are about to do this podcast, right, people are going to be on the toilet, driving, our voice will be on the background. So I think we just need to accept that, don't we?

Oscar: Yeah, I actually interviewed a guy from Melbourne, Monash Uni, a professor. He studied people listening while they sleep, you can listen while you sleep. So I don't mean here, you are going to listen while you sleep, so if they know the neuroscience, John, like I speak at 125 words a minute but you can listen to 400. You can hear more than you actually take in. And some of it is conscious and some of it's not, so it's okay to listen in the background.

John: Guess what? I do hope the record button is on. Sh*t, sorry.





Oscar: Do you want to hit record?

John: It's on, I've already pressed it.

Oscar: Cool, okay. No dramas.

John: No drama. We cut that out but –

Oscar: Hang on, did we say anything that we shouldn't be saying?

John: I don't think so, it depends who was listening, I guess. It really does.

Oscar: Ironically.

John: You and I have had a bit of a chat of recording mics around the word deliberately don't want to listening because you just like the sound in the background, they might be in the mood to say, well, I can't hear very well, they are not really interesting. What are triggers in your mind to help you quickly stay focused, just to say that I really do need to hear what they are saying but I'm not in the mood. How do you kick yourself into pump or give yourself a slap in the face to say wake-up, focus. Any quick tips?

Oscar: Look, everyone knows the currency of the 21st century is the battery on your mobile phone, right? And when it gets drained, most people freak out. And you have a listening battery to, right. During our conversation, your listening battery gets drained but some of us turn up to a conversation with a listening battery at less than 10%. So forget about listening to the speaker right now, everybody has got to understand that listening starts with them. The listener first, not the speaker. And if you have got a radio station playing in your mind all you have got all of these browser tabs open in your own mind, you are on about what am I having for lunch, what I having for dinner, what have I got to do on the weekend or anything that is going on, it's very difficult for you to be available for the other person. So the three tips that I would recommend that consistently have been proven in our database of listeners, 1410 of them, switch off the notification button on





your phone or on your laptop or on your tablet. There is one button no matter what operating system you use, switch it off, notifications off. Second tip is drink water, a glass of water every half an hour. A hydrated brain is a listening brain. And the third tip, just take three deep breaths. You can take three deep breaths, you will send a signal to the nervous system that is called the parasympathetic nervous system that says everything is okay. But in those three acts, you are also recharging your listening batteries so you can get ready to pay attention to what that person is saying. And I would also say some people use the phrase 'pay attention' and some people use the phrase 'give attention'. Right now, John, do you think you are giving attention to me or you are paying attention to me, because I think they are slightly different.

John: Probably doing both. Obviously we are having a conversation and we now know we are being recorded, which is cool, but I am really focused on listening to you, but even just being a podcast host like you are, we are always thinking about the next entry into the conversation. So I'll be really upfront to say, "Yep, I have heard about 40% of what you have said and I enjoyed it." I do want to jump in right now with another thought, and this can be read because you talk about the interruptive listener. I am also really conscious that it is okay to be a selective listener because you are protecting yourself. In a case of arguing and knowing where you are getting out or depth or fear steps in, you can't spend too much time listening because you have got to have a strategy to escape and get out. Would you accept that?

Oscar: I'm curious if you could land me an example of that because I think sometimes that can be productive and sometimes that's unproductive because we should choose to either engage or avoid, but I think we need to be mindful to be explicit about that choice not only to ourselves but also to the counterpart who we are speaking to in the moment. So I think as long as you do a choice fully, John, I think that is a great choice.

John: I think there is a classic telephone call that you have that just keeps going. You say things like, "I've got to go now," but what do I say, I need to be respectful but I need to end this conversation, and obviously it is a two-way





chat but it's not balanced. So it is about how do I escape from this conversation right now.

Oscar: Yeah. "Given the time I have got left, is there anything else you want to say?"

John: Yeah, that's nice, that's respectful, isn't it?

