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Listening--With Your Heart As Well As Your Ears

This NebGuide discusses why being a good listener is important, how it affects family and work life, some styles of poor listening, and provides ways to improve listening skills.

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I speak because I know my needs,
I speak with hesitation because I know not yours.
My words come from my life's experiences
Your understanding comes from yours.
Because of this, what I say,
And what you hear, may not be the same.
So if you will listen carefully,
Not only with your ears,
But with your eyes and with your heart,
Maybe somehow we can communicate.

How often have you heard these statements? "You're not listening to me!"... "Why don't you let me finish what I'm saying?"... "If you only let me, I'll tell you!"... "I may as well be talking to a brick wall!..." "You just don't understand!"... "But that's not what I said!"

If you hear any of these comments coming from your partner, children, friends, or co-workers, perhaps it's true that "you're *not* listening"--really listening to the people who are important in your life. Listening is the art of connecting with another person so you fully understand what they are saying and feeling. It is a vital and necessary skill needed in creating and maintaining a marriage, in parenting

children effectively, and in working together and making effective decisions on the job.

Ineffective Listening

Why are people such poor listeners when it is such an important skill in developing and maintaining relationships? *First, there is the habit of "tuning out,"* which involves the processes of selective attention and selective perception. You hear what you want to hear and screen out what you don't. An example is:

Wife: "I feel sorry for Janet. I went next door to see her this afternoon and...well, you know I told you what happened to her last week."

Husband, not looking up, busy eating: "Did you? What happened, I don't remember."

Or, on a Friday afternoon: *Employer:* "Do you have that report written yet? I said in our meeting on Monday that it must be mailed by 5 o'clock today."

Employee: "Oh, oh, I don't remember you saying anything about that report. I must have forgotten."

Both parties are guilty of *selective listening*, because each had tuned the other out and discounted the importance of the message. Because neither was listening to what the other was saying, they missed out on an opportunity to strengthen their relationship. If the husband had listened to his wife's anxieties and concern about Janet's problems, and if the employee had recognized the importance of having the report completed, both would have had a better understanding of each other's position. Since it is estimated that the average person spends 45 percent of his waking hours listening to someone, no wonder we tune out what we don't want or don't need to hear.

The *second reason for poor listening is physiological*; that is, people listen about five to ten times as fast as they speak. In the time it takes the speaker to say 100 words, the listener has the capacity to hear 500 to 1,000 words. So, while you are talking, the other person is listening with only a fraction of the capacity for attention. The rest of that person's mind impatiently used the extra capacity for other things--to plan the next day's work; to fantasize about their future; to think of an excuse for not being home for dinner on time; to reminisce about a vacation, etc. One of the keys to effective listening is to use this excess mind capacity to constantly analyze what is being said, instead of daydreaming or letting your mind wander.

The *third reason is the sheer impact of the stimuli* from the outside world. People are bombarded with literally thousands of different messages each hour, and the volume of "noise" in their communication network makes effective listening difficult. According to experts, the average person speaks 12,500 words per day, and if that is multiplied by five or more persons in their immediate work or family environment, it is no wonder people get tuned out.

Styles of Poor Listening

One reason the ineffective listening takes place at home or at work is because we have developed bad habits and poor listening styles which prevent us from really hearing others. Some of these styles are:

1. **The Faker.** Fakers only pretend to be listening. They may smile while you talk to them. They may nod their heads. They may appear to be intent, but they are either thinking about something else, or are so intent on appearing to be listening that they do not hear what you are saying. Often their minds wander as they tune in and out of the conversation.

2. **The Dependent Listener.** Some people primarily want to please the speaker. They are so concerned about whether the speaker has a good impression of them that they are unable to listen and respond appropriately. Dependent listeners may agree excessively with what the speaker says, not because they really agree, but because they want to maintain the goodwill of the speaker (nodding head all the time). By trying to please, dependent listeners are frustrating at best.
3. **The Interrupter.** Interrupters never allow the other to finish. They may be afraid that they will forget something important they want to say. Or they may feel that it is necessary to respond to a point as soon as it is made. Or they may simply be more concerned with their own thoughts and feelings than with those of others. In any case, they barrage the speaker with words rather than offering an understanding ear.
4. **The Self-conscious Listener.** Some people are concerned more with their own status in the eyes of the other than with the ideas and feelings of the other. Trying to impress the other person, they don't listen with understanding; therefore they may be constantly framing their replies in order to be helpful.
5. **The Intellectual Listener.** Intellectual listeners attend only to the words of the other. They make a rational appraisal of what has been said verbally, but they ignore the nonverbal cues (including the feelings that are communicated nonverbally). The intellectual listener may develop this style because of the type of work in which he or she engages. Consider Nancy, a computer programmer, who learned to be thoroughly logical and systematic in order to succeed in her work. She tried to apply the same procedure to her marriage, however, and found herself in trouble.
6. **The Judge and Jury Listener.** These listeners often become so involved in the judgement of the idea or behavior of others that they don't hear the full story. They may interrupt with a comment about being "wrong" or "incorrect" or may attack the other person without attempting to understand their position. When this happens, they shut their ears so they don't listen. A kind of *hardening of the categories*.

