WORKSHOPSKILL · PARTICIPANT KIT

The Listening Ladder — Participant Workbook

The guide in print, a frame to write after every debrief question, and session notes pages.

Folder: `the-listening-ladder` · Category: communication · pairs of 2 or trios of 3 · 15 min · offline · print props · assessment-type

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15
MINUTES

print props
SETTING

The Listening Ladder — Facilitator Guide

Most “listening” exercises stop at paraphrasing the words. This ladder climbs two rungs higher — the feeling under the words, then what the speaker left unsaid — and the group only counts the climb when a third person, holding a two-faced card, says *landed*. The lesson is not that good listeners exist. It is that depth is a choice you make on purpose, and the last rung is the one almost nobody takes at work.

Objectives

By the end of the activity, participants will have:

1. Heard their own listening stop at the first rung — the facts restated, the point missed.
2. Named a feeling out loud and **taken a correction for it**, on purpose, in a low-stakes round.
3. Asked one question about what was *not* said, then held the silence instead of filling it.

When to use this activity

- A team hears each other’s words but keeps missing the point, and is surprised by what comes back.
- You have fifteen minutes and pairs or trios — not a whole-room energy to burn.
- You want a measurable before/after for a communication session; this folder carries a pair-level pre/post measure.

The three rungs

Rung	The listener may…	The test
A — Literal	paraphrase the **words** only	“You said X, Y, Z.” Does the speaker agree the facts landed?
B — Feeling	add the **feeling** under the words	“And what I heard under that was frustration.” Right, or over-reach?
C — Unspoken	ask **what was left unsaid**	“What did you not say that I should know?” The speaker fills the gap.

Setup

Clock: fifteen minutes on the floor for the three rounds and the debrief. The pre- and post-measure add two minutes each, bookending the fifteen.

Space: three chairs per trio, angled so the pair can face each other and the validator can watch both. No table between the pair — cards stay in hand until the debrief, so the table never becomes a script.

Materials per trio:

Item	Source
1 × Speaker / Listener / Validator role card	`the-listening-ladder-prop-cards.pdf` (role cards)
1 × Round A / B / C prompt card	`the-listening-ladder-prop-cards.pdf` (round cards)
1 × validator face — *landed / not yet*	printed on the Validator card; there is no third face

Item	Source
1 × participant workbook per person	`the-listening-ladder-workbook.pdf` (US Letter: `the-listening-ladder-workbook-Letter.pdf`)
2 × answer sheet per person	`the-listening-ladder-paper-form.pdf` — one for the pre, one for the post
1 × timer	your phone, or the deck's run-of-show timer on **T**

Grouping rule: trios give the cleanest signal, because a dedicated validator keeps the pair honest. In a tight room, run pairs and let them self-validate by swapping roles each round — noisier results, more repetitions.

Roles: speaker (90 seconds on one real thing, then answers the round-C question), listener (answers only at the rung the round allows), validator (raises the card, says nothing until the round closes). Rotate so everyone speaks once across the three rounds.

How to run it

Time	Phase	Facilitator does	Participants do
0–2	Pre-measure	"Five statements, about your own last week at work — not about this exercise."	Answer alone on the answer sheet
2–3	Pair and assign	Form trios, hand out role and round cards, name the rotation out loud.	Take cards, split speaker / listener / validator
3–6	Round A — Literal	Start the timer. "Ninety seconds on the thing that slowed you down. Listener: words only."	Speaker talks; listener restates the facts; validator raises *landed* or *not yet*
6–9	Round B — Feeling	Same speaker, fresh ninety seconds. "Name what sits under it — then ask whether you got it right."	Listener names the feeling; speaker corrects or confirms; validator judges fit, not poetry
9–12	Round C — Unspoken	New speaker, new topic. "One question about what was not said. Then stop talking."	Listener asks; the pair sits in the gap; validator marks whether it was held
12–15	Debrief	Run the debrief sheet with the cards still in hand.	Compare where each round landed; choose one rung to practice
15–17	Post-measure	Same five statements, now about the climb just completed.	Answer alone; pairs compare their own movement

Then run the debrief — see `the-listening-ladder-debrief.md`.

