

Soulful listening for relationships

Guest: Terri Lonowski

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Meagen Gibson - [00:00:10]

Welcome to this interview. I'm Meagen Gibson, co-host of the Relationship Super Conference.

Today I'm speaking with Terri Lonowski, who created a five element holistic approach to heal the communication divide experienced in our relationships at work and in our personal lives.

Terri is a TEDx speaker and founder of Soulful Listening and serves as chair of the American Counseling Association Foundation, representing over 50,000 professional counselors nationwide.

Terri, thank you for being with us today.

Terri Lonowski

Meagen, I'm super excited to be here. Thank you for inviting me to have a conversation with you.

Meagen Gibson

So, Terri, if you could start by telling me what Soulful Listening is and what inspired you to create it?

Terri Lonowski

Certainly. As you had mentioned, Soulful Listening is a holistic approach to communicating and connecting on a deeper level that is so missing today. People don't feel heard, and it is deadly. Over half of the American population feels lonely because of this. And the health implications are equivalent to smoking 15 cigarettes a day, which is absolutely devastating.

And when we don't feel heard, it really goes against the grain of our very human nature. We're designed to thrive when we feel seen and heard and supported by others, period.

And so I was inspired to take a deeper look at this. I was involved with human-centered design teams. I was coaching them from across the nation. We ended up in the White House a couple of times, and I saw how powerful empathy was. And if you're not familiar with human-centered design or design thinking, at the heart of it is empathy. And using that as the foundation for changing the way you do business, the way you interact with the people that you serve. And I saw stale programs flip on their ear, and I thought, there are still major missing pieces in how we communicate.

And I took some time to do some deep soul searching and reflecting upon what helped me to thrive despite the odds. And out of that emerged, Soulful Listening. And Soulful Listening has five easily repeatable elements. And would you like me to just go over that briefly?

Meagen Gibson

Yeah, absolutely. Please do.

Terri Lonowski - [00:02:34]

So the first element is self care. And we don't often think of the importance of self care relating to the quality of our communication and conversation, but it really is critical. I think we could all imagine a time when we've had enough rest, good nutrition for a few days, and in that space we really have more to offer a conversation. We're able to be more present. We can really hold the space for the conversation to unfold. But when we haven't met our basic needs, it's just so difficult to do.

And self care is more than a bubble bath, although it may include that at some times. But it's really looking at things like setting healthy boundaries, taking care of your physical body, and also looking at how we are talking to ourselves. And all of this plays into really being the best version of ourselves.

Meagen Gibson

It's so great that you name that, because I've absolutely noticed my ability to be a great listener is affected by my stress load, my stress tolerance, how much sleep I'm getting. I can be present for somebody as long as I'm taking care of myself. But if I'm not, my ability to do that has diminished.

Terri Lonowski

So true. And it's a gift you give not only to yourself, but to everyone you come in contact with.

And this leads us to the second element of Soulful Listening, which is becoming fully present. I imagine we all have situations where we can think of where we can almost see a bubble above a person's head with the laundry list of things they are thinking about, not us or our conversation. We feel it. We feel it.

And so when we truly take care of ourselves and we become fully present, we bring a quality of grace and compassion into every interaction.

And sometimes becoming present may sound a little abstract. So what I would love to do is to share an exercise I love to do at my live events, if that's okay with you?

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely.

Terri Lonowski

So first of all, check in with your body, see how you feel right now. Just notice it, maybe wiggle around a little bit in your chair or standing up.

Now what we're going to do, we're going to take three intentional breaths. The way we'll do that is we'll breathe in through our nose. We'll hold. And we'll breathe out through our mouth. And as we're doing this, I would like you to notice the warmth in your heart area.

And we're going to breathe into the count of 4, we'll hold and breathe out to the count of 6.

So let's begin. Breathe in through your nose, 1 2 3 4. Hold.

Out through your mouth, 1 2 3 4 5 6.

Again, in through your nose. Hold. Out through your mouth.

And a third time, in through your nose. Hold. And out through your mouth.

Now notice how your body feels. Wiggle your toes.

[00:06:08]

We are all more fully in our bodies now. And I have felt the energy shift between the two of us, Meagen.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely.

Terri Lonowski

And it's so simple to do. No big announcement needs to be made. You can just take a few breaths and notice how your energy shifts and really notice how people react to you when you're in this calmer, more present state.

