

THE ART OF LISTENING - LISTENING TO UNDERSTAND

"The greatest gift you can give someone is the purity of your attention"

Listening Is a Master Skill:

Although we use listening skills more than any other communication skill, listening is rarely taught because educators (along with almost everyone else) assume listening is equivalent to breathing -- automatic.

But effective listening is a skill. Like any other skill, competency in listening is achieved through learning and practice.

John Parker & Janet Weathers report the following breakdown of a persons communication activities:

listening – 45%; talking – 30%; reading – 16%; writing – 9%.

The human brain works about four times as fast as the mouth. So, listening effectively requires a considerable amount of self-control and concentration.

The problem with Our Listening:

We tend to respond in one of the following four ways, when we listen.

1. *We evaluate* -we either agree or disagree
2. *We probe* - we ask questions from our own frame of reference
3. *We advise* -we give counsel based on our own experience
4. *We interpret* - we try to figure people out, to explain their motives, their behavior, based on our own motives and behavior.

What does it mean to really listen?

Real listening is an active process that has three basic steps.

- **Hearing.** Hearing just means listening enough to catch what the speaker is saying. For example, say you were listening to a report on zebras, and the speaker mentioned that no two are alike. If you can repeat the fact, then you have heard what has been said.
- **Understanding.** The next part of listening happens when you take what you have heard and understand it in your own way. Let's go back to that report on zebras. When you hear that no two are alike, think about what that might mean. You might think, "Maybe this means that the pattern of stripes is different for each zebra."
- **Judging.** After you are sure you understand what the speaker has said, think about whether it makes sense. Do you believe what you have heard? You might think, "How could the stripes to be different for every zebra? But then again, the fingerprints are different for every person. I think this seems believable."

A Good Listener:

‘The good listener ... is a demanding listener’. The four main questions that a demanding listener asks are:

- i. What is the whole speech about?
- ii. What are the main or pivotal ideas, conclusions, and arguments?
- iii. Are the speaker’s conclusions acceptable or mistaken?
- iv. What does it mean to me? What consequences follow from the conclusions the speaker wishes to have adopted? What are their importance or significance to me?

Few Facts about Listening:

Fact #1: You must Learn to Listen

You might be shocked to hear this, but learning to be a good listener begins with listening to yourself. By becoming aware of your own thoughts and feelings, the logic goes, you will make yourself more open to engaging with the thoughts and feelings of others.

Fact#2: There are two levels of listening

The following diagram illustrates.

Speaker (Level one) Verbal Statement	(Smoke)
Listener (Level two) Feeling behind the statement Response	(Fire)
Listener (Level one) Responding the words	(Smoke)
Listener (Level two) Identifying the feeling Response	(Fire)

Fact #3: “Listening Out Loud” is helpful

A good listener is not just a silent receptacle, passively receiving the thoughts and feelings of others. To be an effective listener, you must respond with verbal and nonverbal cues which let the speaker know -- actually prove -- that you are listening and understanding. These responses or feedback enables the speaker to understand whether his idea has reached you successfully.

Fact #4: Listening - A key for intimate relationships

While learning to listen is certainly a big part of being a good friend, it’s a huge part of maintaining a good relationship. By learning to listen to each other, partners can (above all else) escape the trap of trying to guess what the other person is thinking. Not only will both of you have somebody to talk to, but you’ll both know what the other is thinking.

Suggestions for being a Good Listener:

1. *Prepare to be a listener* - people often don't listen because they aren't prepared to listen, We must actively prepare ourselves to listen. Lay aside any judgments and preconceived ideas of what is going to be said.
2. *Refrain from letting the mind wander* into thinking of your response to the speaker's words. We all want to "look good" to others but sometimes people do not listen because they are anticipating their response. Good listeners hear the entire thoughts of the speaker and then respond appropriately.
3. *Listen with the eyes as well as the ears.* Good eye contact means that you are totally interested in the person who is talking as well as what is being said. To make eye contact allows one to connect with the other person on a deep level and most often trust is established. When there is trust everyone feels they are in a "safe" environment and it is easier to express thoughts and feelings in a "safe" environment.
4. *Listen with the heart* as well as the ears and eyes. To listen with the heart means that we are open to the feeling behind the words - or lack of words - spoken. Listening with the heart allows the relationship to deepen.
5. *Listen actively.* Being a listener requires active participation. In any discussion it is necessary to make sure that you understand what the other person is saying.
6. *Listen with empathy.* Feelings and thoughts are personal and unique. Listening with empathy shows we honor and respect the feelings and thoughts of the one who is talking.
7. *"Seek first to understand, then to be understood"* is a concept shared by the well-known motivational speaker, Stephen Covey. While being a listener you should seek to understand what the other person is saying before desiring to be understood.

Two sets of notes to aid a Listener:

- **"Running Notes"** – "The notes you take while listening record what you have done with your mind to take in what you have heard."
- **"Concluding Notes"** – "What you have noted during the course of listening, together with what your memory retains of what was said, provides you with food for thought. The thinking you then do should lead you to make a second set of notes, much more orderly, much more comprehensive, and much more critical."

Barriers to Listening:

Listening takes time or, more accurately, you have to take time to listen. A life programmed with back-to-back commitments offers little leeway for listening. Similarly, a mind constantly buzzing with plans, dreams, schemes and anxieties is difficult to clear. Good listening requires the temporary suspension of all unrelated

thoughts -- a blank canvas. In order to become an effective listener, you have to learn to manage what goes on in your own mind.

Other barriers to listening include:

- worry, fear, anger, grief and depression
- individual bias and prejudice
- semantics and language differences
- noise and verbal “clutter”
- preoccupation, boredom and shrinking attention spans

A Good Listener	Poor Listener
<p>A good listener will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • be prepared to take notes when necessary. That means having writing tools readily. • Ask questions to determine if he or she is accurately understanding the speaker. • Be physically and mentally present in the moment. • Listen by using the ears to "hear" the message, the eyes to "read" body language (when listening in person), the mind to visualize the person speaking (when on the telephone), and heart to empathize with the feelings of the speaker. 	<p>A poor listener:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May be abrupt and / or give one-word answers such as "no", "yes", and "maybe". • Will be easily distracted. The listener may look around the room as opposed to focusing on the speaker's face. • Constantly interrupts, making the speaker feel that what he or she has to say is not important. • The listener finishes the other person's sentences, implying that the listener already knows what the speaker is about to say. • Changes the subject without even realizing it. • Looks at his watch, signaling that you are wasting his time.

Conclusion:

The need to be heard and understood is a basic human need that is as primary a need as having enough water, food or air to survive. Listening is one of the precious gifts to satisfy this need. It helps build relationships, solve problems, ensure understanding and resolve conflicts.

“Listening, like reading, is primarily an activity of the mind, not of the ear or the eye. When the mind is not actively involved in the process, it should be called hearing, not listening; seeing, not reading.”

What’s important here isn’t the precise listening technique. No one method should ever be used in a wooden, rigid way. The things mentioned above are just a few approaches that are worth being mindful of when the moment feels right. They will make the other person happier about speaking with you.