

# THE ART OF LISTENING

## *THE MOST PRECIOUS GIFT YOU CAN GIVE ANYONE IS TIME!*

Listening is a valuable and precious gift --- the gift of time. As a Community Manager, Assistant or Member of a Board of Director, you know that there are at times not enough hours in a day to complete all of the tasks at hand. Giving a person some of this valuable time is a true gift, which helps to build relationships, solve problems, ensure understanding, resolve conflicts and/or improve accuracy. Listening also means fewer errors and less wasted time. Effective listening also builds friendships and careers while saving money at the same time.

As you are listening, mentally screen out distractions, like background activity and noise. In addition, try not to focus on the speakers' accent or speech mannerisms to the point where they become a distraction.

When listening for long periods of time, I know 5 minutes can seem like forever, but try to focus on and remember key words and issues. If you are meeting with the person, writing down these key points will show them that you care enough to listen and make notes.

It also helps when dealing with difficult people to spend much more time listening than speaking. They will feel better as they have been able to "vent" and know that you are listening attentively.

When in doubt about whether to listen or speak, keep listening.

## *ELEVEN STEPS TO EFFECTIVE LISTENING*

(If you are talking more than you are listening, something is wrong.)

1. If in person, face the speaker and make sure to maintain eye contact. If on the telephone, give verbal feedback to five sign that you are listening. Example, "I understand your point." "I see."
2. Be attentive yet relaxed. If on the phone make sure your voice is calm during the verbal feedback.
3. Keep an open mind. As you know very well, there are 2 sides to every story.
4. Listen intently to the words and try to picture what the speaker is saying. If you can't get the mental picture, ask questions that will enable you to clearly visualize.
5. Wait instead for the speaker to pause to ask any clarifying questions. Write them down if necessary to help you remember what you want to ask.
6. Don't interrupt and don't impose your "solutions" until the speaker is finished speaking. If you interrupt, you've only heard part of an issue and you may have silenced parts of the problem that will allow you to help.
7. Try to ask questions only to ensure understanding of something that has been said (avoiding questions that disrupt the speaker's train of thought.)
8. Try to feel and understand what the speaker is feeling regardless of your thoughts, past experiences, feelings, biases or knowledge.
9. Continue to give the speaker regular feedback, e.g. summarize, reflect feelings, or continue with simply saying "uh, huh," etc.

10. Pay attention to what isn't said, if in person, to feelings, facial expressions, gestures, posture, and other nonverbal clues.
11. Ask, "What can I do to help resolve the problem?" The speaker may have an acceptable solution to the problem already worked out. You won't know until you ask.

## TEST YOURSELF!

### ARE YOU A GOOD LISTENER?

You don't want to be a martyr, giving so much attention to others that you're fit to be sainted; not participating in conversation makes you *dull*. On the other hand, the ability to hear – really hear – what others are telling us is key to smooth relations with lovers, colleagues, friends and clients. Yet all too few of us seem to have mastered this vital skill. To see how you rate as a listener, choose the most appropriate responses to each of our questions. (And be as honest as you can: This quiz isn't nearly as straightforward as you think!) Circle the one that most closely represents you and your responses unless the question instructs otherwise.

1. A coworker launches into a long, convoluted story that has you utterly perplexed, so you (*Circle the one that is the most correct.*):
  - a. Spare both of you embarrassment by steering him or her on to another subject.
  - b. Tell him or her you're lost and ask to have the whole thing run by one more time.
  - c. Jump in with questions at the points of worst confusion.
  - d. Pretend to be following: eventually, you're bound to catch on.
  
2. A co-worker is upset because one of the other co-workers has done him or her dirty. You (*Circle the one that is the most correct.*):
  - a. Encourage her – by providing a sympathetic ear – to air her grievances.
  - b. Ditto, a., except that you'll let him or her know you, *too*, have been wronged, to show that they are not alone.
  - c. Express solidarity by confiding *your* experiences with the person and their rottenest deeds.
  - d. Agree that the co-worker is a first-class cad and offer help him or her “get” retaliation.
  
3. After a session of truly great and exhilarating meeting someone says you seem distracted. Your response is to (*Circle the one that is the most correct.*):
  - a. Assure him or her that it couldn't be further from the truth.
  - b. Probe to find out why he or she feels as he or she does.
  - c. Accept what is said – maybe you need to be more expressive in the activity.
  - d. Feel hurt and let it be known.
  
