



OSCAR TRIMBOLI
LEADERSHIP COACH, MENTOR & AUTHOR
HOW TO LISTEN IN COLOUR

LEADERSHIP MOMENTS PODCAST TRANSCRIPT



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EPISODE 38



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[Start of Transcription]

OSCAR: (00:00) We've all been taught maths. We've all been taught language. We haven't been taught what those basic functions are when it comes to listening and yet we spend more than half of our day doing it. So if everyone out there is looking for the hack of the 21st century just learn to get on the productive side of the task you spend most of your time doing, which is listening.

[music]

MURRAY: (00:23) Welcome to my podcast. I'm Murray Wright and this is Leadership Moments, real peoples' stories about the people and the moments that have influenced and shaped their leadership.

If you've ever had a question about listening then listen to today's podcast. My guest today is Oscar Trimboli and he gives us all the answers. Oscar is a fellow coach and host of the Deep Listening Podcast and he is passionate about listening as you will hear. He talks about the cost of not listening, the rules around listening and gives us some great tips to help us move from listening in black and white to listening in colour. He also shares his leadership moments. Now you'll notice I'm a bit quieter during this episode. I was working really hard to listen. Enjoy and remember, listen.

Oscar Trimboli, welcome to the Leadership Moments Podcast.

OSCAR: (01:22) Good day, Murray. I'm looking forward to listening to you today.

MURRAY: (01:25) Now Oscar, you are into listening and this is how actually we caught up, you were doing a presentation at the Institute of Executive Coaching around listening. Maybe you can talk a bit about your background and what's brought you to this, dare I say, obsession with listening.

OSCAR: (01:48) Obsession is fair. My wife would say I'm obsessed as well, but whether it was at school where I spent time with people from 23 different nations. The school I went to was the school closest to the migrant processing centre in the western suburbs of Sydney. So I learned to listen and connect people where English wasn't their first language, with people where English was. Through my corporate career I was consistently the person who always asked the question, "What does the customer think of this?" And listening to the customer was something that I probably became famous for. Everyone's opinion is interesting but what a customer says is going to be more powerful. So I was always testing in customer scenarios. In



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marketing roles I would always make sure that the customer was part of the process and we were listening to what the customer says. For those people who don't work in large organizations you'll be shocked to know how disconnected people are from customers and rarely do they actually get to spend time to listen to customers.

So listening has always been a thread and towards the end of my tenure at Microsoft, which was a decade plus in multiple roles, that one of the things I was obsessed about there as well was next generation leaders in the graduate program and we weren't doing a great job of listening to graduates or people wanting to become graduates. So I rebuilt the graduate program in Microsoft Australia and that got taken to 26 subsidiaries around the world and my managing director at the time, Tracy, said to me, "Maybe this is your calling. Maybe this is your profession." And I started to listen professionally in my own consulting practice. We've touched about 130,000 people across the world with our various training programs, podcasts, speaking presentations and now some of the work is being used by others in their leadership programs as well. So there's a plotted history for you, Murray.

MURRAY: (03:53) Fantastic. So going back to this listening and evolution of it, have you worked out where it comes from in your life? Where did you suddenly get this thing about listening?

OSCAR: (04:04) I don't think it's sudden. I think it's always been there. It's just trying to get out and it was kind of knocking on my mind and my heart and my gut in multiple ways, in multiple scenarios over many decades in my life. But now it's the right time and so not kind of like a lightning bolt moment for me to go, "Now it's about listening." It feels quite natural, it feels quite organic. It feels like a progression and that's why it feels like it's very integrated, congruent and aligned with who I am.

Most people can see in colour but most people really only listen in black and white. They haven't been taught how and for me now that I start to understand the stats, you know, minimum 55% of your day is spent listening. The more senior you are or the more in a sales role you are or the more you're in some kind of consulting role it could be up to 80% of your day is spent listening. Senior executives spend up to 87% of their day listening. But only 2% have ever been taught how. We've all been taught maths. We know plus, minus, division, multiplication. We've all been taught language, English, verbs, adverbs. We haven't been taught what those basic function are when it comes to listening and yet we spend more than half of our day doing it. So if everyone out there is looking for the hack of the 21st century to increase your productivity, just learn to get on the productive side of the task you spend most of your time doing, which is listening.



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MURRAY: (05:49) You talk about deep listening. So what is deep listening for you?

