

## ATTENTION: THE STUNNING CATALYST

By

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At a recent attorney's Sunbridge Inc symposium Jerry Chasen said, "As lawyers we are trained to think for our clients. Every educated bone in our body knows that our job is to produce answers. Every dollar we have ever earned knows that our ideas are what our clients pay for. But in fact an unsettlingly large amount of the time our client's own answers are the pivotal thing. And helping them find those answers, not giving them ours, is expertise they will gratefully pay for. We need," he said, "to stop telling, and start listening – far longer than we feel comfortable with. We need also to know what questions to ask that will get our clients thinking further for themselves. Most attorneys have no ideas how to do that."

Listening – attention -- of the kind that Jerry was talking about is the first, and most important, component of the leadership model known as The Thinking Environment. The sole mission of a Thinking Environment is to help people think for themselves. In such an environment (there are ten components in all and are described in detail in this website) people do their own thinking, sometimes for the first time. They find their way to new levels of clarity, often after years of secret confusion. They find the courage to say what is real and true for them, to determine what they want, to imagine formerly rejected possibilities, to sort out what really matters to them, to make plans, to make peace. A Thinking Environment is a way of being with people that catalyzes a person's finest thinking. And when our clients can do their own thinking, in this way, they come up with ideas that resolve disputes, with facts that resolve cases, with plans that resolve legacies. This is because their ideas are often better than ours.

And it is not just an attorney's clients that need to think for themselves in order for a law practice to operate at highest performance. Every member of the firm needs to be thinking for themselves, too – partners and secretaries alike. This, too, is rare.

Given its importance, isn't it curious that it is rare? No. Not really, because we are guided by our professional definition of help; and it is often wrong. Help, so we are taught, is the act of doing something for someone. Help is driving people rather than clearing the path. It is speaking for them rather than helping

them find their voice. Help traditionally is, as the parable says, feeding people rather than teaching them to fish. It is donating cash rather than creating solutions.

The definition of help as doing things *for* people is insidious. It infantilizes them. It keeps them victims. It makes them look weak and us look strong. It keeps them in our power. It fails to find the best answers and ways forward – it cheats them.

Real help gives the reins back to the person who is seeking help. The person who has the problem also has the solution. The person who has the question usually has the best answer. Not always, But most of the time. Vastly more often than any attorney ever dares prove.

So what does this kind of attention, this deep listening, that ignites the human mind look like? Ironically, it is mostly invisible. It goes on on the inside. It is quiet. It hardly speaks.

This kind of listening is based on courage – the courage to trust our client's own intelligence.

When you are listening in this way, when you are offering deep attention, you are beaming. You are beaming belief in your client's ability to come up with their own answers, to find their own way. You are more drivingly interested in what is real and true for the client than you are frightened of being outshone or of being proved wrong.

Your attention is not a technique. It is a presence that is generated from a wellspring of assumptions about the client. You are assuming as you listen that the client can think well, that with correct information which you sometimes have to supply, they can figure things out. You are assuming that they are inherently resourceful, good, and desirous of the best for everyone. You are assuming, particularly in conflict, that there is a way forward that neither party has yet thought of that will be truly good for both – and that they themselves can think of it.

Attention of this quality actually generates good ideas. There is no such thing as *just listening*.

But we mustn't kid ourselves. This sounds easy. But it is one of the hardest, most challenging, most counter cultural (not counter intuitive) things we ever attempt. It even takes training, or un-training in most cases. We think we listen but we don't. One study revealed this deficit all too graphically A group of professionals were asked how long they thought they listened before they offered analysis or advice or asked questions. They said, "At least three minutes." Their clients were asked how long they wished the professionals would listen before they offered analysis or advice, or asked questions. They said, "At least three minutes."

When those professionals were then observed listening to their clients, the average time before they intervened was twenty seconds.

Consider the implications of this professional habit. The best ideas are rarely found. Thus, the best outcomes are rarely experienced. If you thought that you could double the quality of the work you do with clients just by listening for three minutes rather than twenty seconds, wouldn't you do it? And if that listening had to be more than just waiting to speak; if it had to be generated by a genuine interest in the fact that your client is thinking, in their fine mind at work, even if that were a foreign concept to you, wouldn't you jump the confines of the definition of professional expertise, and dare to listen in this way?

And with your partners and staff, if you knew that you could save two thirds of your meeting time and save the cost of each decision by nearly 80 percent, wouldn't you do whatever it would take? And if you were to find out that what it would take would be to be quiet, to focus your attention rather than to speak, wouldn't you summon the courage to trust that much?

"No development in my entire professional life," said Jeff Knapp, "has been more important to me and my law practice, than learning to give attention in this way, both to my clients and to my team. And nothing has been as surprising as the challenge of it. I just wish it had been taught in law school. It should be."

Despite the stereotype, most attorneys want the very best for their clients, not just for themselves. Listening this way is a sure road to both.

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