

Effective Listening - Part 1

The ability to listen and understand is one of the most important attributes you can have. In many ways listening is the most crucial of all the communication skills, yet it is often the most neglected.

Listening should not be confused with hearing. Hearing is merely a physical experience, whereas listening is a complicated process of absorbing, judging and acting upon what you hear. Proficiency in listening requires effort and practice. Like all communications skills it must be learned. This is a matter of breaking some bad habits and of forming some new ones. Apply these tips to become a better listener:

1. Use empathy in communication

The key to effective listening is empathy - the ability to see an idea or concept from another's point of view. Empathy is understanding and doesn't necessarily involve agreement. Try to have enough confidence in your own beliefs and attitudes so that you can relax any defensiveness and try to understand new information, even if it conflicts with what you believe.

2. Recognise your prejudices

Prejudice is a major barrier to good listening. Ideally your listening should be totally free of prejudice. Since this is practically impossible, the best thing is to recognise your prejudices and make a conscious effort to discount them.

3. Keep an open mind and beware of 'trigger' words

Effective listeners try to identify and to rationalise words or phrases that upset them emotionally and impair their ability to perceive and understand. Often the emotional impact of such words can be decreased through a free and open discussion of them with friends or associates.

4. Find a common area of interest

Effective listening is much easier if you are interested in the topic under discussion. If you are tempted to declare the subject boring and switch off, ask yourself whether you can use some of what is being said. Does the speaker have any worthwhile ideas?

5. Resist distractions

Poor listeners are easily and readily influenced by distractions, even in face-to-face situations. A good listener instinctively fights distraction. Sometimes this can easily be achieved by closing a door, turning off a radio, moving closer to the speaker etc. If you cannot do any of these things then your concentration level has to be turned up.

6. Learn to concentrate

Listening is not a passive activity but requires energy and effort. If you are ill or tired you cannot possibly listen effectively. An important factor in careless listening is lack of incentive. In order to listen effectively you need to feel convinced that what you are about to hear is relevant to you personally. Adopt a "what's in it for me?" attitude to everything you hear. Then when something worthwhile is being said, you won't miss it.

Read Part 2 for further Effective Listening tips...