

2. The Art of Listening

1. INTRODUCTION

The positive effects of good listening upon relationships and situations in all aspects of business cannot be over-emphasised. It is claimed that we spend between 40-65% of our day listening. Given the amount of time listening takes in business situations, it is crucial that it is well done.

- How can we tell if we are good listeners?
- How can we tell when we need to improve these listening skills?
- What can be done to improve them?

Simple tests demonstrate that we all significantly over-estimate our skills as listeners, often by well over 50%, in terms of how much information we think we have understood and retained.

2. WHERE LISTENING IS IMPORTANT

The answer is everywhere. But it is equally important in areas which are perhaps more usually seen as situations of persuading, influencing or managing conflict. In general, any situation involving communication requires listening skills. The more we are dealing with situations in which we are expert and knowledgeable the more we have to be aware of our tendency not to listen because we have already made up our minds.

3. WHY IS LISTENING DIFFICULT?

The reasons why listening does not come easily to us fall under five main headings.

i) Society rewards the talkers

The main reason stems right back to our earliest conditioning and upbringing. Right from the cradle we learn that making a noise brings attention and satisfaction. As children, the noisiest and loudest often become the leaders and innovators of childhood games and activities. Even in formal education the children who always answer questions, and who speak out clearly and distinctly, are the more favored and praised. All of this is important. We need to learn to speak well and effectively, but the balance is such that listening becomes seen as passive, as indicating a submissive position and as showing us up as having nothing to say.

In adult and in business life this trend continues when again, people who make the most noise often gain more attention than they deserve and the quiet are written off as having nothing much to say. In short, talking gains us attention whereas listening loses it.

ii) I'm more important than you

Listening means paying attention to someone else's needs and concerns when clearly, for most of us, our own needs are more important - the interesting part of the conversation begins when we get a chance to talk. For some people, listening is frankly boring and irksome. We have all been at the receiving end of listeners who carry on with other activities or who allow their eyes to gaze glassily on the middle distance. How difficult is it to continue to converse when this happens?

iii) Thoughts are faster than words

Another big problem is that we can think much faster than we can speak. This obviously means that listeners have 'time available' which can either be put to good use, by concentrating and trying to understand what is said, or to bad use, by allowing distractions and their own thoughts to intrude.

iv) Past experience and learning

Our ability to understand everything we are currently dealing with depends on our past learning and

experience of similar situations and people. Depending on our past experience, we will have a set of attitudes, beliefs and assumptions. These can work to help us understand the present situation, but they can also easily lead to pre-judgment, to hasty conclusions and to hearing what we want to hear.

v) We're not so good at speaking either

Finally, the fault is not all with the listener. As speakers we often send mixed or veiled messages. We use language and speech patterns which are not suitable, are uninteresting, or we simply send too much information. Thus we make it hard for listeners to absorb and understand what we mean.

4. POOR LISTENING

Poor listening shows itself in many ways. Certain types of behaviour do, however, seem to be particularly common.

Fidgeting

Body language and gestures clearly indicate our lack of interest in anything that doesn't immediately seem to relate to us. Listening is regarded as an imposition; it is passive and is likely to lose us a dominant position in any interaction.

Aggressive listening

Knowing that listening is important, we try so hard to be good listeners that we intimidate others by staring and by remarks such as "Come on, I am listening".

Intellectual listening

In this case we listen only to the words and are deaf to the emotions behind them. As a result, we become easily bored because we have heard it all before. We are quick with solutions while speakers really want someone to talk to and can easily think of a solution themselves.

Overly passive listening

We feel we have little to contribute and will nod agreement with anything said to us. By failing to communicate any sincerity, we may miss a lot we should be hearing.

Prejudiced listening

We are often unable to separate what we hear from preconceptions or from our own emotional concerns and interests. Depending on our political views, for example, no conservative or socialist could ever have anything useful to say.

5. THE KEYS TO GOOD LISTENING

Listening skills can be markedly improved by attention to the following points and by practicing them frequently.

Learn to tolerate silence

Most people are embarrassed by silence and when someone dries up we rush to fill the gap. Good listeners are not afraid of silence. Mozart said it was the most profound sound in music. Silence allows time for thoughts to be gathered and it can also be used to apply gentle pressure on others to elaborate, without giving your own position away or putting words into their mouth.

Look and listen hard

As we talk we reveal ourselves. Unless we closely observe people, we will miss well over half of the message they are conveying through emphasis in voice, body language and eye contact.

Know your power as a listener

The careful listener is not passive, but has real power. We mentioned the power of silence earlier. A poor listener can destroy the speaker's confidence in their ability to communicate. This is especially important when people are clearly upset, inexperienced or junior in status.

Reflect feelings

When someone shows emotion, indicate that you recognise this. Use paraphrasing to reflect the meaning that is coming across so that the speaker can confirm or alter your understanding.

Use your body language

Make sure that your body language - eye contact, expression, gestures and posture - demonstrates an interest in the speaker.

Know your own emotional biases

Recognise your own preferences and prejudices - try to allow for them in anything you hear. We can never be completely free of emotional filters and we are all subject to them. Be particularly on guard when dealing with people or situations we dislike or fundamentally do not agree with. Experiments show how people will interpret identical messages differently if they are told different original sources for the message.

Avoid Judging

Good listeners create warm, non-judgmental atmospheres and, of course they learn far more as a result. Speakers become defensive and clam up the more they feel under judgment or evaluation. 'Why don't you ...?' type questions can create this defensiveness. Hear people out; then you may be able to act on the full story rather than on unreliable fragments.

The Main Trouble Spot

The biggest trouble spot for most listeners is their own anger. When we are attacked verbally we become defensive or angry and our listening power is correspondingly decreased. Similarly, when the speaker is angry, we must keep our composure and try to defuse the emotion so that more effective communication can be established.

A CHECKLIST FOR EFFECTIVE LISTENING

1. Do I allow the speaker to express his or her complete thoughts without interrupting?
2. Do I listen between the lines, especially when conversing with people who tend to use hidden messages?
3. Do I actively try to develop my ability to be attentive and remember important information?
4. Do I write down the most important details of a message?
5. Do I repeat back to people to ensure that I am understanding what they are trying to say?
6. Do I avoid 'tuning-out' when I recognise that my own biases are interfering with the message?
7. Do I keep my own emotions in control when a speaker is opposed to my point of view?
8. Do I ignore distractions when listening?
9. Do I use my body language to indicate genuine listening?
10. Do I ensure that the environment is conducive to good listening?
11. Do I avoid jumping to conclusions before I have heard and absorbed the whole message?
12. Do I help those who have difficulty getting their message across or do I make it worse by showing impatience or annoyance?

EXERCISE

My action plan for effective listening

Write down all actions you will take to ensure you are listening effectively during negotiations.

SAMPLE