

Effective Listening Principles

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Why is listening such an important skill?

- Being listened to means we are taken seriously. Given our ideas and feelings are unknown; this makes what we have to say important.
- In our society, listening is essential to the development and survival of the individual.
- We learn our culture largely through listening; we learn to think by listening; we learn to love by listening; we learn about ourselves and others by listening.
- Being listened to spells the difference between feeling accepted and isolated.
- Generous listening enhances our own well-being.

Some interesting statistics:

- Some studies indicate that we may be listening at only 25% comprehension rate.
- 85% of what we know, we have learned by listening.
- 75% of the time we are distracted, preoccupied or forgetful.
- We usually only recall approximately 50% after we listen to someone talk.
- We spend about 45% of our time listening.
- We listen at 125-250 words per minute, but think 1000-3000 words per minute

Before we go on to look at effective listening principles, let's first take a look at "Blocks to listening".

There are twelve blocks to listening. You will find that some are old favourites that you use over and over. Others are held in reserve for certain types of people or situations. Everyone uses listening blocks, so you shouldn't worry if a lot of blocks are familiar. This is an opportunity to become more aware of your blocks at the time you actually use them.

Blocks to Listening

Comparing

Comparing makes it hard to listen because you're always trying to assess who is smarter, more competent, more emotionally healthy - you or the other person(s). Some people focus on who has suffered more, who's a bigger victim. While someone's talking, you think to yourself: "Could I do it that well?" or "I've had it harder, he doesn't know what hard is." or "I earn more than that" or "My kids are so much brighter." You can't let much in because you're too busy seeing if you measure up.

Mind Reading

The mind reader doesn't pay much attention to what people say. In fact, they often distrust it. They are trying to figure out what the other person is really thinking and feeling. "She says she wants to go to the show, but I'll bet she's tired and wants to relax. She might be resentful if I push her when she doesn't want to go." The mind reader pays less attention to words than to intonations and subtle cues in an effort to see through to the truth.

If you are a mind reader, you probably make assumptions about how people react to you. "I bet he's looking at my lousy skin." or "She thinks I'm stupid." or "She is turned off by my shyness." These notions are born of intuition, hunches, and vague misgivings, but have little to do with what the person actually says to you.

Rehearsing

You don't have time to listen when you're rehearsing what to say. Your whole attention is on the preparation and crafting of your next comment. You have to *look* interested, but your mind is going a mile a minute because you've got a story to tell, or a point to make. Some people rehearse whole chains of responses: "I'll say, then he'll say," and so on.

Filtering

When you filter, you listen to some things and not to others. You pay only enough attention to see if somebody's angry, or unhappy, or if you're in emotional danger. Once assured that the communication contains none of those things, you let your mind wander.

For example, a woman listens just enough to her son to learn whether he is fighting again at school. Relieved to hear he isn't, she begins thinking about her shopping list. Or, a young man quickly ascertains what kind of a mood his girlfriend is in. If she seems happy as she describes her day, his thoughts begin wandering.

Another way people filter is simply to avoid hearing certain things – particularly anything threatening, negative, critical or unpleasant. It's as if the words were never said: You simply have no memory of them.

Judging

Negative labels have enormous power. If you prejudice someone as stupid or nuts or unqualified, you don't pay as much attention to what they say. You've already written them off. Hastily judging a statement as immoral, hypocritical, mean or crazy means you've ceased to listen and have begun a "knee-jerk" reaction. A basic rule of listening is that judgements should only be made *after* you have heard and evaluated the content of the message.

Dreaming

You're half listening, and something the person says suddenly triggers a chain of private associations. Your neighbour says she's been let go at work, and in a flash you're back to the scene where you got fired for playing cards on those long coffee breaks. Then your mind wanders to memories of another card game years ago where you had a great time. And you're gone into your memories, only to return a few minutes later as your neighbour says, "I knew you'd understand, but don't tell my husband."

You are prone to dreaming when you feel bored or anxious. Everybody dreams, and sometimes you need to make Herculean efforts to stay tuned in. But if you dream a lot with certain people, it may indicate a lack of commitment to knowing or appreciating them. At the very least, it's a statement that you don't value what they have to say very much.

