



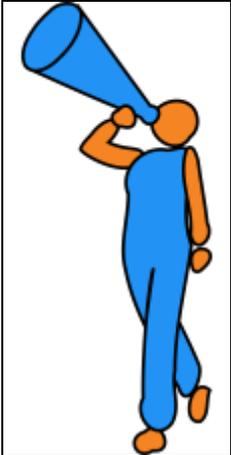
Improving Your Listening Skills for Better Business Results

We Aren't Great Listeners

In general, we aren't very good listeners. Even though we spend eighty percent of our waking hours communicating and nearly forty-five percent of that time listening, we are challenged when it comes to recalling information that we've just heard.

Our formal communication training starts the day we are born. Yet from our earliest years, nearly 99% of that training is focused on learning to talk, read and write. Less than one percent of our formal education is devoted to learning how to listen effectively. And as businesspeople, an inability to listen effectively can have a noticeable influence on our results.

In business, having the discipline to listen is an ongoing challenge. We're taught from day one to control negotiations. Many of us interpret that to mean that we must also dominate the dialogue. If we do this, we risk misunderstanding our customer and their true needs. We may lose out on a sale or a great deal because of our failure to properly listen to our partner, customer, or counterpart.



Successful Businesspeople are Good Listeners

The most successful businesspeople are good listeners. Good listening skills require we follow the 80/20 rule when we are with our customers – 80 percent of our time listening and no more than 20 percent talking. Unfortunately, most businesspeople don't follow this formula. But in reality, becoming a good businessperson means you have to become a great listener. .

This brief training will help you identify some symptoms of poor listening, define some characteristics of good listening skills, and offer suggestions on how you can become a better listener.

Symptoms of Poor Listening Skills

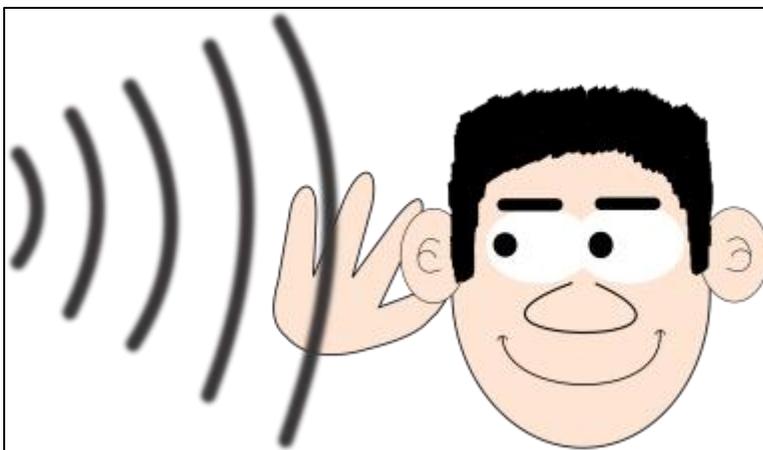
Many of us already know that we aren't the very best of listeners. We've all been involved in conversations where we walk away with a bit of uncertainty. We're conflicted because we're not sure we have all the important points and takeaways from the dialogue. And since follow-up is a critical component of business negotiations, this uncertainty can lead to negative consequences.

Poor listening is a problem. It is estimated that the normal, untrained listener retains only fifty percent of a conversation. That percentage drops to a dismal twenty five percent, just forty-eight hours after the conversation. So, how do you know you have a listening problem?

- When someone is speaking are you thinking about what you are going to say next? Are you tuned in or are you rehearsing the rest of your presentation in your mind?
- Are you doing other things, like checking emails, answering texts, or browsing social media sites while another person is speaking?
- During your negotiations and sales calls, are you easily distracted by your other person's mannerisms?
- Do background noises and commotions easily distract you?
- Do you frequently interrupt a prospect, customer, manager or employee before he has finished speaking?
- Do you easily drift or daydream when someone else is talking?
- Do you make judgments or evaluate what is being said before the other person finishes her dialogue?
- Do you maintain eye contact with another while he is speaking?
- Do you listen through filters? Do you listen based on past experiences or beliefs?
- While listening, do you try to finish the other person's sentence?
- Do you do little to encourage others to open up and speak during a dialogue?

