

How to Listen to Build Trust

We all know how to listen. Most of us believe we're good at it. Yet every course in leadership stresses the need to listen harder, better, smarter. Why is listening so highly valued and often poorly done? It's highly valued because we all like to be listened to. We want to believe that we, along with our opinions and stories, matter to others. We want to receive the positive attention that comes when others really listen to us. We crave that connection. It's often poorly done because it's so hard to do well.



In our fast-paced multi-tasking world, true listening is a rare commodity. Most people do two things at the same time. Talking (& listening) on the phone and driving; meeting (& listening) and checking emails; dining with others (& listening) and texting. It's becoming harder to put our minds on hold and really listen. The first skillset to better listening is FOCUS. That means stop multi-tasking, daydreaming or planning your response.

The average person speaks at a rate of 130 - 170 words per minute. Yet we have the capacity to listen to 600 words per minute. That means we can listen forward, anticipate what the speaker is going to say and actually finish their sentences for them. How annoying is that? This is especially true if the subject is highly familiar to us. We've heard it all before.

Another maddening habit is when the listener speaks your last words in unison with you. They believe they're showing you how well they listen. When that happens, you assume they're on your wavelength and in agreement with what you're saying. They just can't seem to wait until you're finished speaking. Ask yourself, do you own any of these idiosyncrasies?

Really placing our mind on hold and truly listening to the other person takes an amazing amount of cognitive energy. Hearing is an involuntary and mechanical function. If your ears work, then you hear. Listening is mental gymnastics and involves a lot of brain activity. Passive listening happens when we listen to music or the television. Active listening means listening with a purpose.

PARAPHRASING is a skill we need when we're engaged in active listening. That means repeating, in your own words, what the speaker has just said. Good customer service reps are trained and particularly skilled at this. They repeat back what you told them, thereby confirming that they have the correct information. Since communication breaks down so easily, this is good practice for everyone when dealing with clients. Paraphrasing helps verify the accuracy of the message heard and reassures the speaker at the same time.

REFLECTING goes hand in hand with paraphrasing. However it's not often used and more's the pity. It's an excellent subset of listening that builds relationships and engenders trust. Reflecting means projecting how the speaker might feel, as a result of what she/he is telling you. You anticipate how they're feeling and relay it back to them. **"You must have been very disappointed by that."** **"You must have felt very proud."** By telling the speaker how you think they felt, you demonstrate sharp listening and compassion. Many people are reluctant to project their interpretation of how someone else might be feeling. Worry not. If you're off track, they'll be quick to correct you. **"You must have been enraged by that."** **"No, I wasn't enraged, I was just disappointed."** Reflecting shows the speaker you can empathize with how they felt, whether you agree with their reaction or not. It's a lot preferable to saying "I understand."

Professionals and business people in all arenas strive to connect more with their clients and build trust. When we listen effectively and respond by reflecting, the speaker believes that we really understand them. We've connected with them. This is critical in building client relationships.

In any meeting with customers, we can conduct our business efficiently and move on. However, we know that we should be establishing rapport. So, typically we ask about family members, holiday plans, golf games and the like. However, if that's all you do to establish rapport, then you're missing an opportunity. This opportunity is embedded in every interaction. Let's call it listening for Red Flags. These are words or phrases, (particular to your industry) that cue you to the speaker's uncertainty.

If you're listening really well, you will catch those words and capitalize on the chance to make a real connection. Those phrases might include: **"I'm concerned about,"** **"That's expensive,"** **"That sounds too risky,"** **"Will it work?"** **"I'm not too sure about that,"** **"I don't know."**

Identifying these Red Flags lets you show that you're LISTENING BETWEEN THE LINES. You don't want to just pat them on the back and tell them not to worry. You can use this opportunity to stop the business discussions and VALIDATE, AFFIRM, EMPATHIZE and SYMPATHIZE with their feelings. This is another way to build trust and loyalty.

Listening is hard work. Consider increasing your listening energy when responding to your kids, partners, clients, co-workers and staff. Remember it's all about them, not you. It's not about what you will say next. It's about giving them your undivided attention. Watch for the subtle changes in your relationships once you start to really listen. You'll be surprised by the payoff.

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