

NEVER UNDERESTIMATE THE POWER OF REALLY LISTENING



By Samantha Abram

One conclusion from our Listening to Each Other cell is that we should set aside regular time and space to listen with an open mind, reach out to people who are not ‘in the room’, and act on what we hear. Here Samantha Abram reflects on her experience in Wigan of doing just that.

I still remember, vividly, one of the most poignant moments of my time as a PTS (Person-led, Transitional, Strength-based) coach. I had been coaching for around a year and if I’m honest I was beginning to wonder whether meeting people in a coffee shop for a chat had any real purpose.

The idea was to meet wherever the person chooses. Somewhere comfortable and familiar, so that coaching can take place as a real-world experience and become a way of working alongside people. In the first weeks the conversations would often be about the weather or trending Netflix shows. This did not feel work-related and at times I’d wonder if I was getting coaching right. But then there’d be infrequent glimmers, when something real and honest about a person would emerge.

I have known Jon for around three years. If his risk assessment were to land on your desk it would identify Jon as ‘high risk to staff and himself’. He is described in

professionals’ meetings as ‘complex’ and ‘a nuisance’ and as ‘an adult with capacity and no social care needs’. He ‘chooses’ to act in ‘self-destructive ways’ and ‘refuses to work with services’.

Thankfully, my task as a PTS Coach was to become familiar with Jon as a person, not with his risk assessment (which in any case bore no relation to his behaviour with me). The first year or so of meetings with Jon hardly scratched the surface and I learned quickly that he did not want to answer questions. And when he felt he was being questioned or judged, he would leave. Coaching is organic and allows for someone to come and go as they please. But he would always call the next week or the next month and ask me to meet him.

Eventually I found the confidence to stay restful and patient in the silence. One day I didn’t fall into a prescriptive spiel about Jon’s situation or say something professional to kill the awkward stillness

between sips of steaming tea. In that moment we both sat equally awkward and equally human. Jon snatched that moment of balanced power and a wave of feelings, thoughts, and emotions all spilled out. I just listened.

The most important lesson coaching has taught me is that listening empowers. Listening builds trust. My job is to listen and to empower people, and fulfilling this would not be possible if I too wasn't listened to. I am fortunate to work in an environment where listening is valued and enthusiastically put in place. An authentic voice is heard beyond coaching sessions.

At The Brick, we are working towards offering meaningful and valuable provision for people who are going through tough times. We are listening to people to be able to respond with action and create the changes, opportunities and support people tell us they want and need.

When people are truly heard, it becomes obvious that in so many instances the barriers that prevent someone from moving forward are systemic. The very services that are intended to help people who have struggles can be part of the problem. It is now being widely accepted that a 'fixing people' approach is at best demoralising and at worst dehumanising. If we want to move forward with a method of service delivery that allows people to

be in control of their choices and have autonomy over the changes they want to make, then listening is key. By listening to people as individuals with their own unique experiences of tough times and services, we can identify the systemic barriers and remove these by relinquishing the power the systems hold over people.

I listen to individuals, as others in support and similar roles do, but for people to be truly heard it takes more than public-facing staff to listen. It takes more than a charity to listen from the bottom up within its own walls. So much learning for me has come from the opportunities to share with and listen to others through networking, partnership working and social media platforms. I have no doubt that a collective voice is growing, calling for system change. A collective voice can be loud, but an authentic voice, one person's whisper is equally as powerful.

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