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Listen Up!

What causes poor listening and how to overcome it.

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I recall a certain teacher from my youth who would often reprimand me for my loquaciousness. "Child," she would say, "God gave you two ears and one mouth for a reason. You should listen twice as much as you talk." As it turns out, Sister Mary Clarence wasn't far off the mark. Today, well-established communication and psychological research advocates a roughly fifty-fifty split between speaking and listening for maximum effectiveness. Yet, for most people, the listening portion constitutes the biggest difficulty.

Ironically, it is people's natural desire to be helpful that predisposes them to anticipate what another person is going to say, to jump to the solution, or to compose a response before the first person has finished speaking. And if none of those are true, then it's simply plain old "wandering minds" that get in the way of active and effective listening.

All these habits can reduce your career success, because as an accounting professional, you are foremost a communicator and consultant. The good news is that active listening is a learned skill that anyone can master with practise. And when you teach yourself how to actively listen, you greatly increase your chances of success, both in your professional and personal relationships.

Poor Listening Habits

You *can* teach yourself to become a better listener. To start, it is important to realize that listening is much more than simply hearing. Hearing is the physiological process of decoding sounds. You *hear* when you identify a clap of thunder or the sound of a siren or the laughter of a child for what it is, but listening is a complex psychological process of receiving, constructing meaning from, and responding to verbal and non-verbal messages. Listening is interpreting what you hear and responding to it. For example, when you pull over and wait for emergency vehicles to pass as a result of *hearing* a siren, you are *listening*. Unfortunately, there are many barriers to listening.

Self-barriers are the things that happen inside your mind that prevent you from listening well. The most common is the inner conversation — I need to call my lawyer; I should talk to the invoice clerk about a discount for early payment; did I remember to turn off the iron? We all do it, but only those who have taught themselves to actively listen can control it. Another self-barrier is emotional noise. Emotional noise occurs when you predictably react to the words or actions of another. For example, most people stop listening when criticized. It is a normal emotional reaction, but active listeners know how to overcome it.

Information-processing barriers are another kind of obstacle to good listening. The average rate of speech varies anywhere from 125-200 words per minute (wpm). In contrast, depending on which research you

consult, the brain can process information at an average speed of 600-1,200 wpm. The effect is that there is a significant gap between the speed of one's comprehension and the rate at which people speak. That means minds have time to wander — and wander they do.

Yet another challenge to listening is information overload. In today's world, one is constantly bombarded with multiple messages, and sifting and sorting through the auditory information to determine which message to attend to can be daunting.

The third type of barrier to listening is related to time and context. These are the physical limitations — a ringing telephone or a blaring television — competing for your attention. Again, active listeners have learned to compensate for such factors.

Active Listening

Once you understand what causes poor listening, you can switch your focus to techniques to overcome these barriers. Active listening is a learned skill and it occurs when you are immersed in what the speaker is saying. This is why all active listening techniques seek to engage your attention and push other interruptions away. Here are four specific things that you can do to become a better, more active listener.

One, ask probing and clarifying questions. When you ask questions, you force yourself to be involved in what the speaker is saying ... you force yourself to be engaged. Questions such as "Are you telling me that ...?" and "What happens when ...?" require you to process and synthesize information, which of course, means that you have to listen.

Two, paraphrase at appropriate points in the conversation. Paraphrasing requires you to summarize key points. For example, "So if I understand you correctly, what you're telling me is ..." or "Let me stop you for a moment and summarize what I think I've heard you say so far ..." obliges you to attend to and grasp what the speaker is saying — it obliges you to listen.

Three, demonstrate good listening body language. When you turn towards the speaker and give him/her your full attention, lean in to the conversation, make appropriate eye contact, and nod to indicate understanding, you are also compelled to engage in what the speaker is saying, and thus you listen more actively.

Finally, take notes. Note-taking is not the same as transcription, as you are not seeking to document the conversation word-for-word. Instead, you are looking to crystallize the key points of your dialogue. In order to do this, you have to analyze and integrate information, and therefore, listening becomes a necessity.

While this technique is the most effective tool of the four to learn active listening, it is also the most controversial. The two most common objections to taking notes are that doing it while someone else is talking could be construed as impolite, and that it is hard to listen and take notes at the same time. Legitimate concerns perhaps, but easily resolved by asking for permission.

The Bonus

While your initial reason to apply one or more of these four techniques might be to teach yourself to become a better listener, these approaches come with a spectacular additional bonus: *while* you are teaching yourself, you are *also* building rapport.

Each time you ask probing and clarifying questions or paraphrase what the speaker is saying, each time you demonstrate good listening body language or make notes during a conversation, you are clearly showing the other person that you are genuinely interested in what they have to say. And when you do that, you are paving the road to a future relationship built on trust and mutual respect.

As accountants *and* communicators *and* consultants, your ultimate professional success rests firmly on your ability to listen as well as speak. Use active listening skills and you will significantly increase your effectiveness.

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