

Listening - The Untaught Skill

It has been said that we have been given two ears and only one mouth, because we should listen more than talk. I think it is because it is twice as hard to listen as it is to talk.

Listening is one of the most important skills you can have. How well you listen has a major impact on your job effectiveness and on the quality of your relationships with others.

We listen to obtain information.

We listen to understand.

We listen for enjoyment.

We listen to learn.

We listen to show we care.

Given all this listening we do, you would think we'd be good at it! However, most of us are not. Numerous studies have been done on this subject, and depending which one you refer to, most say that we remember a dismal 25-50% of what we hear. That means that when you talk to your boss, colleagues, customers or spouse for 10 minutes, you may only really hear 2½-5 minutes of the conversation.

Turn it around and it reveals that when you are receiving directions or being presented with information, you aren't hearing the whole message either. You hope the important parts are captured in your 25-50%, but what if they're not?

Clearly, listening is a skill that we can all improve on and as we become better at it, we likely will improve our productivity, our ability to influence, and the interpersonal dynamics around us. I have found the following strategies effective in enhancing this skill:

1. **Let the other person do the talking.** If you have been talking for 5-10 minutes, try asking the other person some questions to help get him/her talking. Most people enjoy it when others take an interest in them and want to learn a little bit about them.
2. **Ask open-ended questions.** Asking someone a question that cannot be answered with a simple 'yes' or 'no' answer helps the conversation to naturally develop. This small effort also demonstrates that you care and that you are trying to understand.
3. **Focus.** Maintain eye contact and keep your mind focused on what the other person is saying.
4. **Avoid interrupting.** Listen fully to the person's perspective before commenting.
5. **Practice reflective listening.** Reiterate what was said to demonstrate that you did listen. This practice also ensures that you understood this person correctly, because if you stated it wrong, chances are pretty good that the person will correct you.
6. **Hold back from advising, diagnosing, or interpreting a situation.** Try not to jump to conclusions or figure out a problem before understanding all of the facts, especially if you already have a personal bias regarding the situation.