

RICK'S TIPS

Rick's Tips explores the competencies necessary for successful leadership and provides activities to assist with the development and mastery of these skills.

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ACTIVE LISTENING

"If speaking is silver, then listening is gold."
– Turkish Proverb

ACTIVE VS. SELECTIVE LISTENING

If we were to poll most people and ask them if they were good listeners, the probable answer would be "yes". But are they really, and is there a difference between "Selective Listening" and "Active Listening?"

A child who is being reprimanded is not likely listening to mom or dad; what they are listening for is that brief pause or stop to take a breath and then ever so tactfully enter a "yah, but" to rebuff, explain or deny anything about the situation. In our adulthood, we are prone to doing the same thing.

When this happens over the course of regular conversation, people will likely read into the situation, "He's not really interested in what I have to say," or "He's already made up his mind," or "Why does he bother to ask what we think?" If these thoughts have crossed your mind during a meeting or discussion at work, you've been interacting with someone who probably doesn't really listen.

Many people take their listening skills for granted. They often assume they're listening and that others know they are being heard. The reality is that thousands of leaders struggle with tasks and roles that directly relate to their listening skills, including accepting criticism well, dealing with people's feelings, trying to understand what other people think and encouraging direct reports to share. Even with the best intentions, you may be sending signals that you aren't listening.

Brush up on your listening skills if any of these behaviors describe you:

- I have a hard time concentrating on what is being said.
- I am annoyed when someone slows me down.
- I think about what I want to say next, rather than about what the speaker is saying.
- I don't like it when someone questions my ideas or actions.
- I interrupt or show signs of impatience as I wait for the person to finish talking.
- I give advice too soon; I suggest courses of action or solutions to problems before the other person has fully explained his or her perspective.
- I tell people not to feel the way they do.
- I tend to talk significantly more than the other person talks.
- I become uncomfortable and don't know what to do if the speaker expresses emotions.
- I sit behind my desk, accept phone calls, check my email or text, lean back in my chair or otherwise communicate by my gestures that I am not fully attentive.

The impact of not listening well results in cutting people off, finishing their sentences if they hesitate, interrupting to make a pronouncement or render a solution or decision, or missing the point others are trying to make as a result of being too busy constructing his/her own response.

By not paying attention to ourselves when it comes to listening we may listen to some groups/people and not to others or wind up being inaccurate in restating the case of others. Whether we intentionally are or not, we may appear impatient or uninterested, or worse yet we may appear arrogant.

The behaviors we need to pay attention to that can impact our ability to listen include: defensiveness, not caring, not valuing the opinion of the person we are talking to, or being impatient, insensitive or too busy which results in selective listening.

Active listening means knowing what others have said, what they meant to say and leaving people comfortable that they have had their say. Most people know the techniques of good listening: don't interrupt, be able to paraphrase, listen for underlying meaning and be accepting of other views. The problem is, we all listen well only when we want to or have to. The key most need to learn is how to listen when you **don't want to**.

Remember, listening doesn't mean you accept what they have said or even that you have accepted them. It just means that you've been listening.

LISTENING PROBLEMS

There are three kinds of listening problems:

1. You don't know "how" to listen. That's the least likely problem.
2. You know how to listen, but just don't do it often enough. That's a little more likely.
3. You listen intently to some, neutrally to others and not at all to yet others. That's the most likely problem.

To test this out, to whom do you listen? Boss? Chairperson? Mother? Children? Best friend? Mentor? Spouse? Professional colleague outside of work? Has anyone ever complimented you or thanked you for listening? If the answer to any of those questions is yes, you have a selective listening problem. You know how to listen, you just turn it off and on.

ACTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

How do people know you are listening? First, remember the basics. You have your mouth closed. When your mouth is open, your ears automatically close. You have eye contact. You take notes. You don't frown or fidget. How do people know you've understood? You paraphrase what they have said to their satisfaction. How do people know if you have accepted or rejected what you have understood they have said? You tell them. Hopefully in a tactful way if you reject what they have had to say. Give your reasons.

