

Improving Your Listening Skills

Effective communication is essential. While we often think of what we are saying or writing to others as communication, listening and understanding what others are telling us is just as critical. We have all had conversations that seemed to be very one-sided with the other person not truly listening, hearing or understanding what you are saying.

Here are some ideas to help make sure others don't view your their conversations with you as one-sided conversations.

1. Stay focused. Concentrate on what the person is saying and avoid the temptation of letting your mind drift onto other topics.
2. Don't interrupt. Let the person complete what they are saying. Interrupting or being too eager to jump in alienates the speaker and may prevent the speaker from fully expressing himself.
3. Show interest. An occasional nod, "uh-huh" or "go on" demonstrates that you are paying attention and are interested in learning what the person is saying. If the conversation is taking place in person, take notes.
4. Pay attention to your body language. Speakers get ongoing reactions from your appearance. Making eye contact (without staring), leaning slightly forward, nodding or stroking your chin conveys interest and improves your focus. Also remember that your eyes and facial expressions are very revealing.
5. Understand the whole message. Be sure that you truly understand what the speaker is saying. Avoid the natural tendency to jump to a conclusion before the speaker is finished.
6. Look for intent. Often a speaker will mention several items surrounding an issue early in a conversation. Try to understand why the speaker is having this conversation with you.
7. Use questions. Asking a question will show your attention, provide the speaker an opportunity to refine what he said and give you the opportunity to learn more about their interest.
8. Have empathy. Putting yourself into the speaker's shoes will help you understand the issue and prepare to respond more effectively.

9. Start your response effectively. After you have listened, try to summarize what you are responding to. Consider using the phrase – “Let me make sure I understand ...”

These simple listening aids can be used in almost any environment. Customers, employees, friends and family will all appreciate your conversations more if you listen better.