



Are You Hearing What I'm Saying? – 10 Tips That Will Help You Improve Your Listening Skills

Ernest Hemingway once said “When people talk, listen completely. Most people never listen.” How true that is. How many times has someone asked you how you were, but doesn't take the time to listen to your response? They may cut you off, start talking about themselves, or walk away. If you're like most people, this behavior probably leaves a sour taste in your mouth. People want to be heard and listened to; they want to feel like someone cares.

Be honest with yourself. Do you exhibit the same behaviors that you dislike, or do you make every attempt to hear and listen to those around you? If you find that your listening skills are poor or need tweaking, this article provides tips on how to be a better listener.

1. Make a commitment to improve your listening skills. It is important to note that listening is not a skill with which we are born. We have to learn how to develop good listening skills, and continuously practice what we learn. There are classes and books dedicated to helping individuals learn and perfect their listening skills.
2. Talk less and listen more. Most people like to talk, especially about themselves. As such, work on talking less and listening more. When listening to someone, you might want to jump in and offer an opinion or suggestion; however, make every effort not to do so. Give him the opportunity to be fully heard. In your mind, repeat every word he says, immediately after he has said it. This will help you keep your own thoughts at bay, as you will be listening only to the speaker's words.
3. Whether you are listening to a friend, co-worker, or employee, give them your undivided attention. Make sure there are no distractions (e.g., phones, computers, TVs) that would interfere with your giving full attention to the speaker. If the distractions are unavoidable, try to separate yourself from them to the best of your ability.
4. Display objectivity when listening to others. Set aside your own thoughts, judgments, and experiences. Act as if you don't have any attachment to what is being said.
5. When listening to people with different viewpoints, put yourself in their shoes. Although you may not agree with them, it might help you to better understand their perspective. Try to find a common ground; areas in which you both agree.

6. Wait until a person has finished speaking before you respond. If you are formulating a response while the person is speaking, you are not truly listening to him.
7. In order to communicate that the individual has been heard, summarize or paraphrase what he just said to confirm that you heard him correctly.
8. When listening to someone, takes notes, if needed, to remember important points.
9. As you listen to people, pay attention to how they are conveying their message. Are they loud? Are they speaking quickly? Which words do they use to express what they are feeling? What is the tone of their voice? Their tone generally reflects their emotions; how they are feeling about the issue. When people are angry, upset, or passionate about an issue, the volume of their voice increases, and the tone changes. When they are excited, they may talk faster. When they are depressed, they may talk slow, and the tone of their voice may be sad or devoid of any emotion.
10. When listening to others, also observe their nonverbal behaviors, as sometimes the individual's words and non-verbal behaviors will be contradictory. Are their arms and/or legs crossed? Are they looking directly at you or avoiding eye contact? Is their body turned away from you? Typically, these are signs that the person is "closed" from having a conversation; he may be embarrassed, or trying to avoid a confrontation, or simply doesn't want to talk. Conversely, if the individual is smiling, looking directly at you, and has a relaxed stance, he is open to dialogue.

Listening is one of the greatest gifts you can give to another person. By improving your listening skills, you will be a better friend, colleague, or supervisor. People will naturally gravitate towards you, and appreciate you. The above tips will help, but it your responsibility to continuously work on improving your listening skills. It may take time and effort, but the rewards will be worth it.

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