

Growing Greatness®:
Series of Articles to Cultivate Truly Outstanding Leaders

The Importance of Listening

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Studies show that we spend 80% of our waking hours communicating, and according to research, at least 45% of that time is spent listening. Although listening is a primary activity, most individuals are inefficient listeners. Tests have shown that immediately after listening to a ten-minute oral presentation, the average listener heard, understood, properly evaluated, and retained approximately half of what was said. And within 48 hours, that drops off another 50% to a final 25% level of effectiveness. In other words, we comprehend and retain only one-quarter of what was said.

Why are we such poor listeners? First of all, we have never really been taught to listen. In school, we are taught speaking, reading, and writing skills, but, in general, there are no courses devoted to listening. Secondly, most people are so busy talking or thinking about what they are going to say next that they miss out on many wonderful opportunities to learn about new things, ideas, and people. A major component of the listening process is asking questions and really listening to the answers. Dale Carnegie in his book, *How to Win Friends and Influence people*, says, "Be a good listener. Encourage others to talk about themselves." By listening you'll discover what motivates you're your client to buy your product or service. By listening, you'll discover what's really bothering your spouse or your children. By listening, you'll discover a lot of very interesting people in the world around you. Listening is the catalyst that fosters mutual understanding and provides us with insight into people's needs and desires so that we can connect with them.

Consequences of Poor Listening

Poor listening is often the cause of misunderstandings and their resulting conflicts. Many errors on the job can be traced to poor listening skills. I know of one instance where a major conflict resulted when a stock trader told the analyst to take a million dollars out of reserves and the analyst “heard” the trader say take reserves down to a million. Not only did this miscommunication destroy the working relationship between the trader and the analyst, it also created a major problem for the client.

Active Listening Guidelines

Because our listening speed is faster than the other person’s speaking speed, there is a lot of “dead” time in the communication process. Often, we fill that void by daydreaming or doing something else like making a “to do” list or doodling. Instead, try using the time to process what the speaker has just said in order to reach a deeper level of understanding.

Be aware of your own biases. It’s important that we recognize our own biases. Simply put, keep an open mind.

Identify your emotional triggers. Certain words or complete messages, ideas, or philosophies can easily arouse our emotions. If you doubt this, just think about your emotional response the next time you hear a politician whose ideology is the opposite of yours.

Be empathetic and nonjudgmental. Each of us is different with our own quirks and peculiarities. Instead of focusing on distracting behaviors, concentrate on what the speaker is saying.

Learn to separate fact from opinion. Avoid jumping to conclusions or making assumptions – warranted or not – about what the other person means. Check it out first.

Listen for the feeling of what is being conveyed. Be aware of non-verbal cues such as gestures, facial expressions, and posture. Observe body language. Be patient and sensitive to the other person's feelings and reactions.

Take notes. According to a Chinese proverb, "The palest ink is better than the best memory." No matter how good your memory, you can-not possibly remember everything. Listen for the main idea or thought. Try to capture in your mind and then put the essence of what the speaker is saying. Give your full attention. Look the speaker in the eye, lean forward, and encourage the speaker to continue by nodding your head and making verbal comments such as "That's interesting," or "Tell me more." Even if you find the speaker or the message boring, try to find an area of interest in the speaker's message.

Don't interrupt. This is a tough one if you have developed that habit. Try to concentrate and inhibit your tendency to interrupt.

Limit your own talking. You can't talk and listen at the same time. The ancient Greek philosopher Diogenes put it well when he said, "We have two ears and only one tongue in order that we may hear more speak less."

About the Author

Karen Lawson, PhD, CSP, is an international consultant, executive coach, speaker, and author. She has built a successful organization and management development consulting firm working with Fortune 500 companies as well as small businesses. Dr. Lawson specializes in cultivating outstanding leaders who enable their organizations to outperform the competition. For a complete list of her products and services, contact Lawson Consulting Group, Inc. at 215-368-9465 or at www.LawsonCG.com.

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