



Roadblocks to Listening

Although most of us believe that we are good listeners, what we actually do in conversations is quite a different matter. Borrowed from the writings of Thomas Gordon, these are twelve ways in which people often respond instead of listening well, sometimes even with the intention of being good listeners:

1. **Directing** is telling someone what to do, as if giving an order or a command.
 - *You've got to face up to reality!*
2. **Warning** involves pointing out the risks or dangers of what a person is doing. This can also be a threat.
 - *If you do, you'll be sorry*
3. **Advising** includes making suggestions and providing solutions, usually with the intent of being helpful.
 - *Here's what I would do if I were you...*
4. **Persuading** can be lecturing, arguing, giving reasons, or trying to convince with logic.
 - *If you just think about it you'll realize that...*
5. **Moralizing** is telling people what they should do.
 - *It's your duty to...*
6. **Judging** can take the form of blaming, criticizing, or simply disagreeing.
 - *Well, it's your own fault!*
7. **Agreeing** usually sounds like taking sides with the person, perhaps approving or praising.
 - *Yes. You're absolutely right.*
8. **Shaming** or ridiculing can include attaching a name or stereotype to what the person is saying or doing.
 - *That's a silly way to think.*

9. **Analyzing** offers a reinterpretation or explanation of what the person is saying or doing.

- *You don't really mean that.*

10. **Probing** asks questions to gather facts or press for more information.

- *When did you first realize that?*

11. **Reassuring** can sound like sympathizing or consoling.

- *There, there- I'm sure this will all work out.*

12. **Distracting** tries to draw people away from what they are experiencing by humoring, changing the subject, or withdrawing.

- *You think you've got problems. Let me tell you...*

With some of these you may be wondering "What's wrong with that?" It's not that these responses are wrong. There may be times and places where each of these might be appropriate. It's just that they are not good listening, and if you want to develop accurate empathy skills it's important to suspend these reflexive ways of responding. These roadblocks tend to interrupt the person's own exploration, and in order to get back to their own process, the person must go around them (hence the term "roadblock").

There are also some implicit themes behind roadblock responses that get in the way of understanding. Intended or not, many of them take a one-up position: "I know best. Listen to me." Some of them are outright put-downs implying that there is something wrong with the speaker, and that tends to shut down communication. Others such as agreeing, reassuring, and distracting are mostly conversation stoppers: "You've said enough now." It's not that you should never respond in those ways. It's just that they are not good listening when the purpose is to understand the person's perspective and experience.

Parent Scenario:

A conversation with your daughter (Jane) who is contemplating breaking up with her (struggling) boyfriend:

Jane: *"I don't know if I should leave him or not."*

You: *"You should do what you think is best."* **[Moralizing/telling people what to do]**

Jane: *"But that's the point....I don't know what's best."*

You: *"Yes you do- in your heart."* **[Judging/disagreeing]**

Jane: *"Well...I feel trapped in our relationship."*

You: *"Have you thought about separating for a while?"* **[Advising/providing solutions]**

Jane: *"But I love him and it would hurt him if I left."*

You: *"Yet if you don't do it you could be wasting your life."* **[Warning/cautioning]**

Jane: *"But isn't that kind of selfish?"*

You: *"It's just what you have to do to take care of yourself."* **[Persuading/lecturing]**

Jane: *"I don't know how I would manage."*

You: *"I'm sure you'll be fine."* **[Reassuring/consoling]**

For discussion: What might your responses look like if you avoided these roadblocks to listening?