4. Okay, let's assume your co-worker or member of the Board says something (e.g., “I hate it when you...”) that makes you flaming mad. What happens next? (*Circle the one that is the most correct.*)
  - a. You swallow your anger: confrontation was never your style.
  - b. You find out exactly what's bugging him or her, before you present your point of view.
  - c. You hasten to correct him or her – letting him or her get away with that kind of talk only makes you angry.
  - d. You counter attack (“What about the way you....?”).
  
5. Suppose someone is holding forth on a topic that, while emotionally neutral, makes your eyes glass over – the relative merits of the Oleander plant, say. Which of the following responses do you use to hold up your end of the conversation? (*Choose and Circle as many as you like.*) You:
  - a. Nod.
  - b. Smile.
  - c. Look him or her in the eye.
  - d. Ask pertinent questions.

- e. Paraphrase his or her main points (e.g., “So they are approved in Summerlin and Green Valley Ranch...”) to be sure you’ve understood.
  - f. Murmur such syllables of encouragement as “Mm-hmmm,” “Yeah,” “Right.”
  - g. Take it one step further, with enthusiastic cries of “Really!” or “That’s interesting!”
  - h. Do none of the above. Instead you confess that you’re hopeless when it comes to plants and a Committee should be discussing this anyway.
6. Your close relationship (with partners, family, friends and/or Board members) tend to be:
- a. Few and far between
  - b. Somewhat stormy!
  - c. Warm, fuzzy, fulfilling.
  - d. Desperately unsatisfying.
7. In conversation with clients, what percentage of the time do you generally take the listener’s role?
- a. 0 % to 25 %
  - b. 26% to 50 %
  - c. 51% to 75 %
  - d. 76% to 100 %
8. An important part of being “a good ear,” of course, is the ability to read others’ nonverbal cues. So forget what’s being said for the moment. The question is, what is really going on when a speaker \_\_\_\_\_? (Choose one interpretation for each of the lettered items below and circle that number.)
- a. Puts his finger on his nose or cheek
    - (1) He feels superior.
    - (2) He’s stretching the truth.
    - (3) He has an itch.
  - b. Seems hunched up, tense
    - (1) He’s hiding something.
    - (2) He’s angry.
    - (3) He’s shy.
  - c. Begins to speak louder and in a higher pitch.
    - (1) He’s defensive
    - (2) He’s interested.
    - (3) He’s eager for the conversation to end.
9. How often do you \_\_\_\_\_? (Mark each entry 3 for often, 2 for sometimes, 1 for rarely, or 0 for never to the side.)
- a. Finish other people’s sentences
  - b. Find yourself wondering, while a business contact is talking, where she or he buys his or her clothes.
  - c. Burst into laughter a moment before the punch line to a joke is delivered.
  - d. Use your co-workers description of his or her horrible meeting last night as an excuse to examine your nails.
  - e. Feel personally wronged when a Board of Directors continues to follow a path after you have advised them otherwise.
  - f. Use *against* the Board or co-worker something he or she has said.
  - g. Catch yourself thinking, as a co-worker or Member of the Board launches into a familiar complaint, “Here we go again.”
  - h. Feel compelled to have the last word in a discussion.
  - i. Come away from a serious discussion feeling that nothing valuable has been achieved.

10. Are the following statement true or false? (Mark ***each*** statement with - *T* for true, *F* for false, or ? for undecided to the side.)
- a. A noticeable lull in conversation makes you uncomfortable.
  - b. While listening to a co-worker or Member of the Board, you make a point-of-refocusing your attention whenever it starts to drift.
  - c. In your opinion, there's never a reason to offer unsolicited advice.
  - d. You can usually predict what someone is going to say before she or he actually says it.
  - e. People always, but always, com to you with their most petty problems.

