

## YOUR BODY SPEAKS SPEECH

To be delivered Wednesday, June 1, 2016

*SEA to listen*

Mister/Madame Toastmaster, fellow Toastmasters, and esteemed guests:

Let's start with a show of hands. Who here has ever been confronted by a coworker or family member about a decision you've made or an action that you've taken? OK, hands down. Now, just to yourself, think about how you handled that situation. Are you glad you dealt with it the way you did, or looking back now are there things that you aren't proud of or that you wish you would have done differently?

For me, a number of scenarios come to mind. In one particular instance, a coworker whom I respect came by my desk to express a grievance over the author list on a journal manuscript that I was writing. It became clear pretty quickly that both of us had hard feelings about the issue and that resolving the conflict would mean that one or both of us would have to compromise our positions. In order to work through the disagreement effectively, I realized that I had to hear and understand where my coworker was coming from. As most of us know, however, listening to someone in a tense situation is difficult to do.

For most people, with the exception of maybe the occasional hermit, circumstances like this are somewhat common and can almost be expected. That being the case, I want to take this opportunity to share some pointers that I have learned (and am still learning!) about being a good listener in conflict scenarios. You can summarize them with the statement "SEA to listen," where "sea" is spelled as in the ocean instead of like vision because I'm an engineer and that's most practical for this talk.

Here it is: S – Summarize; E – Empathize; and A – Ask questions. We'll talk about them in order. Oh, and just for fun, let's use a made-up situation as an example: pretend that you're upset at me because I ordered pepperoni pizza instead of garlic and anchovy pizza – your favorite – for the work lunch meeting.

The first listening pointer I have for you is to SUMMARIZE the speaker's position and restate it back to them. In our little example, I can say phrases like "I hear you saying that you feel that your food preferences weren't considered" or "It sounds like you believe I overlooked your refined culinary tastes." Doing this accomplishes several goals. First and most importantly, it shows the speaker that you listened to and understood what they were saying. It conveys the message that you respect their right to disagree with you and that you are willing to consider their position. Second, it avoids escalating the conflict because you chose not to immediately defend your own point of view. Third, it ensures that you actually understand what they were saying, which allows you to avoid having an argument about something both of you actually agree on. By way of example, if I didn't get it right the first time, I could say something like "Sorry about that. Let me try again. It sounds like you

think it would actually be unethical to not expose our coworkers to the glorious taste and smell of garlic and anchovy pizza.” And fourth, restating the speaker’s position actually helps you as well, because it provides you with time to emotionally calm down and think clearly about the problem rather than responding out of anger, frustration, or hurt feelings. So start off by summarizing the speaker’s position.

The second listening pointer is to EMPATHIZE with the speaker. It’s important to not just understand the other person’s point of view, but also to comprehend the feelings that come along with it. I could ask myself, for instance, “How might I feel if my favorite pizza flavor wasn’t available for lunch?” And then, after having considered this aspect of the conflict, express those insights to the speaker. I could say something like “I’m sure it must make you feel upset, confused, and hurt that I didn’t consult you before placing the pizza order.” Showing sympathy for the speaker’s feelings causes them realize that you care about them as a person in addition to the outcome of the conflict, and can also help relax the tense situation too. To summarize our points thus far: begin by summarizing their argument to them, and follow this by empathizing with their position.

The third listening pointer is to ASK QUESTIONS of the speaker. Asking questions serves to help you clarify and draw out the issue and to help the speaker see different aspects of the conflict, including your own perspective. I might ask you something like, “What did you end up eating for lunch instead of garlic and anchovy pizza?” or “Who else might be interested in a wider variety of pizza toppings at our next lunch meeting?” It may be that these questions lead to innovative solutions that you didn’t see before, or even that you or the other person change your position entirely. Who knows – perhaps a majority of your department actually *wants* garlic and anchovy toppings!

Regardless of the outcome, the benefit of the S-E-A framework is that you begin to see the other party not so much as an opponent to disagree with and to overcome, but rather a friend with whom you are battling against the conflict that threatens to drive a wedge between you. In the end, my coworker and I were able to work out a solution to our paper authorship issue, and I think we both came out of the ordeal with greater mutual respect for one another because we handled the situation well. To summarize, I would encourage you to remember the phrase “SEA to listen” – Summarize, Empathize, and Ask questions.

Mister/Madame Toastmaster.