Meagen Gibson

And I think we really overestimate how much effort it takes to become fully present. That was only three breaths, and I noticed my first breath was quick and much more shallow, I had less access. By the second breath, I had a ton more space and was able to really calm. And by the third breath, I was like, I could sit here breathing with you all day. It didn't take that long or that much effort. It's such a simple and quick exercise to become fully present.

Terri Lonowski

Absolutely. And it's invaluable. And it helps us to access more of our higher self, too. More of our talents and abilities in the moment.

And so all of this leads to the third element of Soulful Listening, which is a combination of active listening and empathy. If these two had a child, it would be this element. And it's all in listening, where you listen with every fiber of your being to more than just words. You listen with all your senses, your eyes, your ears, your heart, your intuition to what's being said beyond words.

And the Urban Dictionary has a definition for this type of listening, and they call it quantum listening. And when we tune in and listen in this deeper way, we often gain insights into how we might be helpful to another.

Which leads us into the fourth element of Soulful Listening, and that's inspired action. We all have access to different resources and connections that can be of enormous help to another.

And as a person is revealing information to you, taking note and taking action, no strings attached. Whether it be in a romantic relationship, whether it be with your child, whether it be in the work setting. Just imagine what that would feel like if you indeed were heard and action was taken.

And then the fifth element was woven in, and the fifth element is the feedback loop. That's when you let a person know you've taken inspired action on their behalf.

I think sometimes when we have deep conversations, people are nodding their heads, you feel heard, and they walk away, and it falls into the abyss. Did they ever even really hear?

And so when you repeat these five elements, it embeds integrity within a relationship. Imagine going back to a person that has heard you in this way, has taken some inspired action, has not kept you in the dark, they let you know what's going on. The next time you come to the table and are together, you can relax a little bit more. You can be even more vulnerable, and you can have the confidence that you're being heard and that it matters.

Meagen Gibson - [00:09:31]

The feedback loop aspect reminds me of a relationship I have with two different women. They're friends, and we're all friends together, but we're all really great at telling one another, let's get together. I would really love to see you. And it's hard for all of us to follow through to the next step.

And so we've intentionally held each other accountable, and we're doing a much better job now of saying, okay, yes, we've confirmed, like we always do, that we want to be together, now when? And booking 6 weeks out, which is like that follow through the feedback loop of, I'm committed to this. And none of us is left chasing after the other or carrying the weight of maintaining the friendship and the depth that we need for each other.

Terri Lonowski

Oh, that is so beautiful. And I imagine that your relationship grows deeper and deeper each time you know you can count on one another. And you know that you all are dealing with very busy lives and you are making your relationship a priority. That is an extraordinarily beautiful gift.

Meagen Gibson

Now that takes time, for anybody watching, I've known these women now, doing math, 7 years. We've arrived at this point in year 7. It took us too long to get there, but friendships take time, and sometimes that kind of friendship takes time.

I want to touch back on something that you said at the beginning as well, which was about isolation and loneliness. And I think sometimes we associate that with people who are physically isolated or physically alone. But I'm sure everybody can relate to feeling isolation and loneliness when we're with people. Especially our family, who we're supposed to be closest to or our peer group, who we're supposed to belong to and who we feel a sense of connection to. That could be a team. It could be a lot of things. A group of people at work. And feeling that isolation and loneliness and what that has to do with your concept of Soulful Listening is really the missing piece there.

Terri Lonowski

It is. And it has applications in all settings. You named several different settings right now. And I was doing a keynote for a large leadership group recently. And one of the things they've helped me to remember is how easily this approach bridges into all relationships, as they were applying Soulful Listening in the work setting, and they were taking it home and really excited to be working with their family or bringing this to their family. And one was navigating through the teenage years, and they just found it to be extremely valuable and applicable to all settings.

And so when we look at that disconnect, that is so prevalent, when we have over half of the American population that would self identify as being lonely, we know that we can be around people and not feel heard at all. So it's not physical proximity.

And then we have the complications of the past couple of years, which just, I would say, exacerbated this whole dynamic. And so being deliberate in how we interact with one another is so critical for human performance, for performance in the workplace, for connected relationships in your family, for really elevating human potential in all settings. It is, as you mentioned, the missing piece.

