

ARTICLE

The Number One Skill

Rich Russakoff and Mary Goodman

(MoneyWatch) If there was just one thing you could improve upon that is guaranteed to make you more successful, would you do it? Well then listen up.

We mean it, really - listen up and listen better.

The better we listen, the more others appreciate us and, in return, the more they listen to us. By listening better, we learn more and misinterpret others less. It seems that some people are just naturally good listeners but the truth is listening is an acquired skill. One that, with any improvement, will yield great benefits.

Let's take a look at few of the barriers or bad habits that get in the way of effective listening. See which ones you might be guilty of. (We know which ones we're guilty of.)

- **Multi-tasking** - Do you ever look at your phone or check emails during a conversation? If you think you can multi-task while listening, then you don't know what you're missing. It's also painfully obvious to the other person when we are distracted.
- **Me, Me, Me** - If your major concern is how others perceive you, or what you'll say next, then you can't focus on what is being said.
- **Brain Speed** - If our thoughts outpace the speaking style of the person we are talking with, we tend to let our mind wander. Or we interrupt the other person because we believe we know what the person is trying to say but taking too long to say it.

What did you Say? - Hearing loss can adversely affect every conversation, from missing out on a pleasant exchange to serious safety issues. It is estimated that there are more than 35 million Americans that are hearing impaired. Less than 30% use hearing aids. If you suspect you have a hearing problem, get tested. If you know you have a hearing problem, get hearing aids. If you own hearing aids, wear them.

Line Butting - You're bored with the subject so you interrupt and introduce a new topic. Or worse, you start talking about yourself.

So how did you do?

If not as well as you liked, here are a few things that you can do that will dramatically improve your listening skills.

Paying attention pays off - The first and most important thing you can do to improve your skill as a listener is to give the other person your undivided attention. In the words of Gandhi, "Wherever you are - Be there."

Listen with your voice - Say "no kidding", "um hmm", "go on", or by paraphrasing, which, by definition, is the act of restating or rewording what others say. Psychologists call this "Active Listening".

Say, "So what your saying is..." Or simply repeat the last thought the other person said. There is no better skill for effective listening than paraphrasing. If you've heard correctly, the other person will generally respond with an enthusiastic yes or nod. If you've heard it wrong, they'll know they need to clarify. Paraphrasing gives them the opportunity to restate what they said so accurate and meaningful communications take place.

Listen with your body - Lean forward, put your hands on your chin, or listen with open arms. When your body conveys a listening posture, others become more comfortable and open. If appropriate, take notes. In a business meeting, it shows your interest and helps you stay focused.

Nodding is also a key component of your listening posture. And smiling. Smiles are contagious and make others feel comfortable, and the more comfortable we are, the better we communicate. Establish and maintain eye contact. Not only is this reassuring to the other person, but it enables you to read their body language which can convey more than their words. As Yogi Berra said, "You can observe a lot by just watching."

Button up!! - Don't interrupt. You hate it. So do others. It's rude. Unless you're seeing a fire erupt behind the person speaking, let them finish. Encourage them to fill out their thoughts by saying, "tell me more." When we interrupt, the other person loses their focus and we lose the opportunity to fully understand what they're trying to convey. Make a conscious effort to see how often you interrupt others over the course of a day. Hopefully, it won't be a rude awakening.

Ask questions - In the words of Stephen Covey, "Seek first to understand, then be understood. This involves a very deep paradigm shift. We typically seek first to be understood. Most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply. They are either speaking or preparing to speak."

Talk less - A good philosophy is that conversations should not just be about you, but about *we*. As the Greek sage, Epictetus, observed: "Most of us were born with two ears and one mouth." That's a pretty good ratio between listening and talking.
Now - are you ready to listen?

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