

BOOK REVIEWS

Radical Listening: The Art of True Connection by Christian Van Nieuwerburgh and Robert Biswas-Diener

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This book features the authors' Positive Psychology perspective to offer their model of how to take listening to the next level, with an aim of transcending the practices of 'active listening'. 'Radical listening', they explain, is an approach to conversations, which leads (in the words of the subtitle) to 'The art of true connection'.

Radical Listening: The Art of True Connection by Christian van Nieuwerburgh and Robert Biswas-Diener

Berrett-Koehler, 2025, 208 pages, ISBN 9781523007196, \$27.95 (Kindle edition available) The Art of True Connection

Ask any communicator to tell you their most important skills. 'Listening!', they will chorus, probably at number one in their chart. Rightly so, and Solution Focused practitioners have duly developed useful advanced concepts such as 'Listening for resources' and 'Listening to the current answer before you know what to ask as your next question.' We might describe our stance as 'solution-eared' and 'improvisational'.

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What's radical is when listening:

- Involves the listener being clear about their intention
- Is about connection rather than information
- Is active, such as including checking, and especially then asking questions

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The first two points bring in helpful distinctions, such as listening being more for making progress and improving relationships, than for the satisfaction of the listener's curiosity or understanding.

We talkative practitioners will also appreciate the third point, which allows us our voice alongside that of whoever we may be listening to. Considering extremes in which that isn't the case, you might be reminded of Nancy Kline's exciting 'Time to Think' activities which really do approach 'listening only'.

I like a book with a sense of humour. This one has a lovely series of jokes in the chapter about Questioning, where the authors are examining kinds of questions that interfere with radical listening. For example, in an effort to combat 'cluster questions' (lots of questions rolled together), they advise the reader to 'Feel free to take your time and land on a single, helpful question', which is then paradoxically followed by 'Because what would happen if you did not? How would it affect others? Who would it affect? What might it say about your ability to listen? How would others see you?'

Likewise, reflecting on 'Trojan horse' questions with which the listener slides in possibly unwanted advice, they ask, 'How might you create time to reflect on your use of questions to avoid Trojan horse questions when you are talking to others?'

Back in serious mode, 'Questioning' sits alongside 'Acknowledging' and 'Interjecting' in the authors' inventory of external listening skills, with 'Noticing', 'Quiet' and 'Accepting' constituting the internal listening skills. Together they make up the Radical Listening skill set. There are chapters on each of these, making up the bulk of the contents.

The book is written with conversational clarity, taking enjoyable excursions from the central model to illustrate and contextualise their points. We learn, for example, to notice cultural comparisons by choice of proverbs. The Japanese offer 'If the bird had not sung it would not have been shot', in contrast to the Americans' belief that 'the squeaky wheel gets the grease'.

While the book is deliberately wide-ranging and makes no claims to be solutions-focused or even aimed particularly at coaches or consultants, we know that Christian and Robert are leading practitioners in the positive psychology tradition, and it's pleasing to notice that 'solutions talk' outweighs 'problem talk' throughout, prompting an index that contains 'strengths' but not 'weaknesses', 'affirming' without 'complaining' and 'trust' without 'suspicion'.

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