**EFFECTIVE LISTENING**

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Effective listening is very important, but it is not easy or automatic. People’s appraisal of their listening ability is much like their assessment of their driving skills, in that a large majority of adults think they’re above average! Some of the difficulties and barriers to effective listening are:

\* Not wanting to get involved

\* Being preoccupied or letting your mind wander, and not listening

\* Being so interested in what you have to say that you listen mainly to find an opening to get the floor

\* Formulating and listening to your own message or rebuttal to what the other person is saying

\* Listening to your own personal beliefs about what is being said

\* Evaluating and making judgments about the communicator or the message

\* Holding negative attitudes toward the other person

\* Not asking for clarification, even when you know that you do not understand.

Good listening is an active, two-way dialog. When we listen effectively, we try to understand what the person is thinking and/or feeling from the other person's own perspective. There is a real distinction between merely hearing the words and really listening for the message. Our viewpoint may be different and we may not necessarily agree with the person, but, as we listen, we need to try to understand from the other's perspective. To listen effectively, we must be actively involved in the communication process, not just listening passively. People don’t know they are being listened to unless the listener makes some type of response. Good listening includes paraphrasing and clarifying the message in different words, conveying understanding and acceptance.

Effective listening also includes selectively making comments and asking questions that promote discovery and insight. These may challenge old assumptions, but do so in a constructive way, if we use good skills. Asking a good question tells the speaker the listener has not only heard what was said, but that they comprehended it well enough to want additional information.

Effective listening provides interactions that build a person’s self-esteem. Good listeners make the other person feel supported and make the conversation a positive experience for the other party.

We all act and respond on the basis of our understanding, and too often there is a misunderstanding that neither party is aware of. Effective listening provides for verification of the message being sent, and correction of understanding before acting on it. It has other potential benefits, including:

\* It helps people spot flaws in their reasoning when they hear it played back without criticism.

\* If we listen so we can accurately understand the other's view, we can also be more effective in discovering the flaws in our own position.

\* Sometimes a person just needs to be heard and acknowledged before the person is willing to consider an alternative or soften his /her position.

\* It is often easier for a person to listen to and consider the other's position when that person knows the other is listening and considering his/her position.

\* It also helps identify areas of agreement so the areas of disagreement are put in perspective and are diminished rather than magnified.

\* It is a very effective response when the other person is angry, hurt, or expressing difficult feelings toward you, especially in relationships that are important to you.

Some tips for effective listening:

1. Stop the talking in your mind. If you're talking, you're not listening.

2. Open space in your mind for what the other has to say. Quiet your mind and focus your attention on listening without prior expectations.

3. Focus and let the other person know you are focused by doing such things as maintaining eye contact (unless in a culture where this is considered impolite) and giving non-verbal clues such as acting interested, nodding your head when appropriate, and leaning toward the other person (avoid looking at your watch or at other people or activities, don’t cross your arms).

4. Be empathic and nonjudgmental. You can be accepting and respectful of the person and their feelings and beliefs without agreeing with them or giving up your own position.

5. Paraphrase and use your own words in reflecting your understanding of the message; parroting back the exact original words is annoying and ineffective. Avoid repeating the same form of response, such as “What I heard you say was...”

6. Respond to expressed feelings before responding to content.

7. Don't respond to just the meaning of the words, look for the feelings or intent beyond the words. Depending on the purpose of the interaction and your understanding of what is relevant, you could reflect back your understanding of the other person’s account of the facts, thoughts and beliefs, feelings, wants, hopes, etc.

8. Inhibit your impulse to immediately answer questions. Sometimes people ask questions when they really want to express themselves and are not open to hearing an answer.

9. Encourage the speaker to continue. Especially over the phone, hearing no response feels like no one is listening.

There are different levels of listening. Each of the following levels builds on the others. Not every conversation requires the highest levels of listening, but many conversations would benefit from using skill to operate further up on these levels. Consider which level of listening you’d like to aim for in a specific situation:

*Level 1*: The listener creates a safe environment in which difficult, complex, or emotional issues can be discussed.

*Level 2*: The listener clears away distractions like phones and laptops, focusing attention on the other person and making appropriate eye-contact. (This behavior not only affects how you are perceived as the listener; it immediately influences the listener’s own attitudes and inner feelings. Acting the part changes how you feel inside. This in turn makes you a better listener.)

*Level 3*: The listener seeks to understand the substance of what the other person is saying. They capture ideas, ask questions, and restate issues to confirm that their understanding is correct.

*Level 4*: The listener observes nonverbal cues, such as facial expressions, perspiration, respiration rates, gestures, posture, and numerous other subtle body language signals. It is estimated that 80% of what we communicate comes from these signals. It sounds strange to some, but you listen with your eyes as well as your ears.

*Level 5*: The listener increasingly understands the other person’s emotions and feelings about the topic at hand, and identifies and acknowledges them. The listener empathizes with and validates those feelings in a supportive, nonjudgmental way.

*Level 6*: The listener asks questions that clarify assumptions the other person holds and helps the other person to see the issue in a new light. This could include the listener injecting some thoughts and ideas about the topic that could be useful to the other person. However, good listeners never highjack the conversation so that they or their issues become the subject of the discussion.

 last modified 6/20/19

1 Many of these ideas have been adapted from various sources - including a 2016 post by Jack Zenger and Joseph Folkman in the *Harvard Business Review* - who suggested the six levels of listening.