Meagen Gibson

And I don't know if anybody else can relate to this that's listening, but I know after year one of the pandemic, when I would carefully start to see people, I had a lot of intensity. Because we hadn't seen one another in a while so it would feel like when you got social interactions, when you physically got to be in the same place with people, that I would just go way too hard, way too fast. They'd be like, whoa. But we haven't been together physically. It was just so much more heightened what you're

added when you're physically present with somebody and you're both connected in the Soulful Listening practices.

Terri Lonowski - [00:13:57]

You want to make the most of that, at that time, a rare situation, but when we realized that we could just take a breath and be in that moment, you really cover more territory, too. But it's like drinking from a firehose. You want to get it all in because you've been so removed from it. So I totally understand.

Meagen Gibson

I've adapted since then. It's fine.

So I know that you say that one Soulful Listening conversation has the power to change the trajectory of a life, I want to know what you mean by that.

Terri Lonowski

Well, how about if I share a couple of examples. Let's just do this. I'm going to take it way back to my childhood and bring it on home.

So I grew up in a small country town of Auburn, Nebraska. Population was about 3,000. And I lived in a mansion, which sounds lovely, on the second floor of this mansion, because my family had turned the first floor into a bustling restaurant with banging and clanging and late night bar crowds beneath my bedroom every night. And I had a quieter temperament. And so for me, that was just chaos and wild family dysfunction at every corner.

And what I wanted more than anything was to feel seen and heard. And if someone would have asked me, well, who listens to you? It would not have been my parents. However, I was so fortunate. There was one person that did, and that was my grandma, Helga. And in her presence it was though we were in a safe, warm, delicious bubble and savory aromas were wafting in from the kitchen adding extra comfort. And our relationship was critically important all throughout my life.

And one time in particular, when I was a senior in high school, when we go in for that guidance counselor conversation about what's next, my guidance counselor said, "Terri, you're a small town girl. You'd get lost in a big city like Lincoln, Nebraska. Your best bet is to go to secretarial school and work for your family restaurant", which would have been a death sentence for my spirit.

And so I had some sleepless nights, and I turned to Grandma Helga to sort through that lie. And she was a resilient woman, twice widowed, successful in business, and her words carry weight. And so when I brought this story before her, she just poised herself and said, "Terri, look at all I've done without education. Think of what you can do with it". And in that very moment the trajectory of my life shifted forever.

Meagen Gibson

Well, it occurs to me as you're telling that story, not only was she a successful businesswoman, but she also was, because there's a lot of, I shouldn't say a lot, but many people are successful but haven't had the relationship with you where you felt seen and heard. So the combination of those two things, that you having the previous relationship that she made you feel safe and seen and heard all the time, and her success meant that whatever she was going to say in that moment was going to be the thing you were going to take with you.

Terri Lonowski

That's absolutely right. And when we bring forth our best version of ourselves, we establish a degree of credibility with people. And so when you do speak, when you have listened deeply and you've

taken into account and you bring forth the resources you have, when you then speak people do tend to listen and take action.

Meagen Gibson - [00:17:48]

And I think you said you had two examples. You don't have to give another one, but I think you said you had another one.

Terri Lonowski

So I'm going to weave this together and demonstrate that this practice can be a generational gift. And so I'm going to weave it into how I have shared this gift with my son.

And so as a single parent from the time he was 10, his name is Jacob. Jacob and I knew early on it would be up to the two of us to finance whatever was going to follow high school. So we would tune in and have conversations all along the way. And it was Soulful Listening conversations, but it wasn't called that.

And so he was 15 and we tuned in for a high stakes conversation and I asked him, "Jacob, what would you like for your after high school experience?". And he, at 6'5, 300lbs, at 15 years old, said, "Mom, I'd like to go someplace strong in math and science and if I could play on a good football team, is there a place that has both?". I heard Jacob beyond his words, beyond his body language, to that deeply insightful part of him that was really calling forth a life of great possibilities.

And so I took action and checked around and found this Southern school kept popping up. And we were living in Nebraska and the Southern school was popping up. So I took that back to Jacob, the feedback loop, and just shared with him, "People are saying this school", he goes, "Well, we should go".

I didn't even know how I was going to pay for a plane ticket let alone feed this 300lb behemoth athlete in a big city. But when you listen soulfully and take action, doors just seem to open.

We went to this Southern school and met with coaches, met with students, and we're in a park area or in a park walking, and he looked down at me from his 6'5 perch and said, "Mom, I feel like I belong here".

