

Skills to Improve Your Listening Ability

Effective listening means you put your own concerns on hold temporarily and encourage your partner to take the lead—tell his/her complete story without any interference from you. The goal for you is to understand. You understand without agreeing or disagreeing, blaming, defending, or posing a solution. Following are five skills that will improve your ability to listen effectively.

1. Attend
2. Acknowledge
3. Invite
4. Summarize
5. Ask

1. ATTEND: Look, Listen, Track

Give your full attention by listening with your whole self. Stop other activities, establish eye contact and turn your body towards him/her. Mirror your partner's body position—Sit if he is sitting, stand if she is standing.

By putting your concerns aside for the moment, you convey to him/her that you are available, interested and receptive. Pay close attention to your partner's words and affect (their pose, facial expressions, intensity, pace of breathing). This will help you better interpret and understand the message they are sending. Look, listen and track your partner while he or she is talking. Be aware of the emotions and desires or wants, needs, below the surface as well.

2. ACKNOWLEDGE Other's Experience

When you acknowledge your partner's message, it lets him/her know verbally and nonverbally that you are right with him, and that she is leading and you are following. You validate your partner when you show interest in and respect for what they are trying to express. Being interested in your partner's topic and the emotion behind it, *does not* mean that you agree or disagree with what is being said.

You can acknowledge with a nod of the head, or an “uh-huh” or a brief statement that lets your partner know that you are following along with their narrative. It can be your interpretation that puts into words what you think they are trying to say. Such as:

“That sounds important.”
“I can see you’re really concerned. “
“The idea must really be exciting.”
“I guess you don’t really want to go.”

If you are “right on”, your partner will receive your acceptance, understanding, and affirmation (empathy). The impact on the speaker can be *powerful*. Mostly when we listen, we focus on information, thoughts and behaviors. Do not overlook the powerful emotions that are unspoken. Acknowledge these with empathy. *No amount of rational talk with satisfy the underlying needs to be loved, validated, recognized, and valued.*

As you watch your partner, you will see by their response and expressions if you are giving them *accurate* interpretations, empathy etc.

3. INVITE More Information

You want to encourage your partner to continue to talk to you spontaneously about their subject. Inviting helps you draw out your partner and encourages him/her to tell you more-anything.

“Tell me more.”
“Say more about that.”
“I’d like to hear more about what you are saying.”
“What else can you tell me?”
“Is there anything more you want me to know?”
“I’d like to hear anything else you think I should know.”

An invitation to continue is a powerful message. Many people pause, waiting to see if you are really interested enough for them to go further. They want to know if it safe, if they can trust you to really listen. When you invite them to tell you more, you are saying, “What you are saying is important to me. I have time to listen. Keep talking.”

As you continue to invite, your partner may say something like, “I don’t know if this has something to do with the situation, but...” Usually what follows the “but” is something more important, more core, than what he/she has been talking about before. They have been waiting to make sure they can trust you, that they are safe enough to risk deeper, gut level information or feelings. After they get to this point and you have further invited them to continue, they often are “done” and you will know that you have heard the full story and you have actually helped them to get it all out.

4. SUMMARIZE to Ensure Accuracy

This helps the speaker know that you and he/she are on the same page—that you both understand the meaning of the message. As you summarize parts of the message, you *demonstrate* that you accurately understand. Communication is complex and there can be misunderstandings. Often when you say something, your partner will hear it and then embellish it or reduce it in some way. At this time you do not have *shared meaning*. Having shared meaning is very important in communication. When you summarize for your partner you are making sure the shared meaning is in tact, which of course betters the communication. To summarize:

- Repeat in your words, what you have heard that your partner has said.
- Ask for confirmation or clarification or correction of your summary.

Begin by saying something like: “Let me see if I understand what you said...” “You said you were feeling frustrated about....Is that right?” Your partner will acknowledge the accuracy, you will have a shared message, and you will be building your relationship.

Your partner may need to clarify something or correct something in your summary. This is good because it keeps things accurate and helps the speaker to feel that what they are saying is important to you.

5. ASK Pertinent Questions

These questions are asked so that the Listener can have deeper understanding. This is the opportunity for the Listener to ask the questions he/she wanted to ask during the Speaker’s time but held them at bay in order that the Speaker had his/her full attention. It is important that the questions are not interrogations. The questions are to clear up any unanswered points that the Listener may have. The same respect and attention is given at this time as in the previous time of the Speaker’s story. In effect, if the Speaker is finished, the Listener becomes the Speaker for the sake of asking questions, and the Speaker becomes the Listener. The Speaker/Listener card makes it clear for each partner as to who is who. The card is at this time in the hand of the former Listener, who is now the Speaker. Now he/she can take a turn at telling his/her side of the issue, or her/his story.

SO MUCH OF THIS IS A MATTER OF SELF-CONTROL