

Listen Up and Move Up

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Listening is the number one skill for success in business today. Poor listening skills make people angry and make them feel you don't value them. They affect all relationships, especially business relationships.

Most people think they are good listeners. In reality, we listen effectively only 25% of the time. In fact, most people only listen to the first three or four words of any sentence. Instead of listening, they begin to formulate their response.

Even when people have been told they aren't good at listening, they do very little to improve. They still think having their say is more important.

The following are some tips for listening in a face-to-face meeting or on the phone.

1. Make a conscious decision to listen. Put your mind into the right framework.
2. Take notes. It will force you to put aside what you are currently thinking.
3. Paraphrase what you have heard the other person say. People appreciate when you are trying to get it right. This is particularly important when the other person is upset.

4. Acknowledge the points you hear being verbalized. Use statements such as, "I can see what you mean" or "Wow, I never knew something like that could happen." People want you to feel their pain or inconvenience.
5. If you are face-to-face, nod, lean forward and maintain strong eye contact.
6. If you are on the phone, remember it is harder to demonstrate that you are listening. Use your voice to demonstrate concern and involvement. Be sure to vary your pitch and inflection. Monotones make people feel you are disinterested. Offer frequent acknowledgments. If you are speaking to someone you don't know, focus on a family member's picture. It will help you to personalize your conversation.
7. Never interrupt. When the other person is done speaking, take a two-second breath, hold it for two seconds, and exhale slowly. Then begin your response.
8. When the other person is done speaking, frequently say just one word, "Oh." Typically, he or she will continue to elaborate. As they put more words to what they are saying, they gain focus.
9. Only schedule yourself for meetings with others when your energy is at its highest. Before or after lunch are risky for all parties.
10. If you know you are out of energy, tell the other person that this is not a good time. In the end, the person will appreciate your honesty. However, be sure to reschedule the conversation.
11. If your job entails taking a lot of customer complaints, replenish your energy level. Practice stress management.
12. If necessary, when a conversation is over, keep a log of what was said, especially any next steps. Review the log before the next conversation or meeting.

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Real listening takes effort. It takes commitment, but it is worth the effort. It will improve performance and build a strong team that will be noticeable by all.

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