Before the end of his junior year, Jacob had earned a full scholarship to Georgia Tech. And he did all the work academically and physically, I simply walked alongside him holding the space for possibility and taking action.

And now to just tie it all together, he is now a full grown man and a doctor of physical therapy and is living a life of great possibilities.

And a couple of years ago he wrote me a poem. Imagine this big guy writing this heart centered poem. And it was about the value that he sees in our relationship and that he will accept nothing less in all of his relationships going forward. So it is a relationship that he has had modeled for him, and now he will replicate and is replicating in his own life.

So we have gifts that we can give throughout the generations. This, to me, is one of the great gifts.

Meagen Gibson

If my son had written me that kind of poem, I would have it wallpapered to the bricks behind me so that everyone would ask me, oh, this is my son's poem to me.

That's such a wonderful story. And I can relate to it so much and just creating what you needed. Taking the example from your grandma Helga, creating the thing you want to see in the world and

then also modeling that. It's not that you're just telling people that this works, you've seen it work in your life, in the people that you serve and the people that you work with.

[00:21:30]

And I've often heard that parenting teenagers, I don't have any yet, but parenting teenagers, it's shifting into a consultant role, which I think is a business term for what you're talking about. Which is just soulfully listening to a person who is developing into an adult. He came to you and he said, here's what I'm interested in, and all you did was do a little research and consult and say, here's an option you might want to consider, but it was really up to him at that point.

Terri Lonowski

Oh, absolutely. He was the one that had... For a division one athletes football you have to be committed to putting a lot of work in yourself. That is not something somebody can drive for you. That has to come from within. And so I have been just a partner walking alongside him, and it makes a difference. Even one person in your life can make a tremendous difference.

And when you are modeling this day in and day out... And I would make it a point of connecting with him throughout the adolescent years. And we had a really great relationship. And so he was interested in science and math, and I'm more hug a tree and psychology. So I read *Scientific America* so we can have a dinner conversation about quantum physics, parallel universes and string theory.

Meagen Gibson

You do what you have to.

Terri Lonowski

That's true.

In the work setting, too, finding the point that you can connect with those that you are working together with, are teaming with. Or a romantic partnership, looking at where's our connect point and have some healthy, fun, productive conversations for non high stakes topics, too.

Meagen Gibson

Absolutely.

I have a 12 year old son and he a couple of years ago got really into Japanese anime. And so I was a little bit selective, wanted to support him but also wanted to check it out. And I found a series that was all about a boys volleyball team in Japan. And so I got him into that, and bought him the whole series.

And long story short, now we play volleyball together. I'm his volleyball coach. So you never know how the things that you support, even if you don't necessarily, I didn't understand Japanese manga. It's not my thing. We could have different things and still support each other and the roads might lead you back to it as well.

Terri Lonowski

That is so cool. And I bet you had some fun along the way, too. We find treasures and surprises along the way when we are bringing higher level communication into our interactions with relationships with all types.

Meagen Gibson - [00:24:20]

Absolutely. So if you were to leave our listeners with one takeaway from our time together today, what would it be?

Terri Lonowski

It would be to start small. To really embrace this approach and these elements and start small.

Pick one conversation over the course of this next week that's important to you, a person that you want to let know that you hear them.

Eat well for a couple of days, do a little exercise, become present and have that conversation. And just check in and see how it feels to you and how it feels to the person that you're speaking with.

And simply, if there is one thing I would leave you with, is to take a breath and listen, or three.

Meagen Gibson

Three works really well.

Terri Lonowski

Take three and listen.

Meagen Gibson

I would recommend three. I'm a big fan of three breaths.

Terri, if people want to find out more about you and your work, how can they do that?

Terri Lonowski

My website is a really good way to check in and see what I'm up to, and it is soulfullistening.com. So that's one word, soulfullistening.com.

And another thing that people may want to check into is the TEDx Talk that I did. And that's easy to find, too. And I believe we're going to share that in the show notes for our conversation. And that's another thing that is easy to share with other people that maybe you want to have one of the Soulful Listening conversations. And a quick listen to either this talk or the TEDx Talk will help you to come to that conversation with a common background or common foundation.

So thank you so much. I've enjoyed this.

Meagen Gibson

Thank you. Thanks for being with us today.