

DEVELOPING YOUR LISTENING MUSCLE

Practical exercises to help you build deeper attention, empathy, and understanding

WHAT THIS IS

This short guide offers a set of simple yet powerful exercises to help you *improve your listening muscle*, drawn from *Be More Strategic, Chapter 4: Listen Deeply*.

Listening isn't passive. It's a skill that requires awareness, presence, and practice; just like a physical muscle, it strengthens with deliberate use.

WHY IT MATTERS

Strategic thinkers listen to *understand*, not to *respond*.

They know that real listening:

- Slows reactive thinking and emotional bias
- Builds trust and connection
- Surfaces hidden insights and assumptions
- Creates better-quality conversations and decisions

Improving your listening muscle gives you access to more information, more empathy, and ultimately, more strategic clarity.

"The quality of your listening determines the quality of your thinking, and the quality of your relationships."



HOW TO USE THIS TOOL

Practise one or two of the following exercises each week, either on your own (i.e. using a podcast, audiobook or similar), in work-related meetings and conversations, or with family and friends.

Start small. Pick one conversation a day where you'll intentionally practise deeper listening.

EXERCISE 1: THE 80/20 RULE

Goal: Reduce talking, increase listening.

- In your next conversation, aim to listen 80% of the time and speak only 20%.
- Notice how hard it is to stay silent and what you learn when you do.
- Afterwards, reflect: *What did I hear that I might have missed if I'd spoken more?*

EXERCISE 2: LISTEN WITH YOUR EYES

Goal: Build full-body attention.

- When someone speaks, focus on them completely: eye contact, posture, micro-expressions. (Don't stare!)
- Notice tone, pace, and energy, not just words.
- Ask yourself: *What's really being said? And what's not being said?*

Listening is more than hearing, it's perceiving.



EXERCISE 3: REFLECT AND PARAPHRASE

Goal: Strengthen active listening and understanding.

- During a conversation, summarise what you've heard before replying.

"So, what I'm hearing is that you're feeling ... because..."

- Ask if you've understood correctly.
- Resist the urge to fix or advise. Instead, reflect and confirm. This validates the speaker and deepens trust.

EXERCISE 4: THE PAUSE BEFORE YOU SPEAK

Goal: Break the reflex to respond.

- When someone finishes speaking, take a silent breath before answering.
- That 2 to 3 second pause helps to reset your nervous system and signals presence.
- It prevents the tendency to "listen to respond" and allows your brain to process more fully.

EXERCISE 5: THE THREE-MINUTE LISTEN

Goal: Practise deep focus in short bursts.

- With a partner, set a timer for 3 minutes.
- One person speaks; the other only listens. No nodding, interruptions, or reactions.
- When the timer sounds, the listener plays back what they heard in the right order.
- Swap roles and repeat. This trains sustained attention and recall.



EXERCISE 6: LISTEN FOR WHAT'S BEHIND THE WORDS

Goal: Develop emotional and contextual awareness.

- In your next conversation, focus less on *what* someone says and more on *why* they're saying it.
- Ask gently curious questions, such as: "What makes this important for you?" or "Can you say more about that?"
- This moves listening from the *content* to the *meaning* level.

EXERCISE 7: DEBRIEF YOUR DAY

Goal: Build listening reflection as a habit.

At the end of the day, ask yourself:

- When did I really listen well today?
- When did I drift, interrupt, or judge?
- What was the effect?

Track small improvements over time. That's how you grow the muscle.

WHAT TO DO NEXT

1. Pick one or two exercises and practise them this week.
2. Ask a trusted colleague or partner to observe your listening and share what they notice.
3. Combine this with the *Barriers to Listening* tool, track which barriers fade as your listening improves.
4. Revisit monthly. Consistency builds mastery.



REMEMBER:

Listening deeply is one of the most powerful acts of leadership and learning.

When you truly listen, you don't just hear others, you give them space to think, and that changes everything.

