

## EFFECTIVE LISTENING

“Are you really listening...or are you just waiting for your turn to talk?” – R. Montgomery

Take a moment to think of the best listener you know - someone you really feel you can talk to and who truly understands you. Now think about what makes them such a good listener. What do they do that lets you know they are listening? Chances are, some of the following tactics are used. Maybe you have never even noticed them before (they are all quite subtle) and that is part of what makes them so effective.

Communication is a two-way street consisting of speaking and listening. We are often introduced to tips on improving our speaking skills, but it is taken for granted that we know how to listen. Since most of us are not born with effective listening skills, the following tips may help you become a better listener.

- Active silence. When you are listening, speak only when you need clarification or to summarize what you have heard. Do not be afraid of “silent spots” – by allowing silence in your conversation, you may actually get more information than if you jump in to fill the awkwardness of silence.
- Summarize. As mentioned above, it is a good idea to summarize, in your own words, what the speaker has told you. Not only does this allow you to make sure you have understood everything correctly, it lets your speaker know you truly are listening.
- Nonverbals. Believe it or not, the way you present yourself often determines what or how much your speaker will tell you. If your nonverbals relay the message that you are uninterested, bored or in a hurry, your speaker will pick up on that. Keep these nonverbal cues in mind:
  - Maintain eye contact.
  - Keep your posture open and relaxed (avoid crossing your arms).
  - Nod, smile, “I see” – let your speaker know you are still listening.
  - Avoid looking at your watch. If you do not have time to meet, let your speaker know this and set up an alternative meeting.
- Avoid distractions. Imagine you are telling someone about the biggest crisis of your life. Just when you are about to get to the main point, the phone rings and your listener takes the call! Even if the topic is not extremely personal or emotional, people want to know they have your full attention. By closing your office door or taking your phone off the hook, you

have let your speaker know that she is your main focus.

- Clear your head. Not only is it a good idea to free your mind of your own problems and concerns when listening to others, it often helps to push back any preconceived ideas you may have about the person or topic. This does not mean you should forget your values and opinions, but rather that you should keep an open mind. If you belong to an organization that promotes each person's duty to vote and someone comes to talk to you about why voting is a waste of time, enter the conversation with the attitude that you will learn something from this person. You will find your conversation to be much more effective (and your speaker much less defensive) this way.
- Stay awake. Listening – unlike hearing – is an active job. If you are so tired you are nodding off, or if you are preoccupied with something, you might suggest setting up an alternative time to talk to avoid offending or hurting your speaker.
- Stay calm. If your speaker is using highly emotional words or getting visibly upset, remain calm. If you allow yourself to become over-stimulated by what is being said, you will not be able to focus on the main point.

You may come across a person or two in your lifetime who enjoys talking. And talking. And then talking some more. In these situations, using the above tips may keep you in the conversation for several days. If you encounter a “talker” and need to keep it short, let him know right from the start that you only have fifteen minutes (or whatever your time limit may be). If you make this clear, there should be no hurt feelings when you get ready to leave after fifteen minutes.

Another strategy is to establish together your goal of the conversation and continually refer to it. For example, you may decide at the beginning of your meeting that your goal is to figure out how to improve member participation at your organization's meetings. Whenever your speaker gets off track, you could say, “How does this relate to member participation at meetings?” or “That's really interesting and I'd love to hear about it later, but for the moment we need to stick to our goal.”

Once you have developed effective listening skills, you may find others increasing their trust in you. Not only do effective listening skills improve your leadership ability, they improve your interpersonal relationships as well.

### **Reference:**

Bittleston, J. & Shorter, B. (1981). *The Book of Business Communications Checklists*. London: Associated Business Press.

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