

Effective Listening – A Learned Skill

Most people are convinced they're good listeners. While they may hear what others say, however, they're not truly listening. Effective listening is something that we all do with varying degrees of success—a skill we all tend to take for granted. Nevertheless, it's a skill we can enhance to make ourselves more effective listeners (Reiss 1994).

When to listen: Most people talk too much. We all love the sound of our own voices. So we talk. And when we pause to ask, "What do you think?" we know the answer in our minds before it's spoken. So, our minds race with other thoughts. While the other person is talking, we're thinking about what we want to say next and we miss half of their response.

All of us give selective attention to people and activities around us. How we select what we listen to and how we absorb information is typically done without forethought. Most people run on autopilot, making automatic gestures and responses to those around us. A vacant "Have a nice day" may be acceptable to the clerk at a convenience store, but that depth of conversation will not work if you're actively trying to involve your prospect (Metcalf 1997).

The following ideas will help you to become more conscious of how you communicate, to overcome negative habits that interfere with your relationships, and to become more proficient at remembering what you hear (Brody 1994).

Be aware of conditions that may impede your listening ability. Failure to concentrate may cause a misunderstanding of what someone is trying to get across.

Working in familiar surroundings: When the environment is safe and comfortable for you, there's a natural tendency to relax and become careless. Working in an unfamiliar setting tends to heighten your senses.

Interruptions: Any sort of interruption tends to break the listening process. External interruptions (i.e., telephone, another person coming into the room) are sometimes unavoidable. You must do what you can to minimize them, and above all, not contribute to them. Hold you're talking to a minimum—let others talk and interrupt only to ask for clarification.

Automatic gestures: How many times do you forget something someone told you because you put the conversation on autopilot? The analogy is forgetting where you left the car keys. You put them down, but you don't consciously and specifically remember where you placed them because you weren't consciously focusing on that task when you did it (Carey 1996). Focus your mind on the other person's words.

Talking too much: If you do this, you're not alone. But it's extremely difficult to match your products with the client's needs if you don't listen to what those needs are. Ask questions and listen to the answers. Let someone else do most of the talking.

Failed expectations: The flow of a conversation may not follow the direction you planned. Don't stop listening just because someone isn't saying what you expected to hear (Brody 1994). What their saying may be more important than what you thought you would hear.

Preoccupation: If you're worried about getting to your next call, doing an errand you forgot to handle this morning, or any other task you forgot to do, you'll not hear what someone else is saying.

Make Listening a Multisensory Activity (Brock 1995)

Much of the information we hear committed to short term memory but forgotten before we have the chance to record it, either on paper or in long-term memory(Brock 1995). If you listen proactively you'll retain much more information. Hearing is reflexive and passive; **listening is conscious and active.**

We absorb information best by using multiple senses. Make your impressions visual, verbal and auditory.