



67 The art and power of listening

What is listening?

Being listened to is very important to most people. It is a sign of respect and genuine interest. True listening happens when a total focus on the speaker exists. What they are saying and feeling is heard and understood. There are no distractions nor any misunderstandings based on the listener's own interpretation or perception. Those who are skilled listeners will hear more than just the words. They will hear the speaker's

- reality
- concerns
- opinions and perceptions
- beliefs
- feelings and emotions
- desires
- needs.

They will also be aware of the non-verbal communication of body language and voice tone and pace. Good listeners are able to get to the core of what matters most to the person they are in contact with.

Why is it important?

Really listening to your clients will enable you to find out not just what they might need, but what they really value and who they are as people. Everyone likes to be recognised for who they are, as well as being paid individual attention. This is what the best relationships are made of. Being an excellent listener is a rare skill and, of course, is one of the greatest rapport moves.

Can you remember the last time you were really listened to? As you remember that time, can you recall how it felt to have someone's total focus and attention and know that listening to you was really important to them?

Your challenge

Your own perceptions, judgments and the conversations you have inside your own head can act as a block to what is being said by the person who is speaking to you.

You may miss what matters most to them. Allowing yourself to become distracted or being too keen to move the conversation on to where you want it to be will get in the way.

Listening can be a selfless activity. You will need to relax and be in the right mental and emotional state yourself to be able to give your full attention.

How to listen

Good listening starts with making a decision to give the person speaking your full and undivided attention. Get yourself into a listening state by preparing yourself beforehand. If you have been busy and have a lot on your mind, give yourself ten minutes to clear your head and relax.

- Arrange a place to meet that is free from distractions and is quiet and calm. Arrange seating at a round table or around the corner of a desk or table. Turn chairs towards each other with enough personal space between you to enable you to hear, but not crowd, each other.
- Make sure that you look at your speaker, ask relevant questions and summarise from time to time to check your understanding of what they are saying to you.
- Notice your speaker's responses, pick up on their language and where appropriate feed it back to them. This will make the person feel heard.
- Notice the energy, tone and pace of the speaker's voice. Match that energy and pace when you ask questions and summarise. This will help you to maintain rapport and again make your speaker feel heard.
- Check your understanding and interpretation of their issues from time to time during the conversation and if you need clarification, ask for it.
- Make sure that you are able to communicate exactly what their priorities are and what matters to them in any follow-up proposal.

HOW GOOD ARE YOUR LISTENING SKILLS – SPECIAL RESPONSE CHECKLIST

- ▶ Think of a time when you were really able to listen to someone – what did you do?
- ▶ Think of a time when you were not able to listen to someone well – what was the difference?
- ▶ Who would say that you are a good listener?
- ▶ Who would say that you weren't?

- ▶ In what situations do you listen?
- ▶ In what situations do you find it difficult?

Do you ever

- ▶ Get distracted when someone is talking?
- ▶ Interrupt the conversation with one of your own opinions, ideas or stories?
- ▶ Let your mind drift whilst the person is talking?
- ▶ Look at your watch whilst a person is talking?
- ▶ Misinterpret or misunderstand what someone has said?
- ▶ Switch off?
- ▶ Ask irrelevant questions?

What do you think that you need to do to improve your ability to listen?

What impact do you think better listening would have on your sales appointments?

How to use this information

If, having read this section, you recognise that your own listening skills could improve, the first stage would be to start to become aware of what happens to you when you are listening to people. Notice what goes on in your head, your physical and emotional state and your own listening or non-listening behaviours. Make a conscious decision to listen more and notice what impact that has on your relationships with clients and colleagues.

Think listen and really hear what is being said