Failure modes

1. **Round C turns into advice.** The listener hears the gap and immediately solves it. Rescue: repeat the rule before the round, not after — "one question, then quiet. The speaker fills it."
2. **The validator is polite.** "Close enough" hides the miss and the pair learns nothing. Rescue: hold up the card and read the two faces aloud — *landed*, *not yet*. "Not yet" is the useful one, and saying it early makes it safe.
3. **A feeling gets stated as a diagnosis.** Round B slides into telling the speaker what they really feel. Rescue: require the check — "have I got that right?" — and let the correction land without apology.
4. **The confident one narrates all three rounds.** Rescue: the rotation is not a courtesy, it is the design; three speakers is three data points, one speaker is one.

Variations

- **Online:** trios in a breakout room, cameras on, cards held to the lens or shared on screen. Keep the ninety seconds and the silence — the constraint is the activity, not the room.
- **Large groups (20+):** run every trio at once off the same call-outs; put `the-listening-ladder-activity-poster.pdf` (A3) on the wall as the shared clock, then debrief in plenary with three or four pairs reporting where their validator said *not yet*.
- **Short version (10 min):** run rounds A and C only and drop the measures. You lose the feeling rung — say so in the debrief, because the rung people skip under time pressure is exactly the rung they skip at work.
- **Assessment-type:** run the pre-measure *before* trios form and the post-measure right after the debrief — see `the-listening-ladder-assessment.json`. The interesting number is not the score, it is the pair's move.

Facilitation notes

- The silence after a round-C question is the whole exercise. Do not rescue it; count five seconds on your fingers if you must.
- Topics are real but low-stakes — "the thing that slowed you down this week" beats a loaded confession.
- The strongest transfer question: "Which rung do you already skip at work, and what does skipping it cost you?"

Put it on the wall

Print `the-listening-ladder-activity-poster.pdf` (A3) to put the run of show, the three rungs and the watch-outs on one wall while you facilitate.

Props in this folder

- `the-listening-ladder-prop-cards.pdf` — poker-spec print sheet (63.5 × 88.9 mm, bleed and cut guides): role cards, round cards, branded backs, blanks
- `the-listening-ladder-guide.md` — this run sheet
- `the-listening-ladder-debrief.md` — six debrief questions, failure modes of the debrief, scoring cues
- `the-listening-ladder-assessment.json` — pre/post measure preset: 5 items, one reverse-scored, pair-level
- `the-listening-ladder-paper-form.pdf` — the measure as a print-and-fill answer sheet
- `the-listening-ladder-workbook.pdf` — participant workbook: the idea in plain words, per-round notes, action page
- `the-listening-ladder-slide-deck.html` / `.pdf` — the deck for teaching or projecting, one idea per slide
- `the-listening-ladder-run-sheet.pdf` — the print edition: this run sheet + the debrief, bound as one A4 document with bookmarks
- `the-listening-ladder-activity-poster.pdf` — the whole activity on one A3 wall sheet: run of show, the three rungs, watch-outs
- `the-listening-ladder-start-here.md` — one page, thirty seconds, then print and go
- `SKILL.md` — machine-readable manifest for AI agents
- `*-Letter.pdf` — US Letter editions of the print documents

Agent version

Every file in this folder has a stable public URL — an AI agent can fetch the props, the debrief and this run sheet with three curl commands (see `SKILL.md`). The paper version itself needs no screen at all: no projector, no accounts, just chairs and cards.

The Listening Ladder — Debrief Sheet

> Six questions, four failure modes of the debrief itself, one rule: the validator cards are the evidence.
>
> Use with `the-listening-ladder-guide.md`. The debrief runs the last three minutes of the fifteen.