Oscar: Yeah, I found working with clients and learning from a group of people whether they are FBI hostage negotiators or suicide counsellors or mediators, people who deal with complex arguments, time is so limited. So boxing time for that person that becomes repetitive becomes useful not just for you but also for them. Another phrase, John, might simply be, "Hey, if you were to summarise all of this, what are you going to do about it?" So you put it back on them, right. So they go, "Blah, blah blah blah," and then they come back and they say it a little bit different but it's about 80% the same. "That's great, how would you summarise it and what are you going to do, and I'm really curious how I can help you with that." And it just acts as a bit of a circuit breaker for them to get out of this monologue that is in their head because, you know, very few of us have someone who will listen to us and it sounds like you're a great friend when you are listening to that person, but you just their drug dealer, are you just helping them with their next fix, or are you helping them to see other possibilities that maybe they haven't seen themselves. So too many of us stay in those dysfunctional conversations because we just think we're being good buddies. Now, the opposite is true too, your job as a listener is never to fix anything, your job as a listener isn't even to make sense of what they say. Your job is to help them make sense of what they are thinking and help them understand what does it mean for them. And too many of us spend our time trying to listen to fix rather than listen to help them figure out what they are doing. So I think back to your original question, mate, it's what is going to be effective not just for them but also for you. Too many of us think the dialogue is what the speaker is leading and what I often say to people is just have a look at the conversation as if you were on the balcony rather than on the dance floor and go, is this conversation making progress for both of us





rather than just one of us. So if you think about two circles that overlap, think about where the overlap is not just the different parties there. But equally, too many of us listen for similarities rather than differences too, mate.

John: Exactly. What about a person's mindset, getting that right before you go into listening mode? I wanted to give an example, I've done lots of disability advocacy work and there is a lot of planning that goes into before you even go into where you are standing beside, behind or in front of the person you're going to advocate for, and I've had some great people give me advice around making sure you're in the right zone first. So be aware of your conscious and unconscious bias before you're about to have this conversation with the person. This has worked for me where I'll knock down to sort of say, "I want to listen to this person but I'm really conscious that John McKenna is going to start judging, so I'm going to have a little stick on my hand and sort of say don't judge. I'm okay with that. Do you believe that could work with others?"

Oscar: I kind of come at it in a game design I created around listening in groups and the situation you describe. It's a jigsaw puzzle, and what you need to do is there's a person who makes the jigsaw puzzle and then there's a person who instructs them on how to make the jigsaw puzzle. And it's time limited, there's only 60 pieces, and the teams that finish the puzzle the fastest are always the team that has the instructor directly behind the maker of the jigsaw puzzle. Anybody who's at the side who doesn't have that kind of empathy for what that jigsaw puzzle maker is going through tend to struggle both in instruction, they tend to struggle with communication, so when they're directly behind them as if they can see what they're seeing on the jigsaw puzzle board, are 32% more successful meaning they have more completed pieces. So back to your question is where is your orientation when you're listening? And it's not necessarily always productive, John, to be in the shoes of the person you're advocating for because you may help them become conscious of some of their biases as well as your biases as well. So really simple question that we often don't pose, a whole bunch of questions about how to have the conversation





rather than what to say. So this question liberates a lot of leaders I work with as well as a lot of frontline customer care people: what would make this a great conversation for you? And that's a how question, it's asking us how do we want to interact. And when they answer that question, then all of a sudden then John, you can choose based on what they've said and you having the conscious conversation about it. "Okay, you want this, have you considered that?" "No, I hadn't." "Okay, let's adjust slightly, how does that look going forward?" "Great." Now let's have the conversation about how we advocate.

John: Love it.

Oscar: So let's always be choiceful before we go into a conversation. Not enough of us have a conversation about how to have the conversation. It only takes a couple of minutes but it removes so much confusion, conflict and chaos during the conversation if we just pause at the beginning and say, "Hey, what would make this a great conversation to you, John?" By the way, you probably noticed me using that tricky question for you when we first spoke about what would make a great podcast for you, right?

John: Yes. Cool. We are walking and talking the talk and listening. Oscar, in a world of the multicultural we live in, obviously you've done episodes where people, English as their second language, and I've got many friends from overseas, and this probably sounds quite harsh, but there's lots of fake listening going on because it's important they do the head nods and pretend what's being said, I'm very mindful that those people want to engage and my own views are they are listening but not to all of it because perhaps of the English limitation, but also the other side is they don't feel all that confident to give a good response back to your questions. What are your experiences when talking with people from multicultural backgrounds with limited English?

Oscar: Yeah, one of the fascinating statistics for me, John, is that the software companies that want to test software in multiple languages and accents come to Australia because it's one of the most multicultural markets in the