These are just some of the symptoms of poor listening habits. This is not an all-inclusive list. In fact, in your everyday business, you will probably come up with more. Having some or all of these attributes doesn't necessarily mean you are a terrible listener, but should illustrate that you have room for improvement.

What is a Good Listening?



What is a good listening?
Does such a thing exist or is it simply one of those unattainable goals?

First, let's explore listening. Listening isn't simply hearing. Listening is an active process that demands our full attention. In fact, hearing is passive while listening is active. We may hear what someone is saying, but not process in our

minds, what they have said. For instance, I might tell someone to get out of the road because a car is coming. He may hear me; yet fail to get out the road. Why? Because even though he heard me, he didn't listen to me. Listening is a process that involves more than just hearing.

There are four components to listening:

1. **Hearing.** The first step in listening is actually hearing what the speaker, or your customer is saying. In this step you are simply paying attention to make sure that you have heard the message. Hearing is more of a passive behavior, but it does require a great deal of our resources. During this hearing stage, it can be very difficult for us to maintain concentration. If you fail to concentrate and wander, the rest of the listening process will be faulty because it will be based on inaccurate information. During this stage of listening, be sure to maintain eye contact, concentrate on the speaker, take notes, and do what is necessary to eliminate background noise.
2. **Interpretation.** The second step is interpreting the information. Failure to interpret the speaker words correctly will frequently lead to misunderstanding of the entire message. In fact, we've heard people say before, "I think you've missed the entire point". Well, that's typically because we've failed to interpret the message correctly. Interpretation is an active stage of listening. People sometimes interpret words differently because of varying experiences, knowledge, vocabulary, culture, background and attitudes. Most speakers will use tone of voice, facial expressions, and mannerisms to help make the message clearer to the listener.
3. **Evaluation.** The third step of the listening process is evaluation. Evaluation is when you decide what to do with the information. For example if you are in sales, as your customer listens to your sales pitch, they can either choose to believe or not believe what you have told them. The judgments that you and your customer make in the evaluation step are a crucial part of the listening process.
4. **Respond.** Finally, the fourth step of the listening process is responding. By this, you are simply responding to what you have heard. This is a verbal or visual response that lets the speaker know whether you have gotten the message and what your reaction is. When a customer tells you that they want to place an order, they have gotten the message and chosen to believe what you have presented to them.

Our goal, then, is to become active listeners. Being an active listener means fully participating in the communication process. It means listening to everything the other person has to say. And this, in itself may be a challenge.

How to Become an Active Listener

So, how do you become an active listener? Here are some suggestions:

- Learn to manage your distractions or block them out altogether. Don't allow yourself to become distracted by the environment or by the speaker's appearance, accent, mannerisms, or word use. It's important that during the listening process to keep a focused mind. Keeping focused means managing the distractions.
- Use body language to show interest and energy. When someone is talking, the way you stand, the way you look, the way you hold your arms, or your posture can affect what he tells you. He must perceive that you are genuinely interested in what he is saying. If you put your hands on your hips, showing indifference, then it's doubtful he will open up to you. Show interest. If you are sitting, sit squarely and face him. Don't slouch in your chair. Lean forward when he is talking so that he can see that the attention is being centered completely on him. And keep an open stance. Don't cross your arms in front of your chest, but rather fold your hands in front of you.
- Maintain good eye contact. Good eye contact shows the speaker that you are interested in what she is saying. But, on the other hand, don't make it a stare down contest. It is uncomfortable when someone stares continuously without periodically looking away.
- Ask questions that relate to what the other person is saying. This helps to stimulate your listening, and shows another that you're indeed listening. Many times, you can ask clarifying questions, to ensure the other person that you are getting the message that he is communicating. However, don't become a nuisance, and continually interrupt by asking pointless questions.
- Paraphrase what she has said to ensure understanding. Get confirmation that you have heard and understood correctly.
- Take notes. We are not perfect. Take notes during the conversation that you can later review. But, don't let your note taking become a nuisance by attempting to write down every word other person says. Besides annoying him, you may end up missing the entire message or point.
- Don't interrupt her while she is talking. Give her time to complete her thoughts so that you can consider everything that has been said. A dialogue is not a competition to determine who gets to speak the most. Let her do most of the talking, and you can then do most of the learning. Don't clip the ends of another's thoughts. If she's speaking, let her finish. Don't cut her off because you think you know what she is going to say.