Listening chillers? Don't interrupt before they have finished. Don't suggest words when they hesitate or pause. Don't finish their sentences for them. Don't wave off any further input by saying, "Yes I know that," or "Yes, I know where you're going," or "Yes, I have heard that before." If time is really important, you can say, "Let me see if I know where this is going..." or "I wonder if we could summarize to save both of us some time?" Early in a conversation answers, solutions, conclusions, statements, and dictates shut many people down. You've told them your mind's already made up. Listen first, solve second.

Questions. Good listeners ask lots of questions to get to a good understanding. Probing questions. Clarifying questions. Confirming – is this what you are saying – questions. Ask one more question than you do now and add to that until people signal you that they think you are truly listening.

Selective listening. Whom do you listen to? Whom don't you listen to? What factors account for the difference? Level? Age? Skills? Smarts? Like you/not like you? Gender? Direction (listen up but not down)? Setting? Situation? Your needs? Time available? Race? People I need/don't need? People who have something to offer/those who don't? Challenge yourself to practice listening to those you don't usually listen to. Listen for content. Separate the content from the person. Try to ferret out some value from everyone.

Listening to those who waste a lot of time. With those you don't have time to listen to, switch to being a teacher. Try to help them craft their communications to you in a more acceptable way. Interrupt to summarize. Tell them to be shorter next time. Come with more/less data. Structure the conversation by helping them come up with categories and structures to stop their rambling. Good listeners don't signal to the "bad" people that they are not listening or are not interested. Don't signal to anyone what bucket they're in. Put your mind in neutral, nod, ask questions, be helpful.

Listening under duress. What if you're being criticized or attacked personally? What if people are wrong in what they are saying? The rules remain the same. You need to work on keeping yourself in a calm state when getting negative feedback. You need to shift your thinking. When getting the feedback, your only task is to accurately understand what the person is trying to tell you. It is not, at that point, to accept or refute. That comes later. Let the other side vent but don't react directly. Listen. Nod. Ask clarifying questions. But don't hit back. Don't judge. Keep him/her talking until he/she runs out of venom. Separate the person from the feedback.

Work on your non-verbal listening. Most people, who are not in fact listening, have one or more non-verbal signals. It could be the washboard brow, blank stare, body agitation, finger or pencil drumming, interrupting, your impatient, “I’m busy” look. Most around you know your signs. Do you? Ask someone you trust what it is you do when they think you are not listening. Work on eliminating those chilling non-verbal signals.

Listening to people you don’t like. What do people see in others who like them or can at least get along with them? What are their strengths? Do you have any common interests? Talk less and ask more questions to give them a second chance. Don’t judge their motives and intentions – do that later.

Listening to people you like, but...

- They are disorganized. Interrupt to summarize and keep the discussion focused. While interrupting is generally not a good tactic, it’s necessary here.
- They just want to chat. Ask questions to focus them; don’t respond to chatty remarks.
- They want to unload a problem. Assume when people tell you something they are looking for understanding; indicate that by being able to summarize what they said. Don’t offer any advice.
- They are chronic complainers. Ask them to write down problems and solutions and then discuss it later. This turns down the volume while hopefully moving them off complaining.
- They like to complain about others. Ask if they’ve talked to the person. Encourage them to do so. If that doesn’t work, summarize what they have said without agreeing or disagreeing.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[Listen to Win: A Manager’s Guide to Effective Listening](#) by Curt Belcher, Ph.D and Richard L. Weaver II, Ph.D

[Listening: The Forgotten Skill](#) by Madelyn Burley-Allen

[The Lost Art of Listening](#) by Michael P. Nichols

[Language of Effective Listening](#) by Arthur Robertson

“If you want to be listened to, you should put in time listening.”

– Marge Piercy