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Listening your way to success in business and sales

A wise old owl sat on an oak. The more he saw the less he spoke. The less he spoke the more he heard. Why aren't we like that wise old bird?"

As juvenile as this rhyme may read, the impact of refined listening skills is tremendous and is a key indicator of predicting one's success at anything from meeting and exceeding business and sales objectives to sustaining personal relationships.

But before we can examine how well we listen, to what, and why, we must first define the different levels of listening and identify for ourselves how we tend to listen - - understanding, of course, that there is a barrage of data, voice, motion, and sound firing at us at warp speed. The fact that we have the focus to hear and absorb anything at all is somewhat miraculous.

The first level of listening isn't really listening at all. Pretend Listening (also known as politely ignoring)



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is when the listener only pretends to listen as readily demonstrated by their verbal and non-verbal pre-occupation. A slight step up from pretend listening is Passive Listening. Here the listener acknowledges the speaker randomly and is then easily distracted. Many get caught in the vortex of Selective Listening, the third level where the listener only pays close attention to what interests them and ignores the rest of the message. As we evolve further, we discover Attentive Listening as the listener temporarily listens to the speaker's words attentively and then stops listening and starts comparing what was



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said to their own experience and does not return to listening. Finally, there is the nirvana of listening, Active/Reflective Listening. The listener is truly engaged as demonstrated by their verbal and non-verbal commitment to understanding the entire message.

In active/reflective listening, the listener is truly a participant in the exchange and uses such techniques as attentive body language, open-ended questions, paraphrasing, and summarizing to further facilitate comprehension of the communication.

Becoming an active/reflective listener takes discipline, practice and self-aware-

ness. When you next find yourself in the role of listener, ask yourself, "Am I really listening or waiting to talk?" Once you are conscious of your focus, you can exercise greater control over listening.

Understand the difference between interjecting and interrupting. As an active/reflective listener, interjections allow the listener to participate in the conversation before the speaker has finished by asking relevant questions or paraphrasing to clarify and confirm while maintaining focus on the speaker and his topic. The listener then moves back into the listener role. On the other hand, interruptions also allow the listener to participate in the conversation before the speaker has finished. The key difference, however, is the listener assumes the role of speaker and shifts the focus from the original speaker and topic and onto himself disregarding the origins of the communication.

Another important component of listening is knowing when or when not to listen. Important times to actively listening include before taking an action, before agreeing or disagreeing, when the speaker has a problem or challenge, and when someone asks for constructive feedback or a sounding board. If you cannot actively listen because of time constraints, distractions, exhaustion, stress or a subjective bias, it is essential to let the speaker know that what she wants to convey is important to you and that you'd like to give the conversation your full attention but at this time, you are unable to. Be sure to coordinate a mutually agreeable time for you and the speaker to reconvene.

Stephen Covey asserts that we must seek to understand before being understood. Listening demonstrates great respect for the speaker while affording us the opportunity to learn, discover, make decisions and influence others. ■