OSCAR: (05:53) So deep listening for me is moving away from black and white listening. Most people listen for the words, the audio. They listen with their ears and occasionally people listen with their eyes, to body language and this really deals only with one level of listening which is listening for content. Deep listening is about your ability to listen at five levels of listening. It's about your ability to listen to yourself first and not the person speaking, then listen to the person speaking or about what the content is, then listen for the context in which they're talking about it in. Listen for what's unsaid and ultimately listening for meaning whether they're saying a lot of words, whether they're making a lot of movement, they're trying to mean something that's important to them. And they'll use words like, "What really matters to me?" "What I'm really trying to say." "What's really important in this conversation?" When you get to that level of a dialogue which we rarely do because we're playing a ping pong game between each other, the minute someone else speaks we stop speaking, we think it's time for them to take turns and we just go around the room and that's only true in the West. If you work in Korean cultures or you work in Japanese cultures, with Chinese cultures, silence is an integral part of the dialogue. Even in Australia when you work in the indigenous communities they can have a group of people sitting around for five, ten, fifteen minutes in complete silence and it feels the most natural thing to do.

MURRAY: (07:40) People are quite uncomfortable with silence or can be. I want to pick up on something you said. You talked about people have to listen to themselves. What do you mean by that? What's going on there?

OSCAR: (07:52) So it's happening right now for those of you listening. There's a conversation going on in your head while you're listening to me and the reason that's happening is I can speak at 125 words a minute. On average we speak between 125 and 150 words a minute and if you're a livestock auctioneer or someone who speaks extraordinarily fast like a horse race caller, it might get up to 200 words a minute. The human mind can listen to 400 words a minute, so you're filling in the gap because you're wired neurologically to be distracted. So while you're listening to me now, you might be mowing the lawn, you might be doing some exercise, you might be commuting, but there's a whole bunch of conversation going on in your head about the next conversation you need to have, the last conversation you need to have. So the first thing we need to listen to is not the speaker. The first thing we need to do is create a space in our mind so we can completely listen to the other. If you're



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not available, if there isn't enough space in your mind to actually listen to the other person, you will not have a productive conversation and you will not be able to listen, let alone listen deeply if you're in a conversation with yourself.

MURRAY: (09:13) Yeah. So for me that's the presencing of yourself for the conversation and of course we're talking largely in a work context, but it's so important at home as well. I think that as people come in just be present to have those conversations at home.

OSCAR: (09:28) And I often get asked the question, "What can I do about it?" So three simple tips. The deeper you breathe, the deeper you listen. A hydrated brain is a brain able to listen and switch off your mobile phone. So let's talk about each of those individually because we are not taught how to listen... The process of listening creates a very high cognitive load on our brains and what it means is it uses extra muscles consistently when it's listening because it's not taught the short cuts. It's not taught how.

So the deeper you breathe, the deeper you listen because it gets oxygen to the brain faster.

Tip 2 hydrate: drink a glass of water at least once every two hours and a hydrated brain is a listening brain because the brain consumes 25% of the blood sugars in the body and listening is a task that draws on blood sugars faster. So if you want to be effective as a listener always carry a glass of water into a meeting and make sure you consume it throughout the meeting.

The last one switch off the mobile device. I remember, this being role modeled beautifully to me in 2010. An executive from Microsoft was presenting to a room of ten local business owners and he sat at the head of the table as the meeting host and apologized to the room, stood up and said, "Look I'm really sorry, I just need to switch my mobile phone off." Now what was interesting, Murray, is what happened next, seven of the ten people in the room switched their phones off. A lot of people ask me, "What have I got to do to get others to listen better?" the answer is role model, great listening to them.

MURRAY: (11:15) Yeah. Fantastic. Fantastic.

We better get back to you, Oscar. Get back to your leadership moments questions. Who would you say has influenced you the most in your career?



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OSCAR: (11:28) That's really simple. A guy called Steve Howcroft. Steve ran, still runs a very successful business of about 400 people across the world and I was lucky enough to work with him when he started that business. And he was a role model of being a very comfortable leader in knowing what he knew well and more importantly knowing what he didn't know well. The answers will emerge from the people around you. You don't need to know. You just have to create, cultivate a culture of, "It's okay that we don't know individually but collectively we can solve this."

MURRAY: (12:08) Yeah. I think too often leaders, myself included at times, we put pressure on ourselves to have all the answers and it's just not possible. We've got to engage and collaborate with others and trust them.

I hope you're enjoying the show. I just wanted to take a moment to remind you that you'll find great leadership questions from our guests at murraywright.com.au/leadership-questions or follow the link in the Show Notes and while you're there why not share your favorite questions?

