
The Human Side Of Business: Effective Listening

by STEPHEN D. BOYD

Whether you are engaged in selling, customer service, managing people or just being a team member in your convenience store, a most important people skill is effective listening. We spend about half of our communication time listening, yet our listening efficiency is about 25%. Customers don't come back if they feel the salesperson is not listening. Team morale is low when the team feels management does not listen. We miss key information from a negotiation if we don't pay attention.

Many times we don't listen because we are too busy talking! Lyndon Johnson had a plaque on the wall when he was a U. S. senator that said, "You ain't learning nothing when you are talking."

I find the higher up in an organization you go, the better listeners you will find. Really effective salespeople may listen up to 75% of their communication time. Physicians who listen well have fewer lawsuits against them. There is a real connection between quality listening and success in the workplace. In this article, I want to look at ways we can win on the human side of business: effective listening skills.

Prepare to Listen

Realize that listening is hard work; it is active, not passive.

To listen well, you have to mentally prepare yourself. Get ready to listen. Make yourself shut out other challenges facing you and just listen. Don't allow yourself to do other things as you listen, such as answer-

ing the phone, making a "to do" list or checking your e-mail. Effective listening is difficult and requires all of your attention and all of your effort.

Make Good Use of the Thought/Speech Ratio

We can think about four times faster than a person can talk. As a result, we have trouble concentrating on what the person is saying. We let our minds wander, or we may start thinking about something else. We may begin to formulate our answer to what we think the person is saying. A word or phrase the person uses triggers our mind to an emotional reaction that has nothing to do with what the person is saying. For instance, the word "vacation" might make you think about your own vacation coming up in a couple of weeks. One of the worst things we can do is to interrupt the speaker because he or she is speaking too slowly. Sometimes we get so impatient that we just blurt out what we are thinking in the middle of his/her thought. Our goal should be to concentrate on what the other person is saying. As we listen, we must use that extra thinking time to make ourselves pay attention. Seek to summarize what he or she is saying. Ask yourself, "What is the

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point?” Seek to listen in more than one medium. Listen with your eyes as well as with your ears. Look for the nonverbal to see if it reinforces or contradicts what the person is saying. Does the person look at

you when he or she speaks? Does the person cross his or her arms or legs while speaking?

If you really can't concentrate, you might be able to say, "This is not a good time for me. Could we continue this conversation later today or in the morning?"

Another effective listening skill is to put yourself in situations where you have to prove you are listening.

In a meeting, sit close to where the speaker or facilitator is located. If you sit in a meeting where the speaker will easily make eye contact with you, it will put more pressure on you to listen. For example, sitting down front and in the middle of a meeting room puts you on the spot as a listener. The speaker might call on you and will certainly look to you for feedback. A few years ago, I had a student who was trying college for a second time because he had flunked out the first time. He became a straight "A" student the second time around. According to him, the dramatic difference in his performance was largely a matter of where he sat. In every class, he sat front and center, right in the face of the instructor. Consequently, he heard everything clearly, had nothing between him and the instructor to distract him and he received more eye contact and personal attention than anyone else in the room. People often avoid the rows or seats immediately in front of the speaker, but if you choose to sit in a prime location for listening, you not only have fewer distractions, but you become more accountable for your listening because the speaker is watching you.

Make a Commitment to Listen

Volunteer to take notes at the meeting. This will probably make you the best listener in the meeting. Tell someone who cannot attend the meeting that you will report back to him or her the main ideas discussed at the meeting. These kinds of commitments will motivate you to really listen.

If you are listening one-on-one, sit where there is

no object between you and the speaker. Get out from behind the desk. Sit directly across from the speaker.

Still another way to increase good listening is to encourage the other person to talk. Be pleasant in your nonverbal expression. As comedienne Phyllis Diller stated, "A smile is a curve that sets everything straight." Show emotion that responds to the attitude of the person talking to you. When the person is talking about positive items, have a smile, but if the person is very upset, show concern with your facial expression. The axiom, "Never smile at an angry person" certainly applies here.

Give the speaker space. In a business context, four to six feet is the optimum distance to help the person feel at ease in talking to you.

Don't begin speaking the moment the person stops talking. If you pause a moment, the person will realize that you really are trying to listen and will feel even more comfortable in sharing information with you. In addition, the person may then go ahead and give you more information that is vital for you to give the best feedback.

Develop an open posture to encourage the other person to talk. Lean toward the speaker. Gesture toward the person as you listen and respond. Don't cross your arms or tap the chair or desk with your pen or finger as though you are bored or impatient with what the person is saying. Use the speaker's name as you respond. Seek to give the person assurances that what he or she is saying is the most important thing to you at that moment. An associate of mine "catches" a thought in her hand when she wants to interrupt. The clasped hand gesture is done inconspicuously and is a reminder to keep her in the listening mode until her counterpart finishes talking; she can then retrieve the thought and speak it. All these are ways to keep you listening and the speaker talking.

Ask Questions the Right Way

Be prepared to ask an open question before responding. Open questions usually begin with "What," "How" or "Why." Instead of immediately responding with your own ideas or answers, you might ask, "What do you mean by...?" or "What makes you feel that way about...?" Instead of asking a question you might just encourage the person to talk by saying, "Tell me more about...." Henry David Thoreau said, "The greatest compliment that was ever paid me was when one asked me what I thought, and attended to my answer."

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An important component of good listening is to be willing to empathize. If the speaker is on a topic that has emotional overtones, empathize before you give an answer or advice. Basically, empathy is seeking to put yourself in the other person's position but without getting emotionally involved yourself. Sometimes a person knows you can't solve his or her problem; all he or she really wants is for you to listen. Showing empathy is a way of doing that. Even if you do offer advice or a solution, precede that with an empathic response. These might include, "Wow, that must be tough," or "I can see you really feel strongly about that." Still another good empathic response is, "I can see how important that is to you." If you do find yourself getting emotionally involved, this might be a good time to postpone the conversation until a later time so that you can get control of your emotions. Remember: when emotions are high, communication is low. If you become angry, excited or frustrated, you probably should delay important advice-giving or problem-solving.

As in all business contexts, your mental attitude makes a big difference. Accept the notion that effective listening is a vital part of your success. The ability to listen is a key managerial skill. Anytime you are in a listening situation, have the mental set that you will learn something new. Every person you meet has the potential to help you learn and understand



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better. Get enough rest so that you are not easily distracted or won't nod off as the person speaks.

High Tech vs. High Touch

Author John Naisbett of Megatrends was the first to note that an increasingly "high-tech" society insists upon a corresponding increase in "high touch." One of the best ways of incorporating the human side of business is to concentrate on becoming a better listener.

Whatever you do, seek to listen more than you talk. People who seem to talk all the time never have the credibility of those who spend time listening. An old Scottish verse summarizes the point of this article: "His thoughts were slow, his words were few, and never formed to glisten. But he was a joy for all the clan, for you should have heard him listen." □

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