Payoffs for Effective Listening

The first real evidence of effective communication occurring is when each person really *understands* what the other person has said--the meanings, attitudes, and feelings behind the words. That takes time and concentration. Here are some *positive results* that can be gained from effective listening.

1. ***Gaining knowledge.*** Each person can learn new information about topics, ideas, and people. Listen for the meaning beyond the words and the context of the communication. Listen to the person--get in touch with emotions, language, habits, and temperament.
2. ***Receive better work and cooperation from others.*** Showing sincere interest in other peoples' problems, ideas, thoughts, and opinions can bring you more respect and cooperation.
3. ***Listening can help to win friends.*** Not only does it help you to make new friends, but it will enrich ongoing friendships.
4. ***Listening helps to solve problems and resolve conflict.*** Only after understanding the other person can you agree or disagree, and then work cooperatively to clarify thinking, seek solutions, and resolve conflict.

5. ***Listening can reduce tension.*** It gives the other person a chance to "get it off his chest," to "clear the air," or "let off a little steam."
6. ***Listening can prevent trouble.*** If people can learn to listen before speaking, before sticking their neck out, before taking untenable and unreasonable positions, or making commitments that can't be kept, they will likely avoid many unfortunate experiences.
7. ***Listening can help you do a better job.*** Try asking your partner or fellow workers for ideas about improving your listening performance. Then listen and try some of their suggestions.
8. ***Listening can increase enjoyment in life.*** Efficient listening can increase everyone's enjoyment of a movie, a television program, a lecture, a play, music, and even just plain conversation. It may help people to develop higher standards for everything they hear.
9. ***Listening can strengthen family relationships.*** Marriages are created, maintained, and/or destroyed through effective communication. Most important is our need to listen to each other--with the heart as well as the ears. Empathic listening is the greatest gift parents can give to their children. It is the ability to put themselves in their child's place--to *walk in the other's moccasins*--and understand where the child is coming from without imposing their point of view.

Learn Reflective Listening

The key to reflective listening is the ability to listen in a non-judgmental way--to listen for understanding and not for agreement. How does one learn to be a more attentive and reflective listener? The process goes like this. Sit down opposite the speaker in a relaxed, attentive manner. Let the speaker begin talking about specific ideas or feelings that he or she is experiencing and wants to share. Pay full attention to both the verbal and nonverbal language.

After four or five sentences, stop the speaker with "let me see if I am understanding you." Then, *repeat back in your own words* what you heard and the feelings you picked up on. "You said..." "You felt..." "Was that accurate?" If the speaker says it was *not accurate*, ask for a *clarification* of the portion of the message that was misunderstood or incorrect. Once this is clarified for both of you, then the speaker can go on for another few sentences, and the reflection process continues. Remember, the goal for both the speaker and listener is *understanding*, not agreement.

Reflective listening is *useful* when a person is "uptight" and wants to share feelings that are bothering or behaviors that are upsetting. It is also useful in a brainstorming type of situation when you just want to be heard and understood. It is *not appropriate* when the goal in communicating is to manipulate the other person, or to only communicate negative feelings and judgments. It works only if each person can really accept where the other is coming from; and then uses the process for solving, or as a means of entering the life of the other person. Remember, reflective listening is a skill that must be developed and used.

Common mistakes in reflective listening. While learning the skill of reflective listening, there will be mistakes and people will find it awkward and unnatural at first. This is okay--no skill is learned easily. As you practice, keep in mind some common mistakes you will likely make and try to correct them.

1. *Parroting*--simply repeating the message or responding only to the facts and not the feelings.
2. *Listening without empathy*--continuing whatever activity you were involved in, not looking at the speaker, maintaining a dry, detached manner.

3. *Opening the door, then slamming it shut*--using reflective listening to develop data which the listener then uses to move in with solutions, evaluation, punishment, etc.
4. *Bad Timing*--using reflective listening when the other person needs specific help or information you possess.
5. *Analyzing*--going beyond the message the speaker wants you to know by adding your guess as to why the speaker feels the way he does.

Speaker-Listener Technique

Whether at home or work, conflicts will arise as people attempt the complex task of sharing ideas, feelings, plans, and positions. Developing certain skills can usually help two people improve communication and reduce the intensity of conflicts. Notarius and Markman have developed a step-by-step procedure for the speaker and listener.