And now, back to our guest.

Now back to listening. We've touched on it a bit, but what do you see the impact on individuals, teams and organizations? I suppose it's easy to start off not listening but when they do start to improve and change the way they listen to one another, what's the impact?

OSCAR: (13:05) Impacts? Billions of dollars. I'll tell you two stories. One about Lego, one about curing cancer.

The story of Lego is interesting. As the century came to a conclusion around the late 1990's and 2000's, Lego was going broke because kids were more interested in computer games than they were in building plastic block based puzzles. So the new CEO of Lego came in and decided to commission a movie and this movie was called The Adventures of Crash Craddock. Now very few people have ever seen that movie. The movie was a complete failure. The movie sold \$69,000 at the box office plus DVD sales and yet everybody you would talk to today would tell you that the Lego movie franchise is a phenomenal multi-billion dollar success story, which it is. But the CEO of Lego was humble enough to go, "You know what? We got that wrong." He hired two producers from Hollywood, Lord and Miller. Lord and Miller went and listened to a group of people called the Adult Fans Of Lego and what they learned by listening to



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these people is that there is an evil villain in Lego called the Kragle which are people who glue Lego pieces together and that's a no no. But Lord and Miller used this little gem, this little Easter egg in the movie and because the Adult Fans Of Lego knew that, the Adult Fans Of Lego started to promote the movie to their non-Lego friends and the second movie and the third movie and the fourth movie were 100 million, 300 million, 600 million dollar movies in their own right. But then that spawned the billion dollar extension in Lego based computer games and that grew a new generation of children who are completely into Lego and that grew another billion dollars in the Lego sales alone. So just by listening to the Adult Fans Of Lego, which they had completely ignored, Lord and Miller showed them that just listening can grow three billion dollars of additional revenues for Lego. That's one example.

The other one is listening can cure cancer. Dr. Bronwyn King by listening rather than using any other technique, she has stopped 18 billion dollars' worth of money from bankers going into the tobacco industry and she had a moment where she was sitting down with her pension fund or her superannuation fund representative and wanted to buy a house and wanted to check she had enough money and sat down and had a coffee with him. She had enough money. She walked away but something was troubling her. She came back and said, "Is there any paperwork I need to fill in?" And the representative said, "No. You're fine. Dr. King you're in the default option." So she walked away, but she only took one more step because the word default and option linguistically just don't go together but it's an example of industry jargon that we hear every day that we never challenge. So Bronwyn came back because her gut, not her head, not her heart, but her gut told her that something's not right. She asked him, "What does default mean?" And he said, "Well default means that you have other choices. If you don't want to be invested in mining or alcohol or gambling, we can exclude that from your portfolio. There is one other option, tobacco. We can exclude tobacco." And she said, "Did you say tobacco? Do you know what I do? Do you know I'm a lung cancer oncologist? Do you know I collect the train wrecks that are people who started smoking from the age of 15? Do you know I have to explain to their parents and their children that they're dying at the age of 30, 40 and 50 from lung cancer?" And he went, "No. I don't." So from that point on she went on a quest to talk to the trustees, the asset allocators of the finance industry and she's traveled the world since 2010. Run the clock forward eight years she's worked with fund managers to divest 18 billion dollars of tobacco funds from portfolios. So in those two examples you can see the impact that listening can have in terms of creating positive change in the world, not just about the cost of not listening.



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MURRAY: (17:38) The other piece that comes through as you were talking there is the, and you just talked about it, is actually listening to yourself and finding the curiosity to ask the question.

OSCAR: (17:48) It's so true because a lot of time we'll reset a conversation and go back to it. So a lot of work I do in large organizations, one of the biggest costs of not listening is projects, multi-million dollar projects that are completely off track because people will have meetings. They think they've agreed about something and they come back a month later and people don't understand why that particular task isn't complete. The reality is the person who delegated the task didn't delegate it effectively. The person who heard the delegation wasn't comfortable enough to confirm what they were delegated and go away and do their version of what they were asked to do. The reality is their version of it was completely different than everybody else's version of it and the project overrun cost alone from not listening are quite staggering, up to 22% of project overruns are from people who didn't understand their role in the project. They went ahead and did something in their teams that they weren't clear on. So if you're in the audience and you're one of those leaders, always ask the delegated person to tell you what they've heard.

MURRAY: (19:06) Let's get to that second question and you may have already answered this. What was your 'aha' moment, the moment when you suddenly understood what leadership was all about?

