

Tips on Effective Listening

"We were given two ears but only one mouth, because listening is twice as hard as talking."

Brief Theory of Communication

Expressing our wants, feelings, thoughts and opinions clearly and effectively is only half of the communication process needed for interpersonal effectiveness. The other half is listening and understanding what others communicate to us. When a person decides to communicate with another person, he/she does so to fulfill a need. The person wants something, feels discomfort, and/or has feelings or thoughts about something. In deciding to communicate, the person selects the method or code which he/she believes will effectively deliver the message to the other person. The code used to send the message can be either verbal or nonverbal. When the other person receives the coded message, they go through the process of decoding or interpreting it into understanding and meaning. Effective communication exists between two people when the receiver interprets and understands the sender's message in the same way the sender intended it.

Sources of Difficulty:

by the Speaker	by the Listener
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Voice volume too low to be heard. • Making the message too complex, either by including too many unnecessary details or too many issues. • Getting lost, forgetting your point or the purpose of the interaction. • Body language or nonverbal elements contradicting or interfering with the verbal message, such as smiling when anger or hurt is being expressed. • Paying too much attention to how the other person is taking the message, or how the person might react. • Using a very unique code or unconventional method for delivering the message. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being preoccupied and not listening. • Being so interested in what you have to say that you listen mainly to find an opening to get the floor. • Formulating and listening to your own rebuttal to what the speaker is saying. • Listening to your own personal beliefs about what is being said. • Evaluating and making judgments about the speaker or the message. • Not asking for clarification when you know that you do not understand.

The Three Basic Listening Modes:

1. Competitive or Combative Listening happens when we are more interested in promoting our own point of view than in understanding or exploring someone else's view. We either listen for openings to take the floor, or for flaws or weak points we can attack. As we pretend to pay attention we are impatiently waiting for an opening, or internally formulating our rebuttal and planning our devastating comeback that will destroy their argument and make us the victor.
2. In Passive or Attentive Listening we are genuinely interested in hearing and understanding the other person's point of view. We are attentive and passively listen. We assume that we heard and understand correctly. but stay passive and do not verify it.
3. Active or Reflective Listening is the single most useful and important listening skill. In active listening we are also genuinely interested in understanding what the other person is thinking, feeling, wanting or what the message means, and we are active in checking out our understanding before we respond with our own new message. We restate or paraphrase our understanding of their message and reflect it back to the sender for verification. This verification or feedback process is what distinguishes active listening and makes it effective.

Levels of Communication:

Listening effectively is difficult because people vary in their communication skills and in how clearly they express themselves, and often have different needs, wants and purposes for interacting. The different types of interaction or levels of communication also add to the difficulty. The four different types or levels are:

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| 1. Clichés. | 3. Thoughts and beliefs. |
| 2. Facts. | 4. Feelings and emotions. |

As a listener we attend to the level that we think is most important. Failing to recognize the level most relevant and important to the speaker can lead to a kind of crossed wires where the two people are not on the same wavelength. The purpose of the contact and the nature of our relationship with the person will usually determine what level or levels are appropriate and important for the particular interaction. Note the different requirements in the following situations:

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| • You're lost, and you ask a stranger for directions. | • You are in trouble and someone offers to help. |
| • Your child comes to you crying. | • Your spouse is being affectionate and playful. |
| | • Opposing council is cross-examining you in court. |

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If we don't address the appropriate elements we will not be very effective, and can actually make the situation worse. For example: If your wife is telling you about her hurt feelings and you focus on the facts of the situation and don't acknowledge her feelings, she will likely become even more upset.

There is a real distinction between merely hearing the words and really listening for the message. When we listen effectively we understand what the person is thinking and/or feeling from the other person's own perspective. It is as if we were standing in the other person's shoes, seeing through his/her eyes and listening through the person's ears. Our own viewpoint may be different and we may not necessarily agree with the person, but as we listen, we understand from the other's perspective. To listen effectively, we must be actively involved in the communication process, and not just listening passively.

We all act and respond on the basis of our understanding, and too often there is a misunderstanding that neither of us is aware of. With active listening, if a misunderstanding has occurred, it will be known immediately, and the communication can be clarified before any further misunderstanding occurs. Several other possible benefits occur with active listening:

- Sometimes a person just needs to be heard and acknowledged before the person is willing to consider an alternative or soften his /her position.
- It is often easier for a person to listen to and consider the other's position when that person knows the other is listening and considering his/her position.
- It helps people to spot the flaws in their reasoning when they hear it played back without criticism.
- It also helps identify areas of agreement so the areas of disagreement are put in perspective and are diminished rather than magnified.
- Reflecting back what we hear each other say helps give each a chance to become aware of the different levels that are going on below the surface. This helps to bring things into the open where they can be more readily resolved.
- If we accurately understand the other person's view, we can be more effective in helping the person see the flaws in his/her position.
- If we listen so we can accurately understand the other's view, we can also be more effective in discovering the flaws in our own position.

Listening Tips:

Usually it is important to paraphrase and use your own words in verbalizing your understanding of the message. Parroting back the words verbatim is annoying and does not ensure accurate understanding of the message. Depending on the purpose of the interaction and your understanding of what is relevant, you could reflect back the other persons:

1. Account of the facts.
2. Thoughts and beliefs.
3. Feelings and emotions.
4. Wants, needs or motivation.
5. Hopes and expectations.

- Don't respond to just the meaning of the words, look for the feelings or intent beyond the words. The dictionary or surface meaning of the words or code used by the sender is not the message.
- Inhibit your impulse to immediately answer questions. The code may be in the form of a question. Sometimes people ask questions when they really want to express themselves and are not open to hearing an answer.
- Know when to quit using active listening. Once you accurately understand the sender's message, it may be appropriate to respond with your own message. Don't use active listening to hide and avoid revealing your own position.
- If you are confused and know you do not understand, either tell the person you don't understand and ask him/her to say it another way, or use your best guess. If you are incorrect, the person will realize it and will likely attempt to correct your misunderstanding.
- Active listening is a very effective first response when the other person is angry, hurt or expressing difficult feelings toward you, especially in relationships that are important to you.
- Use eye contact and listening body language. Avoid looking at your watch or at other people or activities around the room. Face and lean toward the speaker and nod your head, as it is appropriate. Be careful about crossing your arms and appearing closed or critical.
- Be empathic and nonjudgmental. You can be accepting and respectful of the person and their feelings and beliefs without invalidating or giving up your own position, or without agreeing with the accuracy and validity of their view.