



## The Power of Listening

*Nature has given us one tongue, but two ears, that we may hear from others twice as much as we speak.* Epictetus

"Not just did you hear me, but, were you listening!" The most amazing thing in communication is our inability to fully understand what someone else means. Ok, be honest, how many times have you said to someone, or have you been told, "you aren't listening?" It's a universal complaint. Let me outline the variables to good listening then offer some concrete suggestions for improvement. For now, I am addressing just face-to-face communication. Phone and email communication add another layer of difficulty.

Well known studies by Mehrabian from University of California Berkeley as well as well re-researched follow-up studies indicate that approximately 7% of our communication is verbal - the actual words we choose. From pre-school to Ph.D. most training programs focus on the ability to express ourselves. When did you last have a "listening" class?

Words have numerous meanings and even with context, not everyone has the same meanings for those words. Here's an experiment I would like for you to try. Go sample ten people. Ask them, what does the word "several" mean to you? I will guarantee you will not get consensus.

From studies we also learn that voice tone and intonation account for approximately 38% of our communication (This rises to 70-90% over the phone!). This is how we read into statements being assertive or aggressive; condescending or inquisitive; insulting or mocking, amongst other things. Someone who tails off at the end of a statement or ends with an upswing of their voice is seen as "wishy-washy" or "unsure" or that they lack assertiveness. The words may be appropriate. But we read more into it because of the delivery.

You can observe a lot just by watching - Yogi Berra. Your body language, including facial expressions, make-up the remaining approximately 55% of the message being communicated. We pick up on postures, stances, and expressions to give us clues to meanings. But, be careful, because "concentration" often looks like "aggravation" to someone who doesn't have the full context.



This is a wonderful time of year to show others you care. Show them by listening attentively. Your true and undivided attention is a wonderful gift to give.

Happy holidays and we'll see you in the New Year.

Here are a few more barriers to good listening:

- a. We are often busy mentally preparing our rebuttal.
- b. Our Type-A personalities are busy trying to complete sentences for others.
- c. We are ready to add in our experiences to show how we "relate".
- d. We have preconceived notions about the person, the content or environment, etc.
- e. We lose objectivity often due to emotions.

To give a framework to these tips, remember one of Stephen Covey's habits for highly effective people: Seek first to understand, then to be understood. You cannot understand if you do not have all the information accurately.

Ok, here are some tips:

- a. First, it takes practice to break bad habits. Go into a conversation with the sole purpose of "listening" and learning from someone else.
- b. Practice asking questions instead of voicing opinions or experiences.
- c. Use the 80-20 Rule on conversations. Can you get someone else to talk 80% of the time? You'll be amazed how much someone will think of YOU if you do this.
- d. Learn reflective listening techniques
- e. Stop doing anything else. Focus on the individual. Ask clarifying questions.
- f. Prevent interruptions.
- g. Take notes on what the person is saying. You validate what they are saying through your actions while leaving some notes you can come back to in order to clarify or refresh your memory.
- h. Listen for more than facts. Get 100% of the message.
- i. Avoid letting your mind wander.

Communication is perfect and imperfect at the same time. It is up to the parties involved to take responsibility for accurate communication. "Unintended" interpretations are in fact, intended if clarification was not sought. That means that 100% of the communication accuracy is on EACH person (not 50% each).

So, listening is a skill which requires practice and overcoming one's own filters by seeking more information and allowing others to express themselves without our interruption.

If you find it isn't so easy (as so many of us) and you would like to work on these skills, Mindset for Performance works with both individuals and groups on improving communication skills.