

2017: The Year of the "EAR"!

Here are three of my favorite quotes:

- *"The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place."* George Bernard Shaw
- *"The leader of the past was a person who knew how to tell. The leader of the future will be a person who knows how to ask."* Peter F. Drucker
- *"The greatest compliment that was ever paid me was when one asked me what I thought, and attended to my answer."* Henry David Thoreau

To me, these quotes capture everything you need to know about human interaction—when it succeeds, and when it fails. Shaw nails the fact that when we think we understand and are understood, we're probably wrong. Drucker captures what goes sideways in virtually all hierarchal relationships: The person in the authority position—whether it's boss, teacher or parent—thinks it's his or her job to tell, not ask. And Thoreau provides keen insight into the benefits of good listening—the best compliment you can give another human being.

So I'd like you to join me in my New Year's Resolution, one I intend to pursue not only in my own behavior but in my work with others. It's to make 2017 The Year of the EAR.

What is the EAR Method of Listening?

Many years ago, I learned the "EAR" listening method. It's simple and effective, and has served my family, friends, clients and me well.

E stands for "Explore."

A stands for "Acknowledge."

R stands for "Respond."

The EAR method has three steps in sequence.

Start by **exploring** the other person's story, experience or position. Use open-ended questions: "What happened?" "What do you think?" "How do you see it?" or "Can you share some examples with me?" Don't hurry. Take your time. Make sure the person has shared what he or she thinks is important: "Anything else?"

After you've sufficiently explored the other person's position, move to **acknowledge**. Confirm your understanding of what he or she thinks is important: "So, if I understand you ... Is that accurate?" "So, your main concern is _____. Is that right?"

After the person confirms that you understand what matters, **respond**.

What are the benefits of this method?

1. It's guaranteed to improve the quality of your response. Following the E-A-R sequence gives you the information and time to craft a nuanced, intelligent response—unlike in most cases where we immediately shoot from the hip.
2. Not to be overly sophisticated, but at a psychological and neurological level, E+A=Warm & Fuzzy Feeling. When someone takes the time to hear your point of view in full and shows they paid attention and understand what matters to you, it feels pretty good, doesn't it? In other words, before you've *responded*, you've created a receptive environment for your response.
3. The EAR method eliminates Culprit #1 in relationship breakdowns: The erroneous assumption (I pronounce it "ass-umption.") Typically we jump to our response, basing it on what we *assume*. All too often, our ass-umption is erroneous, which itself elicits a negative response, and the downward spiral begins.

Two Complementary Listening Tools

A great way to warm up your EAR is to assess your **Period:Question-Mark Ratio**. For every sentence you utter that ends in a period, how many end in question-marks?

The Period:Question-Mark Ratio creates self-awareness, and puts you in the frame of mind to use your EAR.

When I work with executives and managers, it never ceases to amaze me how imbalanced their ratios are. In some cases, I've invoked the symbol for infinity. Why? Because they've never asked an employee a single question!

Personal confession: As my wife Marjorie will readily tell you, those executives and managers aren't the only ones whose ratios could improve ...

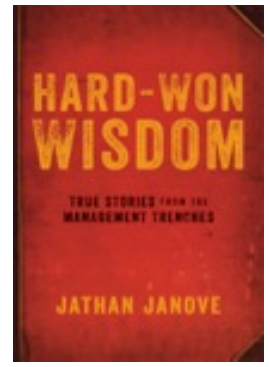
In emotionally charged conversations, our Period:Question-Mark Ratios tend to suffer. We revert to assertions met by counter-assertions—all periods; no question-marks. However, for tough conversations, I encourage you to employ the **Constructive Confrontational Question (CCQ)**.

CCQ has three elements:

1. The question is open-ended. It's designed to get the "E" going in EAR despite the highly charged atmosphere.
2. It's not a cross-examination question. This means it's not an opinion masquerading as a question. "Why did you let me down again?" CCQs are inquisitive. They're curiosity-based. They're not adversarial.
3. The question goes to the heart of the matter—no beating around the bush. "Jim, based on the problems we continue to have, I'm not sure it's going to work out with you at our company. It may be time for a transition. However, I want to hear your assessment. How do you see things?" Or, "Janet, after _____, I felt terribly hurt. From your perspective, what happened?"

CCQs are incredibly powerful, whether at work or otherwise. They create environments where frank, honest and constructive exchanges occur, where collaborative assessments are made about whether or not a relationship should continue. If not, what's the best way for us to make a transition? If so, what steps must we take to put this relationship back on track?

My Challenge & My Promise



In November 2016, the [American Management Association](#) published my book [Hard-Won Wisdom: True Stories From The Management Trenches](#). It contains 46 stories from my own experiences with a “moral of the story” for each. I now want to hear your stories.

Please share with me your experiences in applying the concepts, tools and techniques in this blog post or the book. Perhaps you will have successfully made 2017 The Year of the EAR. You can reach me at Jathan@jathanjanove.com.

If you share with me with your experience or story (the “E”), I promise I will Acknowledge and Respond!