

Workplace Relationships

Listen Up! Enhancing Our Listening Skills

Have you ever thought about how important listening can be? Just consider that we spend 80 percent of our waking hours communicating, and over 45 percent of that time listening to others - spouses, children, friends, co-workers, and acquaintances.

What is listening? Many of us think that listening is what we do while waiting for our turn to talk. Listening is more than being quiet and hearing. Dr. Lyman K. Steil, a well-known authority on the subject of listening, explains that listening involves four stages. First, we hear the message, then interpret, evaluate, and respond to it.

Studies have shown that most of us understand, evaluate, and retain approximately 50 percent of what is said. And after two days, we remember only half of that. The end result is that we comprehend and retain only 25 percent of what is said.

In the workplace, the cost of poor listening adds up to dollars and cents. It can involve the cost of additional time spent in repeating instructions and having to redo assignments that were carried out incorrectly. Further, some workplace accidents involving physical harm to workers are the result of an individual not listening to directions or warnings prior to acting.

On a personal front, our relationships with people can suffer if we do not listen effectively or if we do not have people in our lives that will actively listen to us from time-to-time. We all need someone with whom to share our ideas, thoughts and feelings. If we do not have a listener in our lives, we can begin to feel lonely and isolated.

How would you rate your best friend as a listener? The magic of a warm and sincere friendship is usually one of the rewards of good listening. We are attracted to people who listen. They calm and support us.

Why Don't We Listen?

If listening is really this important, then why aren't we better listeners? There's actually a physiological reason for our listening difficulties. Our capacity to listen ranges from 400 to 600 words a minute, while the average speaking rate is about 125 words per minute. This can give us plenty of time to think about other things while a person is talking to us.

A major reason for our habit of listening poorly, may be lack of training. We teach reading, writing, and speaking in our schools. Adults take courses in speed reading, business writing, and public speaking. Yet, despite all of our attempts at improving communications, we often neglect the communication skill used the most often - listening.

Another reason for poor listening is that we may be too busy to focus exclusively on another individual. Have you ever been too busy to lend a sympathetic ear to a child who has had a tough day at school or to really listen to your mate discuss his or her frustrations?

Sometimes we don't listen to others because we think that they expect us to solve their problems. Yet, few of our friends and relatives really want us to organize their finances, find them new mates or solve their work frustrations. Oftentimes they want to share their thoughts and feelings with us, and want only for us to understand and appreciate what they are going through.

Being able to put ourselves into someone else's shoes or experience, so that we can understand how another may feel, is known as empathic listening. We can let people know that we are listening and do understand them, by reflecting back to them how we think they must feel. "You must be so excited," just might be communicated to someone who is enthusiastically telling you about a promotion they've just received.

We should be aware that empathic listening is the kind of first aid that many people seek. Leo Buscaglia, a well-known psychologist and author, put it this way: "When I ask you to listen to me, and you start giving advice, you have not done what I asked." Remember that there are times when people want us to listen to them and nothing more.

Vary Your Listening Style

Before you can become a good listener, you must become a flexible listener. In other words, it's crucial to vary your listening style to suit the speaker, the subject, and the occasion.

Consider your reason for listening. More often than not, your reason for listening will help decide on your style of listening. Are you listening for pleasure, to receive ideas and information, to evaluate information or to show empathy? These are the four basic reasons for listening.

If you listen to a business seminar the same way you listen to a TV comedy, you may not retain much from the seminar. And it stands to reason that the critical listening style that you would use to evaluate information regarding a major purchase you are about to make is not the style you would use when listening to a friend's troubles.

Which of These Listeners are You?

Taking a look at your listening habits is the first step towards becoming a better listener. Most of us have a number of listening faults. So don't be surprised if you identify yourself in more than one of these illustrations.

The Biased Listener. Usually, the biased listener isn't listening. The biased listener has tuned out and is planning what to say next, based on some fixed idea already decided on regarding the topic at hand (no matter what else is said by the speaker).

When bias becomes prejudice, we may even tune out a person because of his or her age, accent, or occupation.

Ask yourself: Are my biases a barrier to listening? The road to tuned-in listening begins with a deliberate effort to get rid of preconceived ideas, in order to give others a fair hearing.

The Distracted Listener. All of us fit into this category at one time or another. Distracted listeners allow internal or external distractions to prevent them from giving others their undivided attention.

Unfortunately, a lot of distracted listeners don't realize that it's important to get ready to listen. You can't turn yourself into an attentive listener unless you make a deliberate effort to tune out internal distractions and concentrate on what the speaker is saying. If this is not possible, it may be better to set another time to meet with and listen to that person so that he or she can have your undivided attention.

For the most part, external distractions can be eliminated, by simply finding a quiet place for your important conversations, where you'll be free from interruptions.

The Impatient Listener. The impatient listener is one who interrupts and seldom lets people finish what they have to say. It can be easy to slip into this habit.

If you find it extremely frustrating to listen to people who, perhaps, talk slowly, then you are probably an impatient listener. Becoming a patient listener involves making an effort not to interrupt. At first, you'll find it difficult to listen without interrupting. But you'll be pleasantly surprised when the lines of communication open up. Remember, if you have been courteous enough to others, more often than not, they'll listen to you.

The Passive Listener. The passive listener does not realize that listening is an active process. When we are engaged in conversation with this type of listener, we are never sure if our message is understood. Why? Simply because we receive little or no feedback. Obviously, this can cause plenty of communication problems.

A telephone conversation with a passive listener is even more difficult than a face-to-face conversation. More often than not, a speaker's words are met with stony silence. That is why people often wonder if their call has been disconnected. If you are having a telephone conversation and have the person on the other line ask "Are you still there?" it may be because you have not been communicating to him or her that you are listening.

If you have a tendency to be a passive listener, try turning yourself into a responsive listener by providing people with more feedback. Just lean slightly forward, establish eye contact, and nod or smile when appropriate. An occasional remark such as "I see," "uh-huh" or "yes" can be used when the conversation is either face-to-face or by phone.

How Are Your Listening Skills?

You may realize that your listening skills need some improvement. Although you're not going to change a lifetime of these habits overnight, you can, with a little time and effort, learn to become a better listener.

Remember that listening is an important communication skill, and should not be overlooked.

You are probably so familiar with the phrase "think before you speak," so much so, that this advice is probably second nature to you. But this phrase is incomplete. For most of us, if we add a reminder that listening is a skill that should be practiced, the quality of our dealings with others could be greatly improved.

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