globe and we offer many, many variations of language in contact centres. But I remember on Gumbak Mountain 1992, Jakarta, I was on a project on an airport doing some work then and my boss said something very important to me, he said, “Oscar, welcome to Jakarta, welcome to Indonesia. When people say yes to your question, what they are actually saying is ‘yes, I understand your question’. What they’re not saying is ‘yes, I agree with what you’re asking’. So for too many people in the West, they don’t understand that most cultures in Asia particularly but also in ancient cultures like our Aboriginal cultures, our Maori cultures, our Polynesian cultures, are high context cultures and the way you ask questions in the West is very transactional: would you like A or B? Well, in their culture which is high context – Korea, Japan, Indonesia, Thailand – the question lacks sophistication and it lacks a bit of consciousness about if you asked that question in their culture you have to ask it in the context of my relationship to you. So an example in Maori culture, you would never ask what does this mean for your son, you would need to ask that question as what does this mean for your son in the context of our tribe and the context of the community we are part of. That is what I mean by high context culture. So when we ask questions as Aussies, we come off as lacking sophistication and particularly in Aboriginal communities in Australia, they are very high context cultures as well and we need to know our culture first before we can intersect with another. So, John, I would say the most important thing for us to know as a culture as we interact with others is when we speak and use language, we’re not even conscious that that is not the way other cultures use language. So thus when you said somebody is nodding politely because politeness and deference in a culture is important – say, in Asia – that’s just then sending a signal to you that I am ready to commence a relationship to explore what you are saying. It doesn’t necessarily mean they are understanding what you are saying. So I think the big tip, John, is just be a lot more patient and make the implicit and explicit, and by that I mean ask questions again about how are we going to have this conversation and how will we notice when we are confused. How do we talk about our confusion? So back to that example at Jakarta airport, so I was actually working for the airport corporation that ran the airport, we were putting in software and they had never used software before, it





was all manual, it was all paper-based until then and my mindset was all about how I had done this in Australia in a number of airports in Australia, and my boss just kept saying, “Slow down, Oscar. Say that again, Oscar.” And I think just that beautiful patience that Steve showed me in that conversation is a really simple tip. And rather than saying, “Does that make sense,” which is a common way for us in the West to clarify, ask them the question, “Which bit of that doesn’t make sense for you,” and give them permission to say that because a lot of us don’t do that when we’re working across cultures.

John: I agree. Oscar, we deliberately turned this conversation upside down and came straight into it and did the joke about the recording button, I now want to have a serious conversation – and it has all been serious – but you are a professional when it comes to listening. Please, could I ask you, invite you, to talk to my audience right now and very briefly explain what you’ve been doing over many years around listening and obviously mention your website, I would like, I’m not going to waste this opportunity to have someone on the So... podcast show like yourself and give them some good directions to look at your website, I know you have got a quiz. But obviously you work with business people but my audience perhaps, mums and dads and students, so if you could just give us a couple of minutes about you, your journey and one thing, what would you do differently next time?

Oscar: So look, my journey came about while being in a budget meeting between the US, Singapore and Australia and my boss basically said to me – Tracy – she said that at the 20 minute mark, “Oscar, at the end of this meeting we need to talk.” And when somebody who is in a senior position says you need to talk, my mind just went straight to, “I’m getting fired.” I spent the rest of the meeting trying to calculate in my head, John, how many weeks of salary I’ve got left.

John: As you do.

Oscar: And then at the end of the meeting, Tracy says to me, “Close the door, let’s have that chat.” And she says, “You had no idea what you did at the 20





minute mark,” and the only thing going through my head is I know I am getting and I don’t know what I did to get fired. And then she said something that kind of change direction in my life, she said, “If you could code the way you listen, you could change the world.” And so is profound as that was, John, the only thing going through my head was I’m not fired, I live to fight another day, I’m really excited.

John: Can I pull you up there and pull you up on a bit of jargon, you said, “If you could code.” Just explained that a little bit more please, the word ‘code’?

Oscar: This was at Microsoft, so it’s a software company, and what she meant was if I could write into software the way I listen and create a piece of software that helps other people how they can improve their listening, I could change the world. But the only thing I could say in that moment to Tracy was, “Do you mean code or code-code,” because code could also be a checklist, right, it doesn’t have to be software but it could be a checklist to help people along the journey. And she said, “No, Oscar, I mean code.” And as profound as Tracy said that, I just kind of skipped out of the room remembering I am not fired, and then a week later another Vice President said to me, “Can you come into my meeting and audit how I listen.” So they had obviously been talking. And I just went, “Brian, I’m too busy for this stuff, this listening stuff.” And ironically if only I had been listening to myself I would have discovered this anyway. So in the last seven years I’ve been on a quest to create 100 million deep listeners in the world and that’s with books and jigsaw puzzles, playing cards and quizzes and all kinds of things that we are kind of working on. And by far the most common question I get asked when I speak on stage or webinars is this, “I’m a great listener but my wife, my husband, my child, my son, my daughter, are terrible listeners, how can I help them to listen better?” And I always say, “You are the listening role model of your family, they are merely copying you. So the way you listen matters, all of us are setting listening examples.” We can remember our favourite teacher from school – I’m sure you can, John.

