



Learn how to really listen

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Listening is a very critical skill. It is especially important for leaders. If you don't listen, and listen well, then how do you know what is happening, how do you know what people are feeling, and therefore how do you know what the right course of action is. A lot of unhappiness, conflict, and yes, even poor decision making comes from not listening properly.

The conditions needed to listen well.

- In order to listen well you need to be focused on what someone is saying to you. If your mind is in twenty other places you are not going to be doing a great job of listening.
- If you are highly anxious and stressed it will be difficult to listen well. Being in a relaxed and grounded state makes it much easier to be a good listener.
- Arrogant people do not listen well. They are too focused on their own needs and desires to pay careful attention to what someone else is saying.
- Someone who is empathic, that is, someone who can stand in the shoes of the other person and understand what they are saying, will be a better listener than someone who is not.
- To really listen well you need to pay attention to more than just the words being said. You need to look at the body language, the facial expressions, and notice the tone and pace of the voice.
- Cultural similarity usually makes it easier to understand another person. We all tend to think other people see the world as we do. And we think they understand it as we do. But we don't. The interpretation that one person has can be quite different to the interpretation of another. To listen well you need to really and truly understand where the other person is coming from. Once you are aware of this though, you get better at it.
- If you are going to ensure you are a great listener, you need to find a way to check with the person that you have understood what they are saying correctly.

Some exercises to practice your listening skills:

Exercise 1: The “don’t interrupt” exercise

- Make a habit of not interrupting the person talking to you. This means you stop talking and pay attention to what others are saying. You can only learn about the other person when you keep quiet and listen. Whenever you are in a discussion let the speaker finish before you reply.

Exercise 2: Listen more

- Take a notebook and write down all the discussions you had today. Write down for each discussion what the subject was, who talked more – you or another person, what you know more about following this discussion. Write this down for at least 5 – 6 discussions had. If you can take this to the other people involved in the discussion and check with them if they agree with you or not, then so much the better.

Exercise 3: Listening means paying attention which means asking questions

- A great exercise to improve listening skills is to ask questions. If you ask questions, then people know you have to be listening to them, you prevent possible misunderstandings, you can keep the conversation interesting, and you develop your listening skills. Don’t overdo it though or you can become annoying. Set yourself a goal to ask a few questions for some selected conversations you are going to have today.

Exercise 4: Summarising the conversation

- If you are required to summarise a conversation you need to listen carefully. So select some conversations that you will summarise once they are completed, and once the conversation is over write down a summary of the talk. Once again you can check back with the other parties to see if you captured the conversation correctly.

Exercise 5: Show respect for the other person

- If you show respect for the other person you will pay more attention to him or her. Make it a habit to respect the person you are talking to. Find something you can respect about the person.

Exercise 6: Pay attention to nonverbal communication clues

- True listening means you listen to everything that is said – and that includes what the body language is saying. Does the person seem relaxed? What are they doing with their hands? What messages are their bodies communicating? Does their verbal and nonverbal communication tie up?

There are lots of skills in life that enable us to move ahead, to get promoted, to get leadership positions, to be respected and influential. One of those skills, which sometimes does not get much attention, is listening skills. When you have needed someone to listen to you, really and truly listen to you, you know how much it means when someone is a good listener.