How to run this debrief

- Keep the cards in hand, not on the table. Every question points at a card someone held.
- Ask **to the trio first**, then to the room. The trio has the freshest evidence; the room has the pattern.
- Where a round produced nothing — no correction, no *not yet*, no silence — say so plainly. A clean round is a round that was skipped, not a round that went well.

What the cards already tell you

1. **Round A misses.** The words came back, the facts did not. That is the cost of one-way listening — the same cost as a handover email nobody checked.
2. **Round B over-reaches.** Naming a feeling is a guess, not a reading. A listener who guesses *and checks* beats one who guesses and states.
3. **Round C goes quiet.** The pair who sat in the unsaid gap without rushing to fix it are the ones who actually heard. Most teams skip this rung every working day.

The six questions

1. The skipped rung.

"Which rung did your pair climb easiest — and which one did you skip?"

→ Targets: where the pair's listening stops by default. The skipped rung is the one they skip at work; ask what skipping it costs.

2. The "not yet".

"Where did the validator say *not yet* — and what changed before it became *landed*?"

→ Targets: the repair move, isolated. This is the strongest single indicator in the debrief: if the card flipped and nothing changed, the validator went polite.

3. The unsaid question.

"What is the one round-C question you will ask in a real conversation this week?"

→ Targets: commitment, singular. One question survives the week; a list of five does not.

4. The correction.

“Speaker: when the listener named your feeling badly, what did it cost you to say ’no, not quite’?”

→ Targets: whether the room can correct a hearing without escalating it. If nobody corrected anything across three rounds, the exercise was theatre — say so.

5. The held silence.

“Listener: what was it like to ask your round-C question and then not fill the quiet?”

→ Targets: tolerance for the gap. Watch for the ones who laugh it off; that is usually the person who solves too early at work.

6. The cost of rung one.

“Think of the last thing someone explained to you at work that you heard as facts only. What did you miss?”

→ Targets: transfer off the table. Ask for a named case, not a principle — a principle means nobody is volunteering.

Failure modes of the debrief itself

Failure mode	Why it happens	The rescue
The debrief turns into advice-giving	Someone heard the gap and jumps to fix it	Rule: report what you heard, not what they should do. Advice is round-A listening in a suit.
The validator says “good job”	Politeness hides the miss	Only two faces on the card — landed, or not yet. Ask which *not yet* they are still not saying.
Round C stays silent for the wrong reason	Nobody has a question to ask	Model one aloud: “What didn’t you say that I should know?” Then wait the full five seconds.
Feelings get treated as diagnoses	An over-confident paraphrase lands as truth	Always close round B with “have I got that right?” and let the correction be boring, not brave.

Scoring cues (assessment-type sessions)

If you ran the pre/post measure (`the-listening-ladder-assessment.json`), these observables during the rounds are what justify the movement in the report:

Observable	Points to
Listener restates before replying in round B	Paraphrase becoming a habit, not a rule
Speaker corrects a feeling and the pair stays warm	The room can survive being misheard
Round C’s question is followed by silence, not solution	Tolerance for the unsaid
Validator says *not yet* at least once	The check is real rather than ceremonial

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Reading the pre/post

Score at pair level only (see `the-listening-ladder-assessment.json`). Report `pair_delta` and `construct_deltas`, honour `report_note`, and never rank individuals — the exercise measures the quality of the listening loop, not the sharpness of anyone's ear.

The skipped rung.

Which rung did your pair climb easiest — and which one did you skip?

The "not yet".

Where did the validator say *not yet* — and what changed before it became *landed*?

The unsaid question.

What is the one round-C question you will ask in a real conversation this week?

The correction.

Speaker: when the listener named your feeling badly, what did it cost you to say ’no, not quite’?

The held silence.

Listener: what was it like to ask your round-C question and then not fill the quiet?

The cost of rung one.

Think of the last thing someone explained to you at work that you heard as facts only. What did you miss?

Session notes