

The Best Way to Understand? Listen

To connect with others, learn how to truly hear them.

Reviewed by Terrence Fernsler

Listen Like You Mean It: Reclaiming the Lost Art of True Connection. By Ximena Vengoechea. Hardcover. 315 pages. Portfolio/Penguin, penguinrandomhouse.com.

Meaningful conversation requires good listening skills. We too often focus only on what we're saying and how to say it, thinking if we can get our message across we can persuade others to agree with us. Thinking of others as a mere audience by speaking *to* them rather than *with* them, however, can make it hard for them to relate to us.

Conversations are openings to connect. They help us understand others' desires. They reveal common beliefs. While this book focuses on one-on-one interactions, it also applies to group dynamics and can help teams work together more effectively.

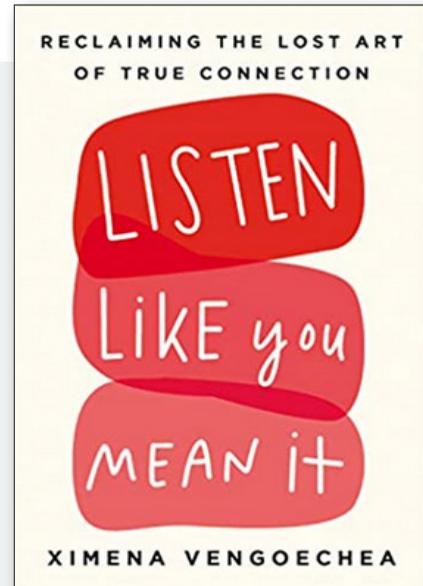
“Along the way you'll learn more about yourself.”

Ximena Vengoechea opens her book by explaining what affects listening. Your presence, the setting, and the way you pay attention can enhance or distract from authentic listening, so she suggests ways to reduce distractions. She then explores how to navigate through unmet needs and create the space to express concerns.

Exercises and examples throughout the book will help you become more present in conversations. Along the way you'll learn more about yourself. You'll discover your listening strengths and learn how to improve shortcomings. Vengoechea encourages developing your emotional intelligence to raise the bar in connecting.

Good listening earns people's trust. It teaches us about others and the hopes and fears we share with them. Learning to listen helps us meet each other as who we are.

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Listen Up

Without careful attention, you may miss what your conversational partner is telling you. You may hear only part of the story or misunderstand it completely. *Listen Like You Mean It* offers strategies to encourage true conversation. For example:

Stay away from surface listening – the act of hearing the literal but not the emotional content. If you listen on the surface, you'll miss clues to the other person's perspective.

Get comfortable with silence. Don't rush to fill every quiet moment. Silence opens up space for people to fully express themselves.

Embrace empathetic listening, which happens when you seek to understand another person's inner world. To listen with empathy, you need to ask questions specific to the other person, then tune in to the answers – not what you expect to hear but what's really being said.

Set devices aside. Close your screens and put your phone away to minimize distractions. Encourage others to do the same.

Tap into feelings. Tune in to the underlying feelings that may be driving the other person's conversation.

Know your listening limits. Deep listening is tiring, so pace yourself, take a break when needed, and set boundaries so that you don't drain yourself.

