

Listening Skills Revisited



It is said that we have two ears and one mouth and should, therefore, listen more and talk less.

Listening is, of course, a key skill for the nature of our work and as we all know maintaining 'effective' listening does not just come naturally. It is something that needs to be worked at, with our skills being reviewed from time to time.

So, how does it feel when someone has really listened to us? As well as hearing, the content of what we are saying, a good listener tries to understand what we have said and, most importantly, feeds back to us that they have understood the intended meaning.

What makes for effective listening?

The principles of good listening are based on common sense. We all listen well some of the time and in certain situations. By becoming more aware of what happens during conversations, we can learn to use our listening skills more consistently.

Think about someone you know who is a good listener. What do you think it is that makes them a good listener? You may identify some of the following skills, which have been identified as characteristic of good listeners:

- Allowing the speaker to do most of the talking
- Maintaining eye contact - showing that you are giving your attention
- Smiling and nodding - conveying that you are concentrating
- Using appropriate body language - being relaxed and open to encourage the speaker to talk

- Concentrating, avoiding distractions
- Summarising what you have heard in order to check you have understood the meaning of what is being said
- Keeping an open mind and accepting that everyone has a different perspective

It does us no harm, however experienced we are in our profession, to revisit our listening skills.

What hinders effective listening?

Now think of someone you know who does not listen well. What is it that he/she is doing which prevents them from listening effectively? Is he/she:-

- Anticipating what you are going to say?
- Interrupting and finishing your sentences?
- Passing judgement or prematurely jumping to conclusions?
- Making assumptions?
- Focusing on himself or herself rather than you?
- Asking questions out of curiosity rather than to help you?
- Devaluing what you are saying by minimising, disbelieving or laughing inappropriately?

Watch out for these behaviours in yourself. They tend to undermine the communication process and are best avoided.

How do I stay tuned in with the speaker?

So to revise, just run your eye over the checklist below and return to it now and again to check how you are doing:

- Am I listening with undivided attention and without interrupting?
- Am I allowing the speaker to do most of the talking?
- If not, am I asking questions to make sure that I have understood?
- Am I focusing on the speaker rather than myself?
- Am I paying attention to non-verbal communication - maintaining eye contact, smiling, nodding etc?
- Am I putting myself in the other person's shoes in order to understand?
- Am I sticking to the speaker's agenda rather than my own?