

HOW TO IMPROVE YOUR LISTENING SKILLS: A KEY TO GOOD COMMUNICATION

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A psychologist once had a client who asked his wife, “How would you rate my listening skills?” She replied, “You are capable of perceiving sound.” For this husband, the four most dreaded words were “We need to talk.” This statement can sometimes be translated, “You need to listen.”

Good communication builds good relationships. Psychologists emphasize good listening skills, which are one of the main themes throughout Dale Carnegie’s (1936/1981) classic book titled *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. There are several simple strategies that can help people improve their listening skills.

Limit your own talking. You can’t talk and listen at the same time. If you are thinking about what you are going to say next, then you are not listening. Good communication is said to be 99% listening and 1% talking.

Listen to hear. Listen carefully to the person who is speaking. Listen to hear, not to mentally compose your response. Listen to learn, not to construct your rebuttal.

Think like the person who is speaking. His or her problems and needs are important. You’ll understand and retain them better if you strive to understand his or her point of view.

Ask clarification questions. If you don’t understand something, or if you feel you may have missed a point, clear it up now before it embarrasses you later. It is often helpful to ask open questions rather than closed questions.

Don’t interrupt or change the subject. A pause, even a long pause, doesn’t always mean that the speaker has finished saying everything that he or she has to say.

Concentrate on what you are hearing. Focus your mind on what the speaker is saying. Practice shutting out outside distractions when listening. Listen with your eyes.

Turn off your own worries. Turning off and tuning in aren’t easy, but they are important. Personal problems or worries not connected with the subject at hand form a kind of internal “static” that can blank out the real message that you are trying to tune in.

Consider taking notes. In some settings, taking notes may be appropriate and will help you remember important points. Be selective. Trying to take notes on everything said can result in being left far behind or in retaining irrelevant information while missing the main themes.

Listen for ideas, not just words. You want to get the whole picture, not just isolated bits and pieces. Listen for key themes.

Use interjections to punctuate your listening. An occasional “Yes” or “I see” shows you are still with the speaker. However, wait until the speaker has finished his or her comment, and don’t overdo or use interjections as meaningless comments.

Prepare in advance. Remarks and questions prepared in advance, when possible, free your mind for listening.

Respond to ideas, not the person. Don't allow irritation to rise from things heard or from mannerisms of the speaker. Rather than reacting to these distractions, consider responding to the ideas. Base your response on principles, not personalities.

Don't argue mentally. Don't allow yourself to become annoyed or irritated with anything that is said. Try agreeing with points to see if you can understand the speaker's perspective better.

Don't jump to conclusions. Avoid making unwarranted assumptions about what is going to be said. Don't mentally try to complete the other person's sentences. Listen and learn.

Practice silence. The word *listen* has the same letters as the word *silent*. One of the best ways to listen is to be silent. If you practice silence (e.g., through meditation), you will become better at learning how and when to be silent.

As a final thought, it is often helpful to keep this question in mind: "Am I listening or just waiting to talk?"

Reference

Carnegie, D. (1936/1981). *How to win friends and influence people* (Rev. ed.). New York, NY: Pocket Books. (Original work published 1936).

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