

The Art of Listening.....

.....like you really mean it



So you think you're listening..?

We all think that we know how to listen, and we probably do, but what we're not so good at is **showing** people that we're listening to them, that we're hearing them and that we're paying full attention to what they're saying.

Use this guide to pick up some useful tips

Why don't we really listen?

Have you ever been in conversation with someone and you get the feeling that they're not really listening? They're nodding in the right places, smiling appropriately, but there's something about them that tells you they aren't engaged. As a speaker, this probably made you feel as though you were boring them, that they didn't want to be there, and it may have discouraged you from continuing your conversation much further.

There are some subtle signs (and some very obvious signs!) that we're all able to pick up on that tell us whether we're being listened to or not.

As a manager, or in fact, as anyone who communicates, it's absolutely vital that we're able to show people that we're listening and we're interested. We all know what we should be doing, but it's valuable to revise these actions and make sure that we're putting them into good practice.

So why don't we listen properly?

Barriers to listening

- Physical Distractions – people walking past, things out of the window, keeping an eye on email
- Mental Distractions – other things on your mind, worries, your mental “to do” list
- Own experiences – relating what we're being told to experiences that we've had in the past
- “Queuing” – We think of something to say, and then we concentrate on finding a gap in the conversation to introduce our own ideas/thoughts
- Time – we're in a hurry, we've got 101 things that we need to do
- Relationship – if you don't respect, or particularly like the person talking, it can be very difficult to really listen to them. Such a dislike can be caused by previous experiences or our own personal prejudices and beliefs

What gives you away?

There are some clear signs that show that we aren't listening or that we aren't giving our full attention, beware of the list below, as if you're displaying these behaviours, you are probably telling someone that you aren't really listening to them.

- Checking your watch
- Looking out of the window
- Looking "through" the speaker
- Yawning
- Turning your body away from the speaker
- Checking your email (however subtly!)
- Checking who's calling on your mobile
- Tapping your pen/fingers on the table
- Lack of eye contact
- Lack of responsiveness
- Overtaking the conversation with your own thoughts and opinions
- Interrupting

Some of these signs can be very subtle, but what's important is to realise what effect these can have on the speaker. You are likely to discourage them from sharing their ideas with you during this conversation, and possibly in future. You are giving the impression that you don't have time for this person. If you don't have the time to hold a conversation at this point in time, you should tell them that you will speak to them later (make sure that you do follow up), when you can give them your full attention.

What tells someone that I am really listening?

Displaying these positive behaviours may well have the impact of encouraging a person to share information with you, to share their ideas and the likely outcome is that they will find you approachable and personable.

- Make eye contact
- Face the speaker – with your whole body
- Concentrate on the speaker
- Don't fiddle
- Give feedback where appropriate
- Give verbal reassurances (known as "verbal nods" such as "mmm", "yes...")
- Resist the temptation to interrupt or to finish their sentences
- Ask clarifying questions if you need to

I have a question....

Sometimes we may need to seek clarification on a subject, or to ask someone to provide further information. This also shows the speaker that you are listening and that you are interested in their subject. Questioning skills are important for good communication and there are a number of different question types that you will find useful.

Open: these don't restrict the speaker in their answer – they encourage the speaker to provide broad information. e.g. What do you think about...?

Probing: these are similar to open questions, but are more focused; they will encourage the speaker to provide specific detail. e.g. Tell me more about why you think that....?

Closed: these suggest that there are limited answers, or even simply "yes" or "no". e.g. Is everything okay?

Hypothetical: these will help people to explore their imagination and seek solutions to problems. e.g. If you could take that call again, how would you prepare yourself?

Great tips for showing you're listening

- Keep your body language open
- Face the speaker
- Maintain eye contact
- Use appropriate facial expressions
- Be aware of your voice tone
- Summarise what you've heard/understood
- Be patient – wait for them to finish
- Ask additional questions where appropriate
- Avoid distractions (your watch, phone, window, other people etc)
- Avoid forming opinions before they've finished speaking