

The lost art of listening

Leaders must know how to communicate



How many times have you been at a business lunch or in a meeting and set your digital device on silent, “so as not to disturb your co-workers?”

Yeah, right! What you’re doing is trying to be someone who’s everywhere at once, so as not to miss a beat of life.

You’ll be a far more competent boss, co-worker, leader, friend and family-person if you master the lost art of listening – really listening, which does not include checking e-mails while having a conversation with your co-worker or – gasp – your wife.

Active listening is a state of mind that involves paying full and careful attention to the person who is speaking – it’s a willingness and an ability to hear and to understand and most of all, to offer respect to the speaker.

True, active listening, by its very definition, avoids the rush to judgment by learning the skills of paraphrasing, summarization and restatement. And in our digital era, active listening has become a skill that we all need to relearn and master.

Poor communication skills by management is typically the No. 1 reason for employee dissatisfaction. The smart manager wants to keep and enhance a positive workspace where employees feel valued and cared for –

something all people want – not just from the workplace.

People, in general, want to feel respected. One of the greatest gifts that a manager can offer his workers is uninterrupted, active listening. You don’t have to agree with what they say, but you do have to listen.

It’s time to acknowledge the fact that our technological era has negatively impacted workplace listening skills. Not addressing this fact does not deny its credibility. Utilizing these skills will make for a happier employee base with less turnover.

It is helpful to think of active listening as an exchange between two people, with one person talking and the other actively listening. The keys to active listening are: paying attention and holding judgment, as well as reflecting, clarifying, summarizing and sharing what has been said by the speaker.

They are not mutually exclusive, in that you don’t have to stop sharing in order to be paying attention, for example. Nor are these skill sets weighted in importance. In one conversation, clarifying may take much effort, while in another, it may seem quick and effortless.

• **Paying attention** while actively listening – to your own behavior and that of the speaker – helps to create the setting for a productive dialogue. Pay attention to your own frame of mind and body language for optimal effectiveness, as well as to the other person’s nonverbal and verbal behavior, in order to make sense of non-verbal cues.

• **Holding judgment** helps you to understand how the other person sees the world by being open to new ideas,

new possibilities and new perspectives. Even when tensions run high, practice empathy, indicate your open mind with body language and verbal prompts, acknowledge your differences and most of all, be patient.

• **Reflecting** the other person’s information, perspective and feelings by saying something along the lines of, “So, as I understand, what you’re saying...” indicates that you hear and understand what is being said. Use this paraphrasing to confirm your understanding and don’t assume that you understood correctly or that the other person knows that you’ve heard.

• **Clarifying** is double-checking on issues that might be unclear or ambiguous. Use questions to help.

• **Summarizing** helps to identify key themes and solidifies your understanding of the person’s points of view. It also may help both parties to be clear on mutual responsibilities and follow up.

• By now, you should have a good understanding of the other person’s points and feelings, and it’s time for **sharing** – introducing your own feelings, thoughts, suggestions and addressing any further issues or concerns.

Active listening is not an optional component of leadership, nor is it a nice way to make others feel good. It is a vital component of leadership in today’s digital age. ⁸⁵

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