

Are You Listening?

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Listening is Important

If someone has ever asked you the question “Are you listening to me?” Chances are that they are seeing something that you are not aware of - - - you are either distracted or simply not paying attention. Listening is the primary means that most people use for gathering information from other sources. However, it is probably one of the least developed skills that many people have. According to one classic listening study by Dr. Ralph Nichols, many adults listen at only about a 25% efficiency level. That means that in any given conversation, people are missing about 75% of what you say (and vice versa)!

Listening is an active process that improves with effective practice and conscious effort. Hearing happens naturally for someone who has no hearing deficits while listening is a learned process.

Unfortunately, most people never have any formal training in the skills of listening while they are in school. For that matter, most people never get any formal training in the skill of listening. Unless someone attends a professional development or higher education class on listening, reads about the topic and practices what they learned, or listens to audio sessions on listening, they likely never get any training that will help them improve. Even those who do attend such training will not improve unless they consciously apply what was learned and take the time to really listen to others.

The Listening Process

Listening is a four-step process in which sounds are collected and actively processed by the brain. The four steps are:

Step 1 - Hearing/Receiving the message. During this step, your ears *hear and receive* sounds which they collect. As the sounds enter the ear, they travel through the ear canal to the brain.

Step 2 – Attending. Once your ears pick up sound waves, your brain goes to work focusing on or *attending* to what was heard. In the process, it tries to sort out everything being heard. The effort involves trying to decide what's important so that you can focus attention on the proper sound. This becomes extremely difficult when you are receiving multiple messages or sounds. That is why it's important to eliminate as many distractions as possible. For example, you could forward telephones or turn off your computer monitor during a meeting, shut your door, or find a quiet place to meet.

Step 3 – Comprehending/Assigning Meaning. Once you've decided to which message or person you will listen, your brain begins a process of *comprehending or assigning*

meaning to what you have heard. Just like a computer, your brain has files of information. These files contain sounds, sights, shapes, visions, experiences, knowledge on various topics that it sorts through. As it compares what was heard to what is stored, it tries to match the pieces. For example, you hear a voice over the phone that sounds familiar. The brain goes to work trying to match the voice to a name or person you've dealt with before. This is called memory and recognition.

Step 4 – Responding. The last phase of the listening process is *responding*. Selecting an appropriate response is crucial to the success of your interactions with others and could ultimately impact relationships. The words you select, the way you deliver them, the timing and location, and the non-verbal signals you send all have meaning. Each impacts the way others perceive and interpret your message. This is why care must be taken to consciously select the appropriate response and method of delivery when dealing with people. A wrong choice could mean lost business or worse --- a person could get angry or violent.

The Impact of Listening

In a world where businesses operate 24 hours a day, seven days a week (24/7), workers are constantly challenged to do more with fewer assets, and customers “want it now” listening often takes a back seat to other activities. People go through the motions of listening and say things like, “Go ahead; I’m listening,” but the reality is that they usually are not. This is one of the reasons why mistakes are made and costs of products and services keep going up. Think about it from this perspective. If you use the 75% listening efficiency loss number from earlier, most of what a customer tells a sales representative they want or need is not accurately processed and the wrong product or service is likely delivered. When mistakes are made, the organization normally replaces or fixes what was wrong. That costs time and money, thus prices continue to escalate.

The long term effect of poor listening is that trust is negatively impacted. Without trust you have no relationship on a personal or organizational level. Thus, the ultimate result of poor listening is that relationships are potentially damaged or destroyed. In a customer service environment, lost trust can often mean the success or failure of the organization.

An Approach for Change

Trainers and educators can take an active role in helping remedy some of this issue. They can do so by first objectively assessing their listening skills. They can then enroll in a training session on listening or do research on the topic to gain new insights into techniques they can use to be a better listener. Then they can continually practice the skill to work toward enhancing their own listening skill level. Having succeeded in this endeavor, they can then start sharing listening tips and guidance to others while modeling good listening behavior themselves. Major gains may not occur, but any improvement is better than none. If everyone were taking this approach, pretty soon we would all be listening better.

To help you on your journey to better listening, check out resources available from the International Listening Association (www.listen.org)

Bob Lucas B.S., M.A., M.A, CPLP is an internationally-known author and learning and performance professional. He has written and contributed to thirty-one books and compilations. He regularly conducts creative training, train-the-trainer, customer service, interpersonal communication and management and supervisory skills workshops. Bob can be reached at blucas@robertwlucas.com or through his website www.robertwlucas.com. Follow his blog at www.robertwlucas.com/wordpress and like him at www.facebook.com/robertwlucasenterprises