OSCAR: (19:16) I think that moment for me came when I was in a situation nearly two decades later from Steve Howcroft, running a division of Microsoft with a set of technologies I knew nothing about, asking very simple questions, not about the technology but asking the team if they understood what they were trying to achieve. I was in a meeting room in Melbourne and this launch of this product was way too early. It was like being given a car with wheels but no rubber tires around the wheels. So it could go really fast if only we had the rubber to put around the wheels and the air to put in the tires. But we didn't have that and people were trying to solve the technical issues of how to get the wheel on the tire and I knew there was no wheel coming any time soon and they knew there was no wheel coming any time soon. And my question was really simple, "Have any of us asked the customer what they want?" And the air went out of the room and everybody took a deep breath in and they all looked at each other hopeful that somebody was going to put their hand up or say something about the customer. And I said, "That's okay. I'll ring a couple of these customers who are having this issue." It was like in the room, "Don't do it Oscar. You're



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just going to get hammered. They're really angry with us already and, you know, you don't need to get involved." And you know, leaders know when they need to step up. In that moment I sent some emails, booked some meetings and a week later I was doing a series of face-to-face meetings and some calls. What was interesting to me is I always ask the customers first up, "Do you trust us to get a solution?" And when you're working at Microsoft they figure you've got enough resources to get the solution. They always trusted us that we would get there. I said, "Which bit of the communication with us is making us untrustworthy at the moment." And all of them said to a person and I can visualize Wendy, one of the chief information officers, saying this to me from her meeting room in Melbourne overlooking the Yarra River at the south bank, and she said to me, "Oscar, all we want is somebody to explain to us in really simple terms what your plan is. We will be happy to build it with you. We will be happy to wait for as long as it takes. But nobody is communicating with us. We can handle bad news. Don't be so arrogant to think that you've got a problem we have never encountered. We have the kinds of problems that you have as well, we run a technology organization. So thank you for coming here face-to-face but whatever you tell me from now on I'm going to expect you're going to deliver on it because at the moment we're dealing with an information black hole." So for me it's the courage to ask the room the question that matters, "What does the customer think?" And then in that moment where leaders have to step up, you know, that wasn't a comfortable meeting for me, I've done many of those meetings. I wasn't there to talk off the talk track. So global companies have, you know, frequently asked questions to stay on message, "That's not what the customers expect from you. They just expect a genuine human connection and for you to say together, 'We can solve this.'"

MURRAY: (22:57) I think in that also there's this whole piece about the assumptions we can make about other people, what they are thinking, what they are experiencing and we just make these assumptions and they're completely wrong and lead us down this path of trouble and angst rather than asking the question.

OSCAR: (23:16) Yeah, which led me to actually write my first book which is called Breakthroughs: How To Confront Assumptions. We have so many blind spots when it comes to knowing what we don't know and being comfortable with the unknowing, being comfortable with the fact we don't know at the moment but know that the answer will emerge. So you know, for leaders out there the most, you know, most impactful question I was really known for asking was, "That's interesting, Murray, but what assumption is sitting behind that response?" And in that moment to get people to start to think about the frameworks, to think about how they think, to think about some of the assumptions that they're putting in place. We do have a



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lot of in-built assumptions and the biggest assumption a lot of the leaders that I've worked with, inside organizations and in my consulting work, is the assumption that what's happening inside our organization is what's happening in the marketplace and anything leaders can do to invest at least a third of their time through the year to be completely external: industry events that aren't in your industry are a really good example of that. There's no point if you're in the finance industry to attend lots of finance industry events. All you're going to get is a competitive perspective. That might be handy but it's not useful.

MURRAY: (24:46) Yeah, and I think... As you were talking there was this... it keeps coming to me about the assumptions we make about ourselves as well and our capacity and capability and impact and how we can have these limiting self-beliefs. We just got to be... make sure we're aware of these and challenge them when needed.

OSCAR: (25:08) And I think a lot of that comes from being careful to cultivate the kinds of people we interact with to get a more deliberate, distinct and diverse perspective. When I talk to people about how many mentors they've got. The answers usually zero, but for those of them who do, they usually say one and I always say, "You need four. Two inside your organization. One who is in a place that you're aspiring to and one that has completely different perspective. You need two outside your organization and one of those needs to be from overseas. And I think in the future we're in, not just the future we're going to operate in, it's those kind of connections to ideas outside our immediate universe and listening to the future which is one of the most un-listened to parts of listening, as well as listening to non-human actors. So you know, how do we listen to animals? How do we listen to the Earth? Is another example of listening that I don't think humans do really well and both the benefits and costs are really high in that context too.

