

# Six Key Traits of Excellent Listeners

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## **You can't say enough or learn enough about listening well.**

In fact, many miscommunications and damaged relationships result from poor listening skills and a lack of intention to listen deeply. On the flip side, listening is often connected with higher levels of leadership effectiveness, trustworthiness and understanding.

We're sharing the following conscious, meaningful-listening tips to help you stock your communication toolbox with options to boost your listening skill. What do the truly excellent listeners have in common? People who listen effectively:

### **1. Concentrate on what the other person is saying**

Listening does not mean waiting for the other person to finish speaking, or multi-tasking by making a mental grocery list while listening. Deep listening requires you to focus solely on what the other person is saying verbally, physically and emotionally. A primary reason to listen deeply is to gain greater understanding of someone else. Use thoughtful questions to verify that you are interpreting these cues as the speaker intends. Studies show that the average person can speak up to 125 words a minute, but would be able to process up to 500 words a minute when listening. Use this "extra time" when listening to soak in the non-verbal communication.

### **2. Don't interrupt**

A high-caliber listener has conscious or unconscious tricks that she employs to avoid interrupting: Jotting ideas on a notepad to refer to when it's her turn to speak; concentrating so genuinely on what the other person is saying that it's not paramount to interject her own thoughts; taking a deep breath to re-center herself on the purpose of the conversation or her intention to listen deeply; and learning tactful tools to use when an interruption is absolutely necessary, as in, "Excuse me, before you continue, you mentioned that you had to leave at 2:00 p.m. and I notice that you're not wearing a watch. I wanted to let you know that it's 1:55 p.m. now." Interestingly, some interpersonal communication experts differentiate an interruption, which stops the flow of communication, with an "overlap," which might occur in a dynamic discussion where participants overlap comments that build on a common idea or intention.

### **3. Squelch the urge to give unsolicited advice**

Listening occurs primarily with your ears, not with your voice. People appreciate listeners who allow them to speak. Giving unsolicited advice can be perceived as "I'm right, you're wrong," which most likely is not the outcome someone is looking for. When it comes time to share ideas or experiences (e.g., when asked), frame your comments as potential options, such as, "One approach that worked well for me was..." or, "Based on what you've told me, ... might be beneficial..." Expectations will differ based on the purpose of the conversation. For example, if someone has approached you for information or to help solve a problem, they're more likely to want your perspective than if they want to share an exciting idea or just need a listening ear! One way to be sure? Ask about the person's interest and intention at the start of the conversation, including whether they're looking for ideas and advice or

just someone to listen.

#### **4. Hear themselves objectively**

If possible, listen in on a conversation in which you feel you are listening deeply. How? Use a tape recorder or have a recorded conversation transcribed. How well do you think you are listening? What cues give you that impression? How effective were your questions? What amount of time did you spend talking? How much did you learn about the other person(s). Reviewing your participation in this manner allows you to "sit across the table" from yourself, and see how others might perceive your listening skills. Using these learnings to improve your skill.

#### **5. Keep filters and stereotypes in check**

First impressions can be everlasting, stereotypes are plentiful, and each of us has filters that affect how we see the world. Such filters mean you might pre-judge what a speaker is going to say, or what she means, before she's spoken. However, if you are listening well, these factors will not color your perception of the message you're receiving. Deep listening requires focus. Practice behaviors and rituals that allow you to shed those distractions before engaging in listening. Sample practices include breathing exercises, reconnecting with your intentions, and being aware of what's an assumption or filter, and what's grounded in reality.

#### **6. Have patience**

Slowing down is the key to good speaking and good listening. Patsy Rodenburg, Director of Voice at London's National Theatre and the Guildhall School of Music and Drama recommends slowing down by pronouncing each word, taking pauses to breath deeply, and practicing effective speaking by using the muscles you'll need (i.e., your voice and mouth). Apply these same techniques when listening. By slowing down your listening you'll better "digest" each word and its intended meaning, and be better prepared to ask purposeful questions. Likewise, a slower conversation eliminates any rushed feeling, which reduces the urge to interrupt, for example.

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