

Listening With Boundaries

There's a fine line between empathetic listening and "owning" the negative emotions of others. Consider this strategy from Laurie, a social worker in a children's oncology unit. When I met Laurie, I had to know how she stays even-keeled.

My first comment to her was, "You can't be in a more depressing and upsetting environment than this. How do you remain positive?"

"I listen with boundaries," she replied.

To communicate effectively, you must find that balance between emotive caring and feeling personally burdened by the barrage of negativity that might be directed toward you. Laurie created a conscious barrier so she would not absorb the frustration and sadness surrounding her. She remained emotive, effective, and informative without taking the circumstances personally.

Despite the extremity of this example, you may find yourself in similar situations. On any given day, you may encounter a problem at home with your child or partner; a broken temporary, even though your patient promised she was on a yogurt-only diet; or a health issue with someone on your team. All of these circumstances can cause a bumpy ride on your emotional roller coaster. It's difficult to sell yourself or your dentistry if you are flying high and sinking low due to the craziness around you.

One time I hit the bottom of my roller coaster when my daughter accosted her younger brother. Having read the parenting books, I placed Courtney in "time-out" until I calmed down.

After a few minutes, I approached her on the staircase and told my 7-year-old, "Courtney, I'm not mad at you; I'm just upset with your behavior."

She looked up at me and said, "Oh yeah? Then why don't you just put my behavior on the staircase?"

It would be nice if we could separate the human being from the human doing. Courtney remained on that staircase for a solid 15 minutes.

Sometimes you'll find humor when you listen with boundaries. Barbara, head of customer service for a national roofing manufacturer, listens to complaints all day long.

She told me, "A customer began screaming over the phone about her leaking skylight. She demanded that I fix the problem immediately because water was dripping onto the piano."

"What did you say?" I asked.

Barbara replied, "I refused to take the problem personally. I could not suddenly become Superwoman and fly over to her home and do the repairs. I told her a technician would be there soon. In the meantime, I suggested that she try to move the piano."

Another aspect of "listening with boundaries" is to incorporate the "65-35 rule" immortalized by Judy Dedmon, a former senior regional vice president of Fannie Mae. Judy presided over a 10-state region, a \$17 million budget, and 300 employees. From my personal observation of coaching many people in this office over a five-year period, everyone — regardless of his or her gender, ethnicity, or age — revered Judy. Every day could have been a potential ride on that emotional roller coaster as she navigated through a schedule that was divided into eight-minute segments. Yet she maintained her composure, and I often



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heard laughter from her executive suite.

One day I asked, "Judy, you are such an effective communicator. What's your secret?"

She replied, "I listen 65 percent of the time. I talk 35 percent of the time."

"But you have so much to offer and your team hangs onto every word you utter," I responded.

Judy ended the conversation with, "If I do all the talking, I don't learn as much."

Laurie and Barbara teach us to emotionally separate from the volatility of the moment. Judy models for us the value of letting the other guy do the talking. And Courtney reminds us that it's really hard to do.

Here's how to listen with boundaries:

☆ Remember, the situation surrounds the issue and not you.

☆ Take a conscious mental snapshot of your desired role and preferred outcome.

☆ Psychologically create the space between what you can and cannot do.

☆ Employ the "65-35 rule."

☆ Continue to listen constructively.