



Did You Hear What Was Said?

By Rich Bayer, Ph.D.

In a conversation, do you really listen to what the other person is saying? If you're like most people, you may have some trouble with this. Your mind may wander. Or you get restless. Or maybe you start thinking about how you disagree with the person. Or you interrupt before the person is finished.

Most of us can hear, but not all of us listen. Listening, however, doesn't come naturally. We're not born with a talent for listening. The good news is that listening is a learnable skill. Communication with other people improves when we learn to listen. In his book *The Seven Habits Of Highly Effective People*, Dr Stephen Covey lists as habit number five, "Seek first to understand and then to be understood."

We can boost our understanding of others when we listen to what they have to say. Good listening habits strengthen our relationships with family, friends, teachers and business associates, and help us to acquire knowledge.

Improving Listening Skills

It's one thing to hear what people say. As long as the apparatus in the ear is working correctly, we can hear sounds and words. But to listen to someone—especially to listen with understanding—requires something more.

Here are some ways to improve your listening skills...

- 1) **Learn to Pay Attention.** This may be the single most important, and obvious, factor in improving our listening skills. To listen, we must pay attention. So what helps us pay attention when someone else is talking?

Focus on what's being said. Keep your mind active while someone is talking, and listen for main ideas. We can think about four times faster than we can talk. On the one hand, this can lead us to distraction, but on the other hand we can use this "extra" thinking power to increase our understanding of what the speaker is saying.

Also, remove distractions. Turn off the TV and cell phone. Stop reading the paper. Listening works best when you give the speaker your undivided attention.

- 2) **Listen without Thinking of How You're Going to Respond.** While someone is talking to you, don't formulate arguments against what they're saying. Be patient with this person. Don't interrupt. Also don't offer advice, unless asked. Then, when the speaker is finished talking, you can start by first showing understanding of what he or she has said. This understanding also demonstrates respect. Then, if you disagree, you have your chance to state your ideas. The person you were listening to is more likely to listen to you if he or she believes that you listened carefully to them.

- 3) Listen with Your Eyes as Well as Your Ears. Face the speaker. This helps in two ways. First it enables you to have eye contact with the speaker, thus enhancing your connection with him or her. Second, when facing someone, both of your ears are aimed in the right direction for maximal hearing.

Also by observing the speaker, you'll pick up non-verbal cues such as arm movements and facial expressions that reveal the speaker's true emotional involvement with what he or she is saying. Only half the information you learn from a conversation comes from the actual words, the other half comes from the non-verbal cues.

- 4) Listen with Positive Regard for the Speaker. Often when someone is speaking, we look for faults or weaknesses in what that person says. This leads to immediate disagreement. You'll understand more of what the speaker is saying if you can listen with empathy. When you're feeling what the speaker is feeling, you're listening with empathy.

Also remain non-judgmental. You cannot understand what someone is saying if you're passing judgment on that person in the back of your mind. Even when you dislike the person who's talking, you'll understand more of what they're saying if you can suspend any negative feelings toward them.

- 5) Give Regular Feedback. Use verbal and non-verbal cues to encourage the speaker. Some verbal cues include short facilitators/interjections such as, "I see," "Uh-hunh," and "Oh really." You can also paraphrase what the speaker is saying or use reflective questions. If the speaker says, "I've been really depressed lately," to paraphrase, you might say, "I guess you're feeling sad." To ask a reflective question to this statement, you might say, "What's been getting you down?" In each case, it will keep the speaker on track with what he or she is saying.

Some non-verbal cues include nodding your head in response to what the speaker is saying and reflecting the speaker's emotion in your facial expressions. Nodding your head shows the speaker that you're listening. This encourages the speaker to continue. Reflecting the emotions shows the speaker that you're feeling what he or she is feeling and that you understand.

The above five techniques have been proven effective by various psychological researchers. By using these techniques, you can improve your listening skills. Try them and see how much of a difference they can make, not only on how well you listen but in how much your relationships with others improves.

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