

LEADERS LISTEN



Be a Better Leader by Being a Careful Listener

These pointers will improve communication, rapport, and motivation throughout your organization.

By Stephen C. Rafe

Listening is more than a process for gathering information. It's a tool for negotiating, enhancing others' self-esteem, showing confidence, motivating people, and much more.

Careful listening means putting active thought into the process rather than being passive. It means staying focused on the speaker without interrupting or judging. Listening with care means looking beneath the words to people's underlying feelings and intentions. If you listen more than you speak, you gain the power role in any situation.

Avoid These Barriers

Most failures in communication occur because we create barriers, such as:

- half-an-ear listening as we pay attention to our own thoughts or even to another conversation
- selective listening in which we edit out what we don't want to hear or focus only on what serves our own agenda
- pretending to be interested when we'd rather be talking about something else or with someone else.

Another problem that often blocks careful listening could be described as "sizing up." We listen for signals that the speaker is rejecting us or our opinions or that the speaker approves of us or our ideas. Sometimes we even listen to find vulnerabilities in the speaker's points.

Finally, we can fail at careful listening when we shift our attention to rehearsing what we intend to say next. Instead, we should remain focused on what the speaker is still saying.

Listen with Your Eyes

To sidestep barriers to careful listening, we need to use not only our ears but also our eyes. We can observe people's shifts in posture, muscle tensions, changes in skin tone or color, and the ways they hold their heads. What they do with their hands and feet also contributes to the messages they send, as does their rate of breathing.

We especially discern people's emotional messages through facial expressions, including how often they blink their eyes, the nature of their eye contact, how they position their eyebrows, and the way they shape their lips. Signals such

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as these give clues to whether the speaker is angry, hostile, worried, defensive, bored, dispassionate, enthusiastic, eager, supportive, understanding, calm, complacent, curious, or puzzled. It's amazing how such a small cluster of signals can provide dozens of possible combinations and how those can be fine-tuned to provide hundreds more.

For example, how would you interpret the message of an individual who is leaning back, looking away from you, lips tight together, legs crossed at the knees, arms folded, and hands clenched? Imagine someone looking that way, or – better yet – ask someone to assume that combination of body language signals for you. Notice how much you can glean without a word being spoken.

Probe for Meaning

Many conversations go awry because the words used have more than one meaning, no meaning, or any meaning the speaker or listener chooses to assign. To move beyond ambiguity, be careful not to assume you know what the other person means. Instead, take the time to probe more deeply. Here are some common situations and suggested responses:

When Information Is Missing

Statement: "Your organization isn't very service-oriented." Response: "What, specifically, makes you feel that way?"

When Information Is Obscure

Statement: "I find this hard to believe." Response: "What is it that you're having difficulty with?"

When You Don't Know What Is Being Compared

Statement: "I liked the other way better." Response: "Better than what?" Or, "In what way?"

When the Action Isn't Clear

Statement: "You discourage a lot of initiative." Response: "How do you mean that?"

When the Speaker Turns a Process into an Event

Statement: "The committee has made its decision." Response: "In your view, what criteria got them there?"

When the Speaker "Reads Minds"

Statement: "Everyone believes this." Response: "How can we tell what *every* one thinks?"

When the Source of the Belief or Opinion Is Unclear

Statement: "They say this is the right way." Response: "Who says this?" Or, "According to whom?"

Two Keys to an Effective Conversation

For conversations that matter, such as those between managers and employees, it's imperative to keep these two keys in mind, according to Randy Siegel (buildyourleaders.com):

KEY #1: BE ACTIVE.

Make a commitment to listen, gather information about the speaker's message, and provide helpful feedback. Engage the speaker with these tips:

React to the message. Offer positive cues like maintaining eye contact, smiling, nodding, and leaning toward the speaker. Don't react with negative signals, such as shaking your head or frowning, even if you disagree with the speaker. Reserve your objections for when it's your turn to speak.

