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## 7 steps to being a better listener

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Listening is as far from a passive activity as anything I can imagine. By being a passive hearer, you may take in some words but give nothing back. Listening requires thought and effort. It means you must work at listening with your head and heart and not just your ears. And it means learning how to respond to what is being said so that you're listening communicates things your relationship partner needs to hear.

Here are seven steps to take in order to gain listening wisdom:

### ***1. Practice silence.***

As the article on sins yesterday suggested, remaining quiet can be a challenge. You're going to feel compelled to interrupt, to finish sentences and to add your two cents. It takes discipline to remain silent. Make a conscious effort to say nothing until you're sure your relationship partner has finished his thought. This is easier written than done. Therefore, try practicing it at home before you do it at work. With a spouse or a friend, force yourself to stay silent during a conversation until they're done speaking. In many ways, it's more difficult to do this with someone you know well, since conversations are often filled with frequent interruptions by both parties. By practicing silence in a personal relationship, though, you learn the discipline of knowing when to be silent in a professional one.

### ***2. Eliminate distractions.***

Shut the door, turn off your cell phone, don't glance at the computer for email. If appropriate--if your relationship partner has communicated that he feels this meeting is important--clear your schedule and tell him that he has all time he needs to make his points. Similarly, don't bring up tangential or unrelated topics. You want the other person to feel you've done everything possible to make 100% listening possible.

### ***3. Focus your attention.***

This means you can't daydream, dwell on how you're going to respond or tune out the other person. Giving your boss or customer your undivided attention is just that--a gift. Reflect on what she's trying to tell you--consider the literal meaning and also read between the lines. Don't allow a ringing phone, a conversation going on outside the office or anything else distract you. People are remarkably sensitive to another individual's attention--or lack thereof. They can somehow tell if you're only listening at 50%. Give them 100% if you value the relationship and the results it can produce.

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## ***4. Show non-verbal attentiveness.***

We communicate most of our messages without opening our mouths. It's not enough just to listen attentively; you need to demonstrate this attentiveness. Three easy ways to do so are: nod; make eye contact; smile. Shifting uneasily in your seat or glancing around as if you're waiting for the police to arrest you are not ways to communicate your attentiveness. Impassive, immobile listeners seem bored. Use your eyes and body language to convey that you're anything but bored.

## ***5. Use the "repeat principle".***

Paraphrase what you thought the other person said. For instance: "If I'm hearing correctly, you're telling me that&" By asking your relationship partner to repeat what you believe is an important point, you're demonstrating that you want to listen better. Requesting clarification communicates your desire to know exactly what is meant. Now, you can't over-use this technique. If you do, you'll come off as inattentive or hard-of-hearing. Wait until you really aren't clear on what he's saying. Or wait until the other person says something where he's placed a lot of emphasis--either through his tone of voice or because he tells you, "This is important". This gives you the opening you need to apply the repeat principle.

## ***6. Empathize.***

Empathy is essential for results-producing relationships, and it's especially crucial in listening. You have 101 ways to communicate your empathy, not all of them verbal. A knowing look, a nod of your head, a sigh--these gestures can communicate you "get it" faster and more empathically than a long-winded speech. Don't try to over-empathize--you don't have to make a melodramatic show of how you're relating to what a client or manager is telling you. Sometimes, empathy can be expressed by relating your own experience relative to what your relationship partner has described. Sometimes, a simple, "Believe me, I know what you're going through with Jim", will get the job done. Empathy really is nothing more than showing you have listened with your heart as well as your head.

## ***7. Ask good questions.***

Have you ever been in an audience when the speaker asks, "Does anyone have any questions?" and no one responds? It's as if he never spoke at all--or no one paid any attention to what he said. If you don't ask any questions during a conversation--or if you just ask perfunctory questions--you're going to create the same effect. So don't be shy about asking a few good questions. Even one good question may be enough to show that you've listened intently. If you've ever listened to a press conference, you know what I mean. Typically, a politician or pro sports coach is asked a bunch of inane questions, and then one member of the media asks the question that really sheds light on a situation. You want to ask that good question. Maybe your boss has just told you that he can't stand his own boss and doesn't know how to deal with his unreasonable requests; that he can't sleep nights, that he's spending too much work time trying to placate his boss then get real work done. So your good question might be: "Can you talk to the CEO or someone in management and ask them to intervene?" A good question demonstrates you've followed the logic of the conversation and are thinking about possible solutions/actions. That's the mark of a perceptive listener.