

How to Be an Effective Listener

Effective listening means you get the message clear and complete, without bias

EFFECTIVE LISTENING IS ONE OF THE MOST challenging activities you can engage in, and yet one of the most rewarding and beneficial — both to the person talking and especially to you, the listener. You have effectively listened when you can clearly articulate what the other person has said and understand it from their point of view. How do you get there? By concentrating, putting their message first (and yours second), and considering their background, perspective, and situation.



Concentrate. What you might suspect is true. Concentrating while listening is far more difficult than during any other form of communication. Why? Simply put, we think much faster than we talk.

People say, on average, about 125 words a minute. But words can speed through our mind at the rate of 1,200 a minute and often much faster. Thus, speech happens at about 10% of your mind's capacity.

When listening, it's virtually impossible to slow your thoughts to that pace — you continue to think at high speed. What you do with that other 90% of processing power is the essence of effective listening.

Concentration increases when you engage in a few mental activities focused on what you hear. First, think ahead: where is this going; what conclusions could you draw? Second, evaluate the talker's points: are they complete, clear, sensible, overly emotional? And third, review all that has been said and think about it in its entirety.

Put the talker's message first. This allows you to better concentrate on what is being said, rather than what you think

about the topic. Chances are that you already have an opinion or thoughts on the topic at hand. Ignore them. You want to listen without your own bias since that will only cloud your understanding and appreciation of the talker's message. This means, of course, considering what you think as secondary, or better yet, wrong.

See it from their point of view. Put aside your own views and opinions, and keep an open mind. Avoid listening to your own subconscious response. Wait until you have fully heard everything that is being said. Only then can you begin to reflect this new information against your own thoughts.

The importance of this perspective became clear to me during this experience. With six others, I attended a software code review for a customized enhancement. I worked on the user interface from specifications created by the programmer based on his meeting with the client. He took about two weeks to write the code. During the hour-long meeting, it became clear that the programmer had coded *his* interpretations of the requirements, but not what the client actually wanted, which was far simpler and more straightforward. Much time and effort was wasted.

Understand their meaning. Hear the words and understand their meaning; ask pertinent, enlightening questions for further information; ask probing questions that gain more depth and breadth.

"So what I hear is ..." begins a descriptive question that seeks clarity and does not engender defensiveness. Be clear, detailed, and precise; avoid vague, ambiguous, complex, and especially dismissive statements and questions. You want to create a supportive communication climate, one that allows the talker to speak freely and openly. But first...

Wait. Don't begin to respond until you can verbally articulate and accurately state what has been said. This is akin to giving a receipt for a transaction and ensures the talker that you get it. This give and take during any conversation leads to genuine, intellectual, and respectful discussion.

It's entirely possible that the talker does not completely understand what they are saying; that they have not fully thought it out. That's the purpose of much dialog — to expand everyone's knowledge. This is your opportunity to enlighten everyone involved. Your carefully considered questions can expose gaps or misunderstandings.

In a nutshell, how you respond when you listen, to a large degree, controls the amount and verity of what you learn.

Search for areas of agreement... rather than constantly seeking weak points or points where you disagree. It's these areas of agreement that establish a common ground from which you and the talker can both benefit. Eschew the urge to prepare a contradictory response, or even a supportive one.

Consider the talker's background. One of the marvelous aspects of life is that everyone's background is different, and thus their perspective. You can learn a lot just by understanding another's background, where they are coming from. That understanding alone can open your eyes to a viewpoint that you didn't even know existed.

Hang in there. The real issue — the true fundamental point — almost always takes time to surface. Consider the 80-20 rule: eighty percent of a message leads up to the twenty percent that lies at the heart of the matter. When you are patient enough, you will eventually arrive at that "aha" moment when you can nod your head and say to yourself, "Now I get it." What a breakthrough moment.

Practice listening. Every chance you get. Don't turn it on and off at your convenience. Make it a habit. Listening is a gift to both you and especially to that talker: your employee, colleague, prospect, or client. Listening builds relationships. 🍌

— RICH MAGGIANI

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