- **Use the speaker-listener technique so each side knows he or she will have a chance to be heard.** First decide what you will talk about, who will be the speaker and who will be the listener. To practice keeping your roles straight, get a piece of paper and write *floor* on it. Trade the *floor* back and forth, remembering to speak only when you have the floor. The speaker should keep his or her statements short so the listener can follow them.
- **Relating to each other and resolving problems are both important goals, but always relate first and resolve second.** To show you are listening, relating, and trying to understand the full importance of what the other person is saying, take in the message, try to sense his or her feelings, and then restate a mixture of those thoughts and feelings.
- **As a listener, don't apologize or offer an explanation or excuse until after you have shown you appreciate the other person's feelings.** Even honest apologies and explanations detract attention from the speaker. The listener should show respect for the speaker's feelings and not try to dilute them by waving an apology or explanation at them. The listener must accept the possibility that he or she did something the speaker didn't like, even if it wasn't the purpose. The listener must develop a sense of confidence in taking turns, knowing that her or his position will be given equal time as soon as the speaker and listener roles switch.
- **Don't blame or attack.** Problems between two people are relationship problems. Each needs to examine their role in creating and maintaining the problem. Attacking and blaming only creates defensiveness and hostility.
- **Set aside a weekly half-hour meeting to work on the relationship.** Even if both people are very busy, scheduling this time says work on the relationship is important.
- **If one person would like to discuss an issue outside the time of the half-hour meeting, he or she should say "I'd like to talk about X. Is this a good time?"** The other has the right to decline to talk at that moment, but it becomes that person's responsibility to make sure the talk happens within 24 hours.
- **During a discussion, focus on one problem.** Stay on one subject at a time, even though your thoughts may drift to related issues. Ask yourself what your listening and discussion goals are.
- **Reserve** the right to take a break if the discussion is not going well. If one side starts to attack, blame, or escalate, either person can call a STOP. At that point, agree to stop talking and pick up

the conversation within 24 hours.

Ten Commandments of Effective Listening

Effective listening requires an understanding that it is not just the speaker's responsibility to make sure he/she is understood. The listener has a major role to play in hearing the complete message. The following ideas will assist the listener in understanding the message.

1. **Stop talking!** You cannot listen when you are talking. You will only be thinking about what you are going to say next instead of paying attention to what the other person is trying to say. Consciously focus your attention on the speaker.
2. **Put the speaker at ease:** Relax, smile, look at the speaker and help that person feel free to talk. Look and act interested. Remove distractions: turn off the TV; close the door; stop what you are doing, and pay attention.
3. **Pay attention to the nonverbal language** of physical gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice, and body posture. An authority on nonverbal language says that 55 percent of the message meaning is *nonverbal*, 38 percent is indicated by *tone of voice*, and only 7 percent is conveyed by the *words* used in a spoken message. Few people know how to listen to the eyes; what a tapping foot means; a furrowed brow; clenched fist; the biting of nails. These often reveal the key feelings behind the words.
4. **Listen for what is not said.** Ask questions to clarify the meaning of words and the feelings involved, or ask the speaker to enlarge on the statement. People often find it difficult to speak up about matters or experiences that are very important or highly emotional for them. Listen for *how* the speaker presents the message. What people hesitate to say is often the most critical point.
5. **Know exactly what the other person is saying.** Reflect back what the other person has said in a "shared meaning" experience so you completely understand the meaning and content of the message before you reply to it. A good listener does not assume they understand the other person. You, as the listener, should not express your views until you have summarized the speaker's message to his satisfaction.
6. **Be aware of "tune out" words.** These are words which appear in the media that strike an emotional chord in the listener and interferes with attentive listening (e.g. abortion, nuclear war, communism, homosexuality). Avoid arguing mentally. Listen to understand, not to oppose.
7. **Concentrate on "hidden" emotional meanings.** What are the real feelings behind the words? What is the tone of voice saying? What does the emphasis on certain words mean? Notice how the meaning of the following question is changed when you change the emphasis from one word to the next.

What do you want?
What *do* you want?
What do *you* want?
What do you *want*?
8. **Be patient.** Don't interrupt the speaker. This is disrespectful and suggests you want to talk instead of listen. Allow plenty of time for the speaker to convey ideas and meaning. Be courteous and

give the speaker adequate time to present the full message.

9. **Hold your temper!** Try to keep your own emotions from interfering with your listening efficiency. When emotions are high, there is a tendency to tune out the speaker, become defensive, or want to give advice. You don't have to agree to be a good listener. Don't argue! Even if you win, you lose.
10. **Empathize with the speaker.** Try to "walk in the other's moccasins" so you can feel what that person is feeling and understand the point of view the speaker is trying to convey.

True attentive and reflective listening offers the opportunity for others to share their life with you. Listening and leveling has a chance of healing hurts and building bridges in a relationship. When someone listens to you and you feel understood, you are much more likely to trust the other person, thus opening the gate for more intimate communication.

Conclusion

You may think, "What is so important about listening? I listen!" Sure you do. But *how*? How adept are you, for example, in getting people to come right out and really talk to you? Before you can get the most out of a listening situation, others must first believe that you really *want to listen*. They must feel that when they tell you something, it will be received by you in the proper spirit. Learn to *listen beyond the words*, with your *heart* as well as your *ears*. Observe the signs of the inner feelings such as voice quality, facial expressions, body posture and motions, etc. These actions are revealing, and sometimes may have an opposite meaning from the spoken word. A friend put it this way: "You listened as if you wanted to hear what I was going to say, as if it was really important to you. And that makes me feel good!"

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