

5 Ways to Be a Better Listener

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Presented by Gilda Bonanno

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Listening is a crucial skill for professional and personal success. Yet it seems like such a basic skill - we all know how to listen, right? But although this skill is basic in theory, it's difficult to execute. Yes, everyone can listen, but how many people can listen well?

Communication is a two-way street - there is a sender (the speaker) and there is a receiver (the listener). And if all goes well, the message that is sent is the same message that is received. As the receiver/listener, it is your job to make sure you understand what the sender/speaker is trying to communicate.

Why is listening important? First, it shows respect to the speaker. When was the last time someone listened - really listened - to you? Didn't it make you feel good, like you had something worth listening to? That's how you want to make others feel when they speak to you. Business and life would be a lot easier if we showed each other more respect.

Second, if you listen well, you can learn something. If you ask a good question and then open your ears and close your mouth, you'll be amazed at what people will tell you. What new things could you learn from your employees if you stopped to listen?

Here are 5 ways to improve your listening skills:

1. **Focus.** If you decide that someone is worth listening to, then give the speaker your full attention. Turn away from the computer and set your cell phone to vibrate. We may like to think we can multi-task, but we really can't do it with tasks, and we certainly can't do it with people. You can't read your email or read the newspaper and listen to someone at the same time. Sure, you might *hear* what they are saying, and you may even catch the meaning of some of it, but you are not really *listening*.
2. **Show that you are listening.** Make eye contact, ask relevant questions and avoid distracting behavior like yawning or checking your watch frequently.
3. **For a few minutes, let it be all about the other person.** Don't use the time to think about your rebuttal. It's important to remember that the function of listening is to understand what the other person is saying, not necessarily to agree with it. Yes, you can disagree, but first you have to understand the other's point of view. And sometimes, just listening and having the other person feel "heard" will be enough to defuse any disagreement.



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4. Read between the lines. Don't just listen to the words – also tune into the non-verbal communications. Watch the other's body language and become aware of the feelings behind the words. If you're not sure, ask questions to check that your understanding matches theirs. Usually you have to deal first with the person's feelings, whether anger, frustration or joy, before you can move on to problem-solving or resolution.

5. Resist the urge to interrupt. Ah, this is a tough one for many of us, me included. Sometimes we're so agitated by what we've heard, or we're so excited, that we feel we have to cut them off with "but that's not what happened" or "you think that's bad, wait till you hear what happened to me!" Interrupting tells the other person that you think your words are more important than theirs, which is not the message you want to send. As with any skill development, practicing helps.

As Stephen Covey reminds us in The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, "seek first to understand, then to be understood." The next time you're in a conversation with a colleague, a loved one or even someone you've just met, practice active listening. You'll be amazed at how that simple habit can improve your relationships and give you opportunities to learn.



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