

Listen to Others

Listening is a hallmark of a good leader. How you demonstrate your understanding of what people say determines whether they feel heard. By taking the time to polish your listening skills, you build others' trust and confidence in you. You also will help people say what they mean.

Studies show that up to 80 percent of communication is nonverbal. So,

knowing how to read others and how to ask follow-up questions are important skills to develop. When you become known as someone who is a good listener, people will feel comfortable sharing their honest opinions with you and will perceive you as someone who is engaged, present, and concerned about the issue at hand.

In this chapter, we will cover the following areas:

- ▶ Evaluate your current listening skills
- ▶ Listen willingly to concerns expressed by others
- ▶ Listen attentively and with empathy to concerns expressed by others
- ▶ Exhibit appropriate nonverbal behavior to show receptivity to others' spoken messages
- ▶ Listen carefully to input
- ▶ Ask questions to clarify others' points of view
- ▶ Listen actively, reflect, and summarize others' comments to ensure understanding
- ▶ Interpret nonverbal messages
- ▶ Listen patiently to others without interrupting
- ▶ Listen well in a group

Evaluate your current listening skills