John: Sure do.





Oscar: And I want to ask you this question, do you think they were amazing because they listened not only to what you said but what you meant and they could listen not just to what you said but what was on your heart?

John: They showed evidence that they were listening and I live a journey in my life where I can see falseness and fakeness, so my heart and soul needs to feel it and if I can feel that energy that that person is hearing me, that is my indicator that I like that person and why they are my favourite.

Oscar: Yeah. So as parents, here's a tip, if you have got really young kids, say, under eight years old, whenever you are speaking to them and you are getting frustrated, you will know you are getting frustrated because you will say to your kids, "Why aren't you listening to me?" When that happens, it's a time to pause and a time to remember Oscar said to get to their eye level. So that means whether they are really tiny, bring them up on a bench or maybe a chair or a table and make sure your eyes are at their eye level and ask them the question again or give the instruction again, because eye level is ear level and ear level is listening level. But also something happens, and John, you mentioned this earlier on when I advocate for somebody else what position am I adopting, it's very difficult for you to be angry when you are screaming at your child with direct eye contact at the same eye level, the power dynamic kind of goes away and you go, "Wow, there is another being in front of me and I have to be an example in this moment, not a busy, shouting, working adult." If you've got teenage kids, slightly different depending on whether it's a boy or a girl. Boys will listen to you if they have got something to do with their hands or they are sitting in the passenger seat of the car, they've got some level of distraction for them. So boys listen better when their eye contact isn't direct to the speaker in the teenage years because of all the hormones going on in their body, their body is interpreting that as a threat signal, as in you are being challenging to me. And if you want to have a chat to your teenage son, go for a walk, go in the garden, chop up some vegetables. But be close to them but again, you want to not necessarily be eye to eye. Whereas with teenage girls, it's the opposite. You want to sit down and have a meal with them, you want to





have a glass of water with them, you want to have a milkshake with them, but they value eye contact and they will listen more in that case.

John: And obviously these are very general statements because I work with people with intellectual disability, people on Asperger's and autism and the last thing you do is look for their eyes and then you throw in the word 'culture'. So it's really interesting, but I am not disagreeing at all, but you have got to add that whole mix because you don't know who you are going to start talking to and don't judge them just by their age of course, there are so many other factors.

Oscar: It's a great distinction, John, and three weeks ago I interviewed a mother and son in North Chicago, Minneapolis, and it was a fascinating conversation because when the son had come home at the age of three and told his mum that three was half of eight, she took out eight M&Ms to explain to him why he was wrong.

John: M&Ms are chocolates, for everybody wondering what they are.

Oscar: It could have been peanuts, just eight separate things. And she split them into two to divide them into two, into half. And by the time she had laid out the chocolate M&Ms on the table and spread them into halves and was about to explain to her three-year-old son why four in fact is half of eight and why he was wrong, he said, "Mum, stop." And he drew an eight on a piece of paper and he laid it on it's side, and he took out a pair of scissors and he cut the eight in half, and he showed her two three's. So for a lot of us, we have all these mental models. All models are wrong and some models are useful. So you need to be conscious, all of what I'm talking about is very generic and if you want to learn more, we've got all those other artefacts we talked about earlier on the podcast and the books and the jigsaw puzzles and the quizzes and stuff like that. So thanks for pointing me out the generality of what I'm talking about.

John: All good. We are going to wrap soon. Also, I'm going to obviously hit 'end recording' and you are going to take your headphones off, your mic away.





I imagine that you are going to hopefully, presume, take a couple of minutes to say how much was John listening to me because I'm going to do the same thing when I stop this broadcast, "Did Oscar hear what I was saying?" Is that okay that we have time to ourselves and to digests and analyse was I being listen to?

Oscar: And I think the other question I often pose at this point is I wonder what the audience will actually listen to and take away from this conversation because, you know, somebody said to me, "Oscar, a good podcast post will listen to the guest but a great podcast host will listen for the questions that they know the audience will be asking." And I just went, oh my God, how do you do that while you are trying to work out the tech and you are trying to be in a conversation and it's really hard. But listening is relational, situational, it's contextual. And the question I will pose as I press stop on this recording is, "Was I being of service to you and your community? Were my stories effective?"

John: All had similar thoughts, I share your view. I hope people listen and they have overheard what we are talking about, but hopefully the people have stayed on for this whole episode – and the first bit was deliberate, audience, we try to weave a little bit of humour into the traditional who are you and who are you. I'm John McKenna, you're Oscar Trimboli. We've had a good time. Mate, let's stay in touch and thank you for sharing your thoughts today.

Oscar: Thanks for listening.

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