

ARTICLE REPRINT

Listen! – Back To Basics

If you accept, as we said last month, that “*listening is not doing anything that interferes with seeing,*” you must take a critical look at everything you normally do when you think you are listening. Much of what we’ve been taught about good listening habits just isn’t true.

Most of us are aware that if our minds are wandering when someone is speaking, we aren’t really listening. If we are thinking ahead, reacting to something the speaker has said, we can’t possibly listen to what the speaker is currently saying. If we are busy formulating questions to ask while the speaker is talking, we are thinking about our questions, and we aren’t really listening. This seems obvious; But what about taking notes and some other activities we’ve been told helps us to listen?

When you take notes during a sales call or during a business meeting, I guarantee that you are missing out on a significant part of the human listening and communication process. First, you cannot write fast enough or accurately enough to capture all the speaker’s words or reflect exactly what the speaker says. Second, taking notes requires effort and activities that detract from pure listening. Finally, to miss a speaker’s candid facial expressions, the signposts of emotions, robs you of a crucial part of the communication process. Although well intentioned teachers taught us that taking notes ensures that we will capture what is said during meetings, note taking actually inhibits effective listening.

Many of us may also have been taught that to be perceived as good listeners we must make a sincere effort to appear attentive when someone is speaking. We might have been advised, for example, to lean forward, and to stare intently into the eyes of a speaker, or to defy gravity by twisting ourselves up into contorted positions – all intended to *scream* that we are listening! But in the making of the effort to do all this we divert attention from the speaker and instead devote some concentration to our efforts. Again, we aren’t truly listening.

So, if you find yourself interrupting a speaker, recognize that you had already started the thinking process that resulted in the interruption. When you observe yourself taking notes, realize that while you are writing, you may be missing some of the most important components of the communication process, the visual cues telegraphed by the speaker that may reveal underlying emotions. And if you become conscious that you are making some effort to impress a speaker with your listening skills, recognize that those efforts interfere with complete listening.

If you are convinced that multi-tasking – doing any two or more things at the same time – divides your attention and prevents effective listening, you will want to get back to the basics of listening immediately. Before you can get back to basics, however, you might want to go beyond the superficial to understand what, more than anything, prevents real listening. Next month we will explore “*listening through a screen, darkly.*”

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