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6 listening techniques that can change everything

By BRAD LARSEN, Standard-Examiner contributor Oct 22, 2014



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“The most basic and powerful way to connect to another person is to listen. Just listen. Perhaps the most important thing we ever give each other is our attention.”

-Rachel Naomi Remen

If there's a common complaint by employers and employees, it's that the other doesn't listen. It's paradoxical that both will claim emphatically that they listen, but the other doesn't. That's why it's important that you understand listening and develop listening skills.

Listening is key to all effective communication; without the ability to listen effectively messages are easily misunderstood — communication breaks down and the sender of the message can easily become frustrated or irritated.

Listening is harder than most people realize because it is an acquired skill just like reading or writing. However, it is probably one of the most valuable skills to learn. No matter how technically adept, personable, and organized you are, without being able to attentively listen you won't be effective.

Good listeners learn to listen with attention rather than just hearing the words. Attentive listening not only takes in what is being said, but also what is not being said in terms of body language, information that is left out, or information that is vague. Listening is a whole-mind activity that requires total concentration.

Listening requires a definite attitude that is reflected in six different techniques vital in becoming a good listener as well as being perceived as one. If you practice these techniques, everyone will count listening as one of your greatest strengths.

1. Engage the speaker. Help the speaker to feel free to speak. Nod or use other gestures or words to encourage them to continue. Lean forward from your chair when seated. When standing, lean your upper body slightly toward the talker. Never lean back against a wall or prop your feet up on something.

2. Remove distractions. Focus on what is being said: don't doodle, shuffle papers, look out the window, pick your fingernails or similar. Avoid unnecessary interruptions. These behaviors disrupt the listening process and send messages to the speaker that you are bored, distracted or just don't care.

3. Pay attention. When somebody else is talking, listen to what they are saying. Do not interrupt, talk over them or finish their sentences for them. Stop whatever you are doing and look directly into the eyes of the person addressing you and maintain this stance throughout the conversation. In the process, never let your eyes wander even if the other person doesn't look at you.

4. Empathize. Try to understand the other person's point of view. Look at issues from their perspective. Let go of preconceived ideas. Try not to make assumptions about what the speaker is thinking. By having an open mind we can more fully empathize with the speaker. Wait until the speaker is finished before deciding that you disagree. Even if the speaker is launching a complaint against you, wait until they finish to defend yourself. The speaker will feel as though their point had been made.

5. Ask instead of commenting. When you are anticipating making a comment on what a person has said, ask a question instead. This will keep you listening longer, and often the added information will help you make a higher quality contribution to the conversation. Get information before you give information.

6. Practice responsive listening. Responsive listening is not just repeating or parroting what people say to you. Responsive listening is saying what you feel you heard the person say. Too often we are advice listeners, answer listeners, corrective listeners, detached listeners and opinion listeners. If you are a responsive listener first, you can move more effectively to advice giving, counseling, supporting and correcting later.

When you learn these skills, people will believe that you are easy to talk to and will communicate more easily and freely with you. Break the cycle of blaming each other for not listening. Simply give people your undivided attention. The benefits to you and your reputation as someone who really cares may be greater than you can ever imagine.

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