

ARTICLE REPRINT

Superb Listeners

I've been impressed with the listening skills of a few people I have heard about or whom I know personally. Two of the people I want to write about are former President Bill Clinton, and my friend Rob.

Whatever you might think of Bill Clinton's politics or personal habits, observing him in conversation will confirm that he is a superb listener. While I have never spoken directly to Mr. Clinton, I am aware of what others who have spoken with him say about their experiences.

Generally, those who have spoken with Bill Clinton all agree that conversing with him is an experience they won't soon forget. All agree that when they spoke with Mr. Clinton, they had the overwhelming feeling that they were the only person in the room, and that they had 100% of his attention. I have been told that when talking with President Clinton, you know he "feels your pain," though he might not have uttered those words in the conversation!

Anyone who speaks with my friend, Rob, has a similar experience. When you talk with Rob, he leans ever so slightly forward and looks intently at you as you speak. His eyes never wander to other parts of the room, and he genuinely appears unaware that anyone else is in the vicinity. There is never a doubt in the speaker's mind that Rob is listening totally, with complete attention and with every ounce of energy he can muster.

So, what is it that seems to distinguish superb listeners from the rest of us? First, when you watch them listen, they appear to be just listening, and not doing anything that interferes with *seeing* their conversational partner. They do not appear to listen through a screen, darkly. They never give the impression that they have an image in their minds that has created a screen through which they see and hear the speaker. Although they may know the speaker, or know something about her, they listen as if they were meeting her for the first time.

While super listeners are listening, they give the impression there is no one else in the room. All their attention is focused on the speaker. There are no interruptions, no hint of a wandering mind, and their eyes never lose their focus on the speaker. I don't know what it's like for them, but for the speaker the feeling is empowering. There is no sense whatsoever that you are not being heard, and understood, completely.

In observing superb listeners in conversation, I've seen that the people to whom they are listening seem as absorbed in the conversation as they are. As strange as it may sound, there did not seem to be any separation between the speaker and the listener. Nothing from the outside penetrated the conversation.

Superb listeners are able, consciously or out of habit, to focus their entire *attention* on the speaker. Focusing attention is what is meant by true seeing and true listening. There is no reliance on intention, effort, or images and memories of the past. There is only *attention*, like the attention you give, at least for a brief moment, to the beautiful song of a bird.

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