MURRAY: (26:23) So you actually talk about how we are all natural listeners but we lose the connection of our ability to listen just, you know, cultural the way we're brought up, etc. so it gets beat out of us. What advice do you give for people to retrain themselves to get back into connecting with that natural ability to listen?

OSCAR: (26:46) Yeah. I'm glad you said that, Murray. It's a natural ability. The first skill we learn in our mother's womb is to listen, but the minute we're born we get smacked, we come screaming out into the world and we scream for the rest of our lives and we just want people to notice us. So the simplest thing we can do to connect with our natural born listener: breathe more deeply; drink more water during the day; and switch off that device when you're facing people because the impact will be transformational.



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MURRAY: (27:17) That simple isn't it? Simple but not easy, you would say.

Third and final question, failure. We've all had them. What would you say is one of your biggest failures and how does that inform your leadership today?

OSCAR: (27:33) My biggest failure came... learning how to swim as an adult and after three months of working with Judy I could swim two kilometres in a swimming pool, no problem. Then I moved to the ocean. I could not swim more than ten strokes. I was completely beetroot red, I was struggling to hold my breath. Something wasn't going right. So Emma said, "Have you really been able to swim two kilometres non-stop?" And I said, "Yeah. Judy will verify that." She goes, "I'm going to watch you." And I went, "Okay." And after only ten strokes she pointed me to stop and she came up and she said, "You're not breathing." And I said, "What do you mean? I'm breathing. I, you know." She said, "No. You're not breathing out under the water." And I went, "Yeah." She said, "Did you breathe out under the water in the pool?" I said, "No." So she goes, "You're breathing out when you come up and you're breathing in when you come up in the pool." I said, "Yeah."

And because I failed in a system that was dynamic, the ocean, what I learned from that failure was that performance in a static system is easy. Performance in a dynamic system is really hard and if I didn't get the basics right to begin with in the pool, I was never going to succeed in the ocean.

My learning was, one of the first employees that I'd ever managed as a leader of leaders, I'd failed to give them the micro-skills to move from an individual contributor to a people manager. I'd made an assumption that they had all the skills they needed in a static system to move into a dynamic system and my biggest failure as a leader was not setting them up for success.

MURRAY: (29:35) I think that's so important about setting people up for success because too often we say, "Oh you're a good bloke. You go and run the department." Now when they crash and burn, they impact the whole team and there's a good chance they'll leave or they just don't have a good time.

Okay. Brilliant. And that's the questions. But people, if they want to connect with you Oscar, how do they go about it? Because you've got your podcast which is... Is it Deep Listening?

OSCAR: (30:00) yeah, if you just go oscartrimboli.com/podcast or just type Oscar Trimboli on LinkedIn. There's only one of me.



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MURRAY: (30:08) The only one.

OSCAR: (30:08) So it won't be hard to find.

MURRAY: (30:10) And we'll put these links on the Show Notes so you can get that. I would recommend that on Oscar's website he's got a great White Paper which will really cover a lot of what he's been talking about today.

Now before we go Oscar, I'm collecting questions, leadership questions from people. Is there a question that you have that's your favorite or the one you go to that has the biggest impact around this whole listening piece?

OSCAR: (30:40) Murray, if we were to come back in 12 months' time what's the question you didn't ask me that we should have explored today?

MURRAY: (30:48) Nice. Thank you.

OSCAR: (30:50) So that's the question I always ask is how do you explore the unsaid? I like getting people to think about that a bit further than just today.

MURRAY: (31:00) Oscar Trimboli, thank you very much. Great information and insight around listening and thank you for sharing.

OSCAR: (31:06) Thanks for listening, Murray.

MURRAY: (31:08) Thank you, Oscar. Take care.

Thanks to Oscar for reminding us of the importance of deep listening and providing us with so many insights and useful tips. The biggest take away I had from our talk was the whole piece around diversity and working harder to be exposed to other views and ways of thinking and of course, listen to them. How about you? How do you use this? What questions can you ask? And what preparation of yourself can you do to listen better and as Oscar reminded us, ultimately lift our productivity.

[music]

That's it for this episode. Thanks for listening. Head to murraywright.com for the transcripts, key learnings and resources from today's and past episodes. Once you're



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[End of Transcription]



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