Confirm what you've heard. Paraphrase but don't parrot. Say, "Okay, as I understand it, you're saying that . . ." or "Let me make sure I understand you . . ." Summarizing and waiting for confirmation will avoid misunderstandings.

Share your emotions. Provide feedback without judgment. For example: "When you . . . , I feel . . . "

KEY #2: BE EMPATHETIC.

Make sure others feel seen, heard, and understood with these suggestions:

Nudge the speaker to a solution. Add a new perspective by sharing a similar experience you've had.

Mirror the speaker physically. You can often convey empathy more effectively in silence – with a look or pause – than with words. Physically, you become more empathetic by mirroring the other person's breathing rate, voice speed and volume, gestures, and posture.

When Cause and Effect Aren't Obvious

Statement: "Public opinion is going to create problems." Response: "How is that likely to happen?"

When the Speaker Makes Imperative Statements (Using Words Like Must, Need to, Have to, Can't)

Statement: "We need to put an end to . . ." Response: "What would be the outcome if we didn't?"

When the Statement Is Overblown

Statement: "You people are always saying things like that." Response: "Always?" Or, "Who else said it?" Or, "Under what circumstances?"

Respond with Understanding

Just by saying, "I understand . . .," you can build connection and head off disagreement. For optimal rapport, it helps to respond in the modality the other person is using. For example, if the speaker has been using a predominance of visual words, you would say, "I understand the picture." If someone uses auditory words, you might say, "I understand

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what you're *saying*." To a person using tactile words, you could say, "I understand how you *feel*."

You can also express your understanding in terms of the individual's commitment to the concept, sense of time, and the like. For example, you could say, "I understand that this is important to you," or "I understand the priority this is for you," or "I understand why this needs to move forward now." There are many ways to express understanding: Find the ones that work best in your specific situation.

Show Agreement

You can also maintain rapport by establishing agreement. There are four ways to do so. You can:

Agree Entirely

Statement: "Our children deserve a good education."

Response: "I agree with you completely: A good education is essential."

Agree in Part

Statement: "Our children's education needs to include cultural-diversity courses."

Response: "I certainly agree that schools could help provide cultural-diversity awareness."

Agree with the Principle or Concept

Statement: "Saving the whales should be a part of educational instruction in the schools."

Take the time to probe more deeply.

Message Sent, Message Received

Fine-tune your communication skills with articles such as these (NonprofitWorld.org):

Why Feedback Is the Key to Your Success (Vol. 35, No. 3)

How to Fix Communication Breakdowns (Vol. 29, No. 1)

The Secrets & Science of Body Language (Vol. 28, No. 5)

Cynicism Rx: Authentic Communication (Vol. 24, No. 6)

How to Assess Credibility in Workplace Investigations (Vol. 23, No. 1)

11 Communication Keys that Will Change the Way You Lead (Vol. 14, No. 2)

What the Heck Are You Trying to Say? (Vol. 34, No. 2)

How Jargon Undermines Communication (Vol. 27, No. 2)

Increase Work-Group Productivity with Concrescent Conversation (Vol. 26, No. 3)



Response: "Concern for our ecology can certainly be a valuable part of a student's educational experience."

Agree with the Emotion

Statement: "Those educators won't get away with that one!"

Response: "I can see that you've got some pretty strong feelings on the issue."

As you can see, each of these responses provides a golden opportunity to follow with "Tell me more," perhaps followed by an encouraging, open-end question such as, "How would you go about it?" Each time you show a nonjudgmental interest in others' views, you're building a relationship far beyond any you might achieve by trying to impress them with your own opinions.

Express Appreciation

When all else fails, you can at least express appreciation. As with showing agreement, you can show appreciation in whichever one of the four possibilities is most appropriate. In addition, if none of those seems to fit, you can say something such as "I appreciate your bringing that up" or "I appreciate your letting me know." An expression of appreciation is always welcome and sets the stage for an effective outcome.

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