## SCORING OF TEST

1. a-3    b-2    c-1    d-0
2. a-0    b-1    c-3    d-2
3. a-3    b-1    c-0    d-2
4. a-0    b-1    c-3    d-2
5. Give yourself points as follows:  
a-0    b-0    c-0    d-1  
e-1    f-0    g-2    h-5
6. a-3    b-2    c-1    d-0
7. a-3    b-2    c-1    d-0
8. a.    (1)-1    (2)-2    (3)-0  
b.    (1)-2    (2)-1    (3)-0  
c.    (1)-1    (2)-0    (3)-2
9. Give yourself points as marked on the sheet.
10.        T        F        ?  
a.        3        0        1  
b.        1        3        2  
c.        1        3        2  
d.        2        0        1  
E.        0        3        1

## **SO.... HOW DO YOU RATE?**

### **54 POINTS OR MORE - F.**

Plainly put, you are nobody's favorite confidante and they consider you not to be a good listener. When not interrupting, you tend to natter or chatter on compulsively, filling every real or imagined conversational gap. Possibly your parents had a "children should be seen and not heard" philosophy that made you view listening as a form of submission—one to be avoided at all costs.

Whatever is behind your nonstop patter, though, the problem is costing you, as a quick review of your relationships will attest. Further, according to Stephen Bank a clinical psychologist in Middletown, Connecticut, and director of the Art of Listening Program, you need to do more than just disengage that overactive mouth: "Listening isn't just the act itself – it's a whole attitude toward communication."

Shut the door on your own concerns. It's important to ask pertinent, open-ended questions that show the speaker you're with him or her, so he'll want to divulge more. Also, summarize your impressions. 'In other words....' every now and then, to be sure you're getting the point. Why not start today? You've nothing to lose but your chatterbox reputation!

### **36-53 POINTS – C.**

While you may think you hear what's going on around you, there are those who would disagree. Your worst mistake? When angry or impatient, you tune out – and you're not the only one. Most of us do well enough when we're hearing what we want to hear. As soon as the going, though, we fall apart. A typical response to slight criticism would be to jump in with a rebuttal or counterattack. Control the fight response and focus on emotions behind the speaker's remarks. The next time your defenses threaten to block all incoming information, try opening your ears.

### **18 – 35 POINTS – A.**

Congratulations! When those in your circle, including clients, need a sounding board, you're the one they turn to. Even in conflictual situations, you keep the channels open by giving other the benefit of the doubt. Plus, you've an instinctive feel for when to be a responsive "mirror" and when to offer input of your own. No wonder you're such a popular person, and not just with family and friends. That flair for reciprocal communication makes you a valued employee and successful manager as well. The only suggestion: Keep up the good work.

### **17 POINTS OR FEWER – I.** (For incomplete)

You're there when other need an audience, al right; problem is, you've little to offer *but* a sympathetic ear. There is a type for whom listening is a kind of power play, a method of pulling data from everyone else without even revealing your opinions.

Often, members of this "silent minority" suffer from the fear of risk taking, but whatever the roots of their reluctance to take center stage, the tactic is sure to backfire in the end. The individual will feel used and/or bored.

**Moral:** Like any form of human interchange. Listening has to go two ways. To achieve true understanding, you've got to give your co-worker and client a chance to shut up and do his or her bit.

# **EIGHT - PRACTICAL SOLUTIONS TO PROBLEM SOLVING**

## **1. IDENTIFY THE PROBLEM**

Are you attacking the symptoms or the cause?

## **2. PRIORITIZE THE PROBLEM**

Get the truth and realities that must be dealt with!

## **3. DEFINE THE PROBLEM**

- A. The difference between making a decision and solving a problem is:
- B. Problem is a situation that's counter to your intentions or expectations.
- C. Decision is a choice you must make between two or more alternatives.
  - a. Ask the right questions
  - b. Talk to the right people
  - c. Get the hard facts
  - d. Get involved in the process

## **4. SELECT PEOPLE TO HELP YOU IN THE PROBLEM SOLVING PROCESS**

## **5. COLLECT PROBLEM CAUSES**

## **6. PRIORITIZE AND SELECT THE BEST SOLUTIONS**

- A. Which solution has the greatest potential to be right?
- B. Which solution is in the best interests of the common-interest community?
- C. Which solution has the momentum and timing on its side?
- D. Which solution has the greatest chance for success

## **7. IMPLEMENT THE BEST SOLUTION**

## **8. EVALUATE THE SOLUTION – REGULARLY**

- A. Were we able to identify the real causes of the problem?
- B. Did we make the right decision?
- C. Has the problem been resolved?
- D. Have the key people accepted this solution?
- E. Did I help people to develop problem solving skills to manage conflict in the future?