



## LISTENING AND ASKING QUESTIONS - QUICK TIPS

Five quick tips for understanding the nuances and benefits of listening in the workplace.

### *Listening Matters*

- Listen to the people who work with and for you. This is an essential duty and an invaluable skill in leadership. Knowing their minds is crucial to building a sense of trust and community with those people, and you will gain important information and new perspectives in the process.
- Listening is a powerful tool for increasing your stock at work, at any position. It helps you ensure you are looking out for all the members of your team, as well as your external and internal stakeholders.
- If the people who work under you are comfortable bringing their ideas, concerns and issues to you, they will generally be happier and more productive, and you will know about problems and potential problems sooner. It is important for people to know who they can go to if they have a problem. When the boss is regarded as a good listener, everyone is more at ease.

### *Active Listening vs Passive Listening*

- There are different kinds of listening and they are best suited to different kinds of conversations. Whether you need to employ active listening or passive listening depends largely on what you believe the other person's goals are in the conversation...
  - ◆ Is this a discussion in which you need to learn something? Perhaps gather more information or more perspectives regarding an incident? This indicates that you should ask particular questions to draw out details and paraphrase their statements to confirm understanding.
  - ◆ Are you having a conversation where someone is upset about something? Maybe the person just needs to vent, or perhaps he or she is just seeking your moral support or sympathy? Such a conversation may still involve questions to confirm understanding, and may generally need more simple responses through body language and affirmation.
- Sometimes it is enough for people to simply feel they have been heard; other times you will need to invest more actively in the conversation to glean more details, and confirm facts.

### *Good Follow Up Questions are a Part of Good Listening*

- Particularly in difficult conversations, try to focus on asking follow up questions rather than just reacting to what you are hearing. This can be an effective means of keeping the conversation steady and avoiding escalation.
  - ◆ Simple questions like “And then what happened?” or “Can you tell me more about that?” serve not only to elicit more information, they also acknowledge your engagement and presence in the moment with the speaker.



- Phrasing questions in an open-ended manner promotes purity in what you're being told. When your queries are leading, you may find you wind up hearing what you want to hear, rather than what the person is really trying to say.
- Take care not to “weaponize” your questions. Do not use them as a means of attack or to elicit “gotcha!” moments. Cultivate curiosity in the way you ask questions.
  - ♦ e.g.: if some aspect of a project has not been progressing at the pace you expected, asking “I’m trying to understand how we got here, can you walk me through these events?” is an effective way of delivering your assessment in a way that promotes cooperation and elicits information. Asking “what were you thinking when you did X?” delivers the same assessment but immediately puts the person on the defensive.

## *Listening is Influencing*

- The single most powerful way to influence people is to listen to them. It helps to build rapport, indicating that you care about them and what they have to say. It is an efficient way of accumulating information and reducing misunderstandings.
- Very few of us are ever heard clearly or truly understood. If you are able to make those who come to you with their issues feel that way, you will increase your value immeasurably in the eyes of your colleagues.
- When you are regarded as a good listener, people tend to listen more carefully to you as well. You are able to convey your ideas more effectively and present more convincing arguments to others. The best listeners in an organization are also frequently the biggest influencers.
- Listening carefully also pays huge dividends in negotiations, allowing you to focus on the interests of all parties involved and find potential extra value to bring to the table.

## *Nonverbal Aspects of Listening*

- Body language plays an important role in conversations, and is often overlooked or not thought about at all because many of its effects are not obvious ... some are even subconscious. In a surprisingly short time span, body language can aid you in establishing rapport and trust with another person, or antagonize the person without you even realizing it.
  - ♦ The orientation of your shoulders and center of mass can indicate your level of engagement in a conversation. Are you facing the other person? Angling to the side can give the impression you are not fully focused, not truly listening, or perhaps don’t care about the situation as much as you could.
  - ♦ Likewise, your posture and sitting position give off signals about your level of interest. Slouching and leaning back can make one seem unconcerned or aloof, whereas leaning in too far forward can come off as aggressive or even irritated.
  - ♦ Head movement and eye contact convey a lot of information about your current state. Not responding at all and never making eye contact indicates no enthusiasm for the conversation, while staring too hard, fidgeting or nodding vigorously appears frenetic. As always, maintaining a balance is the goal, between showing you are engaged and exhibiting a sense of calm.
- Not all conversations call for the same uses of body language. For example, if you are discussing data or examining materials, orienting yourself towards those assets rather than the person you are with can help



to keep the conversation on point, or de-escalate when things are getting tense. As always, assessing whether your body language is effective is best done by watching for the impact you are having.

- One of the simplest means of establishing rapport via your body language is to mirror your partner. This doesn't mean mimicking his or her every move. It is about adopting similar sitting positions, angling your head the same way, or using shared styles of speech. Two people in rapport will often exhibit these similarities unconsciously.