Identifying

In this block, you take everything a person tells you and refer it back to your own experience. They want to tell you about a toothache, but that reminds you of the time you had oral surgery for receding gums. You launch into your story before they can finish theirs. Everything you hear reminds you of something that you've done, or suffered. You're so busy with these exciting tales of your life, that there's no time to really hear or get to know the other person. You may be turning the conversation to be about you and not the other person.

Advising

You are a great problem solver, ready with help and suggestions. You don't have to hear more than a few sentences before you begin searching for the right advice. However, while you are cooking up suggestions and convincing someone to "just try it", you miss what's most important. You didn't hear the feelings, and you didn't acknowledge the person's pain. He or she still feels basically alone because you couldn't listen and just *be* there.

Sparring

This block has you arguing and debating with people. The other person never feels heard because you're so quick to disagree. In fact, a lot of your focus is on finding things to disagree with. You take strong stands, are very clear about your beliefs and preferences. The way to avoid sparring is to repeat back and acknowledge what you have heard. Look for one thing you might agree with.

One sub-type of sparring is the *put down*. You use acerbic or sarcastic remarks to dismiss the other person's point of view. For example: Helen starts telling Arthur about her problems in Biology class. Arthur says: "When are you going to have the brains enough to drop that class?" Al is feeling overwhelmed with the noise from the TV. When he tells Rebecca, she says, "Oh come on, not the TV routine again." The put down is the standard block to listening in many marriages. It quickly pushes the communication into stereotyped patterns where each person repeats familiar hostile litany.

A second type of sparring is discounting. Discounting is for people who can't stand compliments. "Oh, I didn't do anything." or "What do you mean, I was totally lame." or "It's nice of you to say, but it's really a very poor attempt." The basic technique is to run yourself down when you get a compliment. The other person never really feels satisfied that you heard their appreciation. And they're right, you didn't.

Being right

Being right means you will go to any lengths (twist the facts, start shouting, make excuses or accusations, call up past sins) to avoid being wrong. You can't listen to criticism, you can't be corrected, and you can't take suggestions to change. Your convictions are unshakeable. And since you won't acknowledge that your mistakes are mistakes, you keep making them.

Derailing

This listening block is accomplished by suddenly changing the subject. You derail the train of conversation when you get bored or uncomfortable with the topic. Another way of derailing is by *joking it off*. This means that you continually respond to whatever is said with a joke or quip in order to avoid the discomfort of anxiety in seriously listening to the other person.

Placating

"Right.. Right.. Absolutely.. I know.. Of course you are.. Incredible.. Yes.. Really? You want people to like you. So you agree with everything. You may half listen; just enough to get the drift, but you're not really involved. You are placating rather than tuning in and examining what's being said.

Tips for Effective Listening

OK, so now you've read the blocks to listening, and you probably have an idea which ones apply to you. Remember we all do them! From now on though, you will probably notice when you are blocking your listening ability. Awareness is a wonderful thing. It can be a stepping stone to trying on new behaviours/actions. If you catch yourself "blocking your listening ability" you may find some of the tips below useful in assisting you to stay focused on the conversation at hand.

- Take a couple of seconds to empty your mind. Take a few deep breaths and set a clear intention of hearing what the other person wants to communicate to you.
- Make direct eye contact with the other person.
- Ensure your non verbal communication is inviting and encouraging the other person to speak.
- Ensure you are in an optimal state to listen eg: comfortable body position, no major distractions like background noise eg: television, radio or loud music playing.
- Ideally, no sense of urgency or time constraints. If you do, just letting the other person know that you may have to cut the conversation short gives them the option to reschedule to a more suitable time for both parties.
- Let go of any desire to “control” the conversation. Allow it to evolve based on the conversation versus your need to steer it.
- If you are unsure that you have heard correctly, repeat back to the other person what you think they said.

For example: “So what you’re saying is ...” or “Can I just clarify ...” This way there is less chance of miscommunications occurring.

