

Is Anybody Listening?

People these days seem to be impatient, stressed and constantly rushed.. But if we let it get in the way of listening, there is a price to pay. That price includes losses in efficiency, effectiveness, and even in relationships. We make mistakes, we forget what was said, we miss nuances in the conversation. Not good.

We owe it to ourselves and all those we care about at home and at work, to slow down, pay attention, and do the hard but rewarding work of listening.

This week, check your listening habits.

1. **Put aside all else.** In order to really listen, you must put aside other work, turn away from the computer screen, and focus on the speaker. It is too easy to keep looking at your work, especially when the person is on the phone. But it is pretty obvious when someone is not listening. Listening is a skill that requires your full attention. Try it and see what a difference focus makes.
2. **Focus on the entire message.** Pay attention to what is being said, not on your response to it. Tune in to body language, tone of voice, facial expressions, absorbing the whole message. Watch for conflicting body language, such as a frown, folded arms over chest, or a subtle shaking of the head while saying "yes." Non-verbals can account for as much as 55% of the message, so pay close attention to the entire message, not just the words.
3. **Show that you are listening.** Avoid looking around or fidgeting. Make steady eye contact, nod, and use neutral acknowledgements such as "uh-huh" or "go on." Separate listening from responding: don't jump in too soon with your own opinion, your story, or your advice. Listen first.
4. **Adjust to the style of the other person.** If they are interested in the emotional context, don't keep asking about facts. If they are very fact-oriented, shift your listening to the rational. If they want details, focus more on details. If they want to talk big picture, let them know you see it, then ask about feelings or for further facts.
5. **Check back.** Ask if you are hearing them correctly. Don't make assumptions or jump to conclusions based on partial hearing. Even if you are under pressure or tight on time, maybe especially then, slow down, breathe, and focus on hearing and paraphrasing what you are hearing. If you just can't focus at that moment, say so, and ask to connect at another time.
6. **Eliminate sound clutter.** If your phone is getting a bad signal, don't tough it out. If you are in a noisy place, or rushing to catch a plane, and you can't hear what is being said, there is no way you can do a great job of listening. Ask to reschedule, or get yourself to a quieter place where you can both hear and concentrate.

Great leaders and great communicators have a striking ability to listen well. It takes work and effort, and energy you sometimes feel short on, but it is so worth it. It pays dividends in better productivity and helps build better relationships. What could be more worthwhile?

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