- Acknowledge what the he has said before changing the direction of the conversation. If he has just finished talking to you about razor thin margins, acknowledge this, and make sure he is finished, by simply restating and then asking, "I see that you are concerned about the low margins in the category. Is there anything else that concerns you?"
- Encourage her to talk. Encourage her expressions through conversations. Sometimes when you interrupt, you come across as a 'know-it-all' and customers and colleagues may clam up and leave all the talking to you. Make it clear to them that you are there to learn, and that the best way to learn is to listen to what they have to say.
- Focus on feelings and ideas as much as facts. Give expression to the emotional components and unexpressed core meanings of the message. If a customer says to you, "I've got to find a way to jump start my business", that's just a fact. But give attention to the meaning behind it. Listen to the way the customer is talking, and how he is talking. He may be saying, "Everything I own is in this business. If it doesn't succeed, I am going to lose everything." So listen closely, and be able to respond to the feelings and ideas, just as you would the facts.
- Make empathetic remarks that acknowledge the speaker's feelings. True empathy is a skill. Negotiators who have developed the ability to empathize can display it even when encountering people with whom they have little in common. Practice listening with empathy. Attend to the feelings of others, but be careful to remain detached. Being an empathetic listener doesn't mean a sympathetic listener. When you become sympathetic, you are no longer detached from the situation and may have difficulty offering solutions.
- Keep an open mind. Be willing to accept new ideas and opinions that differ from yours. Reserve judgment. Remember the point of listening is to gain new information.
- Monitor your own reactions. Sometimes the way you react isn't consistent with what the other person is saying. If you're on a sale's call and your customer is looking for higher margins, and you are frowning, then your customer is receiving an answer to his request even before you speak. Equally important, is to monitor the other person's non-verbal signals. Be alert to the non-verbal cues.
- Have patience. The more the other person says the more you learn about him.
- Silence sometimes speaks louder than words. When another person is talking, and pauses, don't take that as a cue to begin talking. Nod to encourage her to continue speaking.
- Don't jump to conclusions. Don't tune out a speaker just because you think you have the gist of the conversation or you know what the speaker is going to say next.

Improving Listening Skills for Better Sales Results

- Listen “between the lines”. Concentrate on what is being said as well as what is not being said.
- React to the message, not to the person. Don’t get angry or take it personally. Just because someone doesn’t like your product or company, doesn’t mean he or she does not like you.
- Respond in such a way that proves you are taking the other person seriously. Demonstrate respect for his point of view.
- Give the speaker credit. Thank her for taking time to share information with you.
- Become a solution-oriented listener. Spend more time on listening for a solution than you would on the problem.
- Listen with a positive mind. Nothing clouds your judgment more than being negative when going into the dialogue.
- Know yourself. Understand where your hot and cold buttons are and adjust your listening process to circumvent any sudden shutdown because of an emotion-laden word or phrase. Again, don’t take it personally.

Active listening takes a great deal of practice. It isn’t something you are going to get in a day or two. You’ll have to work at becoming a better listener. But, by becoming a better listener you’ll also become a better businessperson. And that alone, can help contribute to your organization’s overall financial success.