Active listening is when we actively choose to listen to what the other person wants to communicate. Here are some useful tips to listen “actively”:

Things to Try

- Put the focus of attention totally on the speaker
- Repeat conversationally and tentatively, in your words, your understanding of the speaker's meaning.
- Feedback feelings, as well as content (probe, if appropriate, eg: "How do you feel about that? Or "How did that affect you?)
- Reflect back not only to show you understand, but also so the speaker can hear and understand his or her own meaning.
- Try again if your active listening statement is not well received.
- Be as accurate in the summary of the meaning as you can.
- Challenge powerlessness and hopelessness subtly eg: "It is hopeless", "It seems hopeless to you right now." "There's nothing I can do" "You can't find anything that could fix it?"
- Allow silences in the conversation.
- Notice body shifts and respond to them by waiting. Then, eg: "How does it all seem to you now?"

Things to Avoid

- Avoid talking about yourself.
- Reject introducing your own reactions or well intentioned comments.

- Try not to ignore feelings in the situation.
- Avoid advising, diagnosing, baiting, reassuring, encouraging or criticising.
- Dispense with thinking about what you will say next.
- Avoid parroting the speaker's words or only saying "mm" or "ah, hah".
- Don't pretend that you have understood if you haven't.
- Avoid letting the speaker drift to less significant topics because you haven't shown you understand.
- Avoid fixing, changing or improving what the speaker has said.
- Don't change topics.
- Resist filling in every space with your talk.
- Don't neglect the non-verbal content of the conversation.

The poem on the following page summarises a lot of what we have just discussed.

LISTEN

When I ask you to listen to me, and you start giving advice, you have not done what I asked.

When I ask you to listen to me, and you begin to tell me why I shouldn't feel that way, you are trampling my feelings.

When I ask you to listen to me, and you feel you have to do something to solve my problems, you have failed me, strange as that may seem.

Listen! All I ask is that you listen to me.

Not talk or do – just hear me.

Advice is cheap: 50 cents will get you both Dorothy Dix and Dr Spock in the same newspaper.

And I can DO for myself; I'm not helpless.

Maybe discouraged and faltering, but not helpless.

When you do something for me that I can and need to do for myself, you contribute to my fear and weakness.

But when you accept as a simple fact that I do feel what I feel, no matter how irrational, then I quit trying to convince you and can get about the business of understanding what's behind this irrational feeling. And when that's clear, the answers are obvious and I don't need advice.

So, please listen and just hear me, and if you want to talk, wait a minute for your turn; and I'll listen to you.

Author Anonymous

Acknowledgements & Further Reading

This article has been produced by Kathryn Orford, Principal Coach of Your next Step Coaching in Sydney Australia. askacoach.com is grateful to Kathryn for allowing us to reprint her article here.

Skills development exercises have been added by the askacoach.com team.

Kathryn's comment about further reading and attribution appear below:

"A large portion of the information provide here has been sourced from The Conflict Resolution Network. We would like to thank them for sharing this valuable information with us. For further information their website is: www.crnhq.org.

A wonderful book on listening skills and how to resolve conflict is "Everyone Can Win" by Helena Cornelius and Shoshana Faire. This is available at most bookshops and can also be ordered online at the website mentioned above.

Statistical information regarding listening has been sourced from the International Listening Association Website at www.listen.org."

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Skills Development Exercises

Here are some exercises to help you take the information from this document and apply it to your situation in a practical manner. Documenting your discoveries regarding your insights relative to Effective Listening Principles in a journal or notebook could be highly valuable and provide a good baseline for developing your skills in this regard.

1. Make a list of the 12 blocks to listening. Then rate them using a scale of 0 to 5 on how frequently you use them when speaking to other people. 0 = never and 5 = always.
2. From your findings in answering the previous question take the three blocks you use most often. Then write down two things for each one you could do that would help you with being able to listen more effectively by employing these blocks less. Try these for a week and document your findings after employing these changes.
3. As a result of your findings from the previous exercise is there anything else you need to change in relation to the initial blocks to enable you to listen more effectively? Document these and try them over the next week.
4. If these changes are effective pick the next blocks on your list and undertake a similar process to those outlined in Questions 2 & 3. Document if these changes were effective and outline the benefits gained and whether any aspect in the conversation is lost/impaired as a result of these changes.
5. Throughout the next month while working on your own changes listen for these blocks being used by others. How could you make them aware of this without offending them or upsetting them? Would you be prepared to do this? What benefits do you think could arise as a result? What difficulties might be encountered if you tried this? How could you ensure that there was little damage as a result of this activity?

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