

Are You Listening?

By David B. Burns

Ever had a conversation with somebody who only pretended to listen to you? Of course you did. How did you feel during the conversation? Ignored? How do you feel about them now? I bet they're not your favorite person.

Why do I know you had this conversation? I know because the world is full of people who don't listen, they only hear. I know because most people have never learned, or have never been taught how to listen. In his classic communication book, "People Skills," Dr. Robert Bolton relates the results of a study that shows that 70 percent of our waking moments are spent in communication. Of that 70 percent, 9 percent is used for writing, 16 percent for reading, 30 percent for talking, and, the largest block by far, 45 percent for listening.

Compare those numbers with all of your education, from grade school through your current professional development. Reading and writing received the most emphasis with speaking coming in third. And which category of communication received the least attention? That's right, listening. You got the least training for the most needed ability. Did you ever receive *any* formal instruction on listening? Unless you were schooled in psychology or a related field, you probably didn't get any training at all. The result is that you often mistake hearing for listening, and suffer the negative results.

Personally, your inability to listen creates misunderstanding, which leads to poor communication, which leads to poor relationships. Professionally, your poor listening habits cause equally poor relationships. For your workplace, remember that misunderstandings also decrease teamwork, lower productivity, and reduce customer satisfaction, all of which translate to a weaker bottom line. So what are you going to do about it . . . today?

Step one:

Concentrate all your attention on the person speaking. This is easier said than done. The trap is that speaking, listening, and thinking occur at vastly different rates.

On average, people speak at 125 words per minute while most of us can listen and comprehend more than 400 words per minute. That's a big gap. And what do you do during that gap? You drift, day dream, and generally tune out while you wait for them to catch up with your comprehension. But wait, it gets worse. You are generally capable of thinking at up to 2,000 words per minute. With a gap that large, you might even be tempted to write tomorrow's to-do list. Do I need to say it - don't.

Focus your attention on them – nowhere else. Because to them, what they have to say is the most important thing in the world.

Step two:

And on what should you focus? Focus on two things – details of the person’s concern plus the emotional content, or the reason that concern is important to them. These two points work together. If you only pay attention to the facts, you will appear cold and machine-like, and your spouse/co-worker/boss/customer will be left with a chill. If you only pay attention to the emotion, you will be seen as “sensitive,” but unable to help with the issue. Either way you lose. By paying attention to both, you win.

I recently moved and had some problems with my phone service – land lines, cell phones, billing, and changed numbers. Even though I had to make nine calls until everything was corrected, the customer service reps were excellent. They assured me that they were doing everything in their power to solve the technical issues, and they also let me know they understood the emotions I was experiencing.

For example, one of the reps said, “Mr. Burns, I understand how frustrating this must be for you, and I’ll send this information about your issues to the service crew as soon as we finish our conversation.” Even though I had to make a total of nine calls, I am a happy customer. They listened for facts. They listened for emotion. They won (and so did I).

Now you know two key steps to more effective listening. Get out there and practice. Go back to your personal and professional interactions and truly listen. And whenever you start to drift off, just imagine a little voice in your ear that asks, “Are you hearing, or are you listening?”

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David travels the country working as a business trainer, speaker, and consultant to organizations ranging in size from micro-businesses to Fortune 500 firms. He brings diverse training and knowledge to every presentation, including a degree in Education, advanced degrees in multiple martial arts, and the practical hands-on experience of running his own businesses since 1980. With his trademark optimism and sense of humor, he shares his experience in terms everyone can relate to, put into practice, and benefit from immediately.

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