

FOUR STEPS TO EFFECTIVE LISTENING (page 1 of 2)



Effective listening is the intentional effort to fully understand communication from another person. This is natural for some, but for most it is a learned skill.

Often, we listen with only partial attention, and we spend much of that time forming our rebuttal rather than seeking to truly understand. Changing our habits to fully listen will result in many benefits:

- We pay closer attention to the speaker
- We improve the level of our understanding of the speaker
- The speaker is more likely to feel truly heard
- The speaker is more likely to move beyond surface-level issues
- We create opportunities to resolve conflict and prevent future conflict

Try using these four activities to make yourself a more effective listener:

1. Set the Stage

Get rid of distractions. Try to find a quiet place that allows for private conversation. Move or turn away from noise, visual activity, or other distractions. Turn off your phone.

Give them your full attention. Put aside personal distractions. For people to open up, they must feel that what they are saying is being valued and that they are being heard. We can think four times faster than we can talk, so it takes effort to pay attention and concentrate on the speaker without interrupting.

Be patient. You can't "squeeze in" important conversations. Do not rush people; give them time to speak fully. Many people will take a long time before they are ready to say what is most personal or important.

2. Clear Your Mind

Get out of "argument mode". Do not let your opinions lead the conversation. Showing negative reactions will change the direction of the conversation or keep you from getting all of the facts, so keep your face and body language open but neutral.

Know yourself. Understand your strengths and weaknesses as a listener and pay attention to what you are doing. Recognize your own prejudices and avoid making judgments before you have fully understood what the speaker means. Be aware of your feelings toward the speaker, the subject, and the occasion and make sure they do not color your understanding.

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Don't pre-judge. What you know about the speaker may or may not be true, but either way it is certainly not the whole story. Focus on their ideas, even if you don't like the individual, the way s/he looks and communicates, or vice versa.

Be aware of your effect. Arguing, criticizing, taking notes, not taking notes, asking questions, not asking questions, are all personal preferences and by the same token, possible irritants to the speaker. Learn about the other person and adapt. When in doubt, ask.

3. Be Present and Be Helpful

Avoid assumptions. Do not assume others define and use words exactly as you do. Avoid assuming what they meant and that you understand their non-verbal communication. You are interpreting all of their communication through your perceptions. Stop and ask, acknowledge your assumptions in a non-confrontational way.

Talk only to help. You cannot listen and argue at the same time. Talk only to enhance your understanding or to reinforce that you are paying attention. Watch for clues. We sometimes concentrate on what is said and miss the subtleties conveyed in how it is said. Pay attention to non-verbal clues. If people look away or close off, they may have more to say.

Ask clarifying and supportive questions. Gentle questioning helps. When you do not understand, need more explanation, or want to show that you are listening, simply ask. Questions should encourage, not embarrass, challenge, or show up the speaker.

4. Demonstrate That You Hear

Express interest and encourage equally. Use your body position and attention to encourage the speaker and signal your interest. Look at the other person. Facial expression, eyes, posture and gestures provide important communication signals. Don't just encourage statements with which you agree. Avoid expressing agreement or disagreement, Encourage the train of thought. Say things like "that's interesting, can you help me understand?"

Empathize. The purpose of listening is to understand what the speaker thinks and why, not what you think about what the speaker is saying. Try to put yourself in the other's place so you can understand what s/he is trying to communicate and why it matters. Open up to the other speaker in your body language and your thoughts.

Reflect back. Make sure that you have understood clearly what was intended and how you have captured it. Restate what you think you heard in words that have that meaning for you and explore common understanding. Don't simply repeat the speaker's words.