

Name: _____

LISTENING SKILLS

For many of us, listening is the communication skill we use the most. Yet, many people listen poorly, and they rarely think to improve this important skill.

Poor listeners "hear" what's being said, but they rarely "listen" to the whole message. They get distracted by their own thoughts or by what's going on around them, and they formulate their responses before the person they're talking to has finished speaking. Because of this, they miss crucial information.

Good listeners, on the other hand, enjoy better relationships, because they fully understand what other people are saying. Their team members are also more productive, because they feel that they can discuss problems easily, and talk through solutions.

Preparing to Listen

Good preparation is essential for effective listening. Without it, it's hard to listen to people successfully.

Before you have an important conversation, remove anything that may distract you from it, so that you can focus, and so that you can show the other person that she has your full attention. Switch off your cell phone, turn off instant messaging and email alerts, put your work away, close your meeting room door, and do what you can to make sure that you won't be interrupted.

If you know that you won't be able to offer the other person your full attention – for example, if you're working on an urgent task – schedule a better time to speak. However, make sure that the other person knows that the conversation is important to you. Also, do what you can to make the other person feel at ease. Use open body language and a friendly tone.

If he indicates that he wants to speak about a sensitive subject, and if this is appropriate, remind him that the conversation is in confidence, and that he can be honest with you.

(Note: If you're a manager, there may be some things that you cannot keep confidential. If your conversation is beginning to encroach on these, make this clear to the other person.)

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Active Listening

When you listen actively, you not only make a conscious effort to hear the other person's words, but, more importantly, you try to understand their whole message.

To do this, learn how to read people's body language and tone, so that you can identify "hidden" nonverbal messages. Also, don't interrupt people, and don't allow yourself to become distracted by your own thoughts or opinions. Instead, focus completely on what the other person is saying. Nod or say "OK" occasionally to acknowledge that you're listening.

If you don't understand something, wait for people to finish what they're saying before you ask for clarification.

Above all, don't formulate a response until people have communicated their whole message, and avoid any judgment or criticism until it's your turn to speak. If you argue or "play devil's advocate" while you listen, you may discourage them from opening up to you.

Tip:

It can be difficult not to formulate a response while the other person is talking. This is because we typically think much faster than other people can speak, so our brains are often "whirring away" while they are talking. You'll need to concentrate hard to stay focused on the person who's speaking, and this can take a lot of effort.

Empathic Listening

When you demonstrate empathy, you recognize other people's emotions, and you do what you can to understand their perspectives. As such, it really helps you take active listening to the next level.

To listen empathically, put yourself "in other people's shoes," and try to see things from their point of view. Then, summarize what they say, in your own words, to show them that you understand their perspectives. Also, ask open questions to help people articulate themselves fully, and avoid using leading questions that "put words in people's mouths." This gives them the opportunity to add further detail, and to talk about their feelings.

Importantly, don't fear moments of silence when you listen. Instead, embrace pauses as a way to give people time to finish their point, and to allow them to reflect on what they have said.

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Key Points

When you have good listening skills, you not only "hear" what's being said, but you listen to the whole message as well. Because of this, you help others express themselves fully.

When you need to listen, make sure that you're prepared, and ensure that things in your environment will not distract you. Also, do what you can to put people at ease.

Next, use active listening techniques so that you give people your full attention, and so that you can understand the nonverbal elements of their message. Then, take your listening skills to the next level with empathic listening. When appropriate, embrace silence, and make an effort to see things from other people's perspectives.

Remember:

1. Make eye contact: look into eyes while listening
2. Show interest in the person: face person and lean forward
3. Give encouraging facial expressions: nod, smile, or look serious
4. Use correct voice tone: sound pleasant or serious
5. Keep an open posture: hands, arm, feet, and legs are open, not crossed

With a partner take turns listening... to the following questions:

1. Name your favorite celebrity.
2. Why do you like that person?
3. What does that person do?
4. Has that person influenced any of your decisions?
5. Ask them 2 questions

To test your mental acuity and listening, answer the following questions (partners are not to peek at the answers!) Switch after 5 questions.

1. Johnny's mother had three children. The first child was named April. The second child was named May. What was the third child's name?
2. A clerk at a butcher shop stands five feet ten inches tall and wears size 13 sneakers. What does he weigh?
3. Before Mt. Everest was discovered, what was the highest mountain in the world?
4. How much dirt is there in a hole that measures two feet by three feet by four feet?
5. What word in the English language is always spelled incorrectly?

Answers

1. Johnny.
2. Meat.
3. Mt. Everest. It just wasn't discovered yet.
4. There is no dirt in a hole.
5. Incorrectly (except when it is spelled incorrectly).

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1. Billie was born on December 28th, yet her birthday always falls in the summer. How is this possible?
2. In British Columbia you cannot take a picture of a man with a wooden leg. Why not?
3. If you were running a race and you passed the person in 2nd place, what place would you be in now?
4. Which is correct to say, "The yolk of the egg is white" or "The yolk of the egg are white?"
5. A farmer has five haystacks in one field and four haystacks in another. How many haystacks would he have if he combined them all in one field?

Answers

1. Billie lives in the southern hemisphere – Australia.
2. You can't take a picture with a wooden leg. You need a camera (or iPad or cell phone) to take a picture.
3. You would be in 2nd place. You passed the person in second place, not first.
4. Neither. Egg yolks are yellow.
5. One. If he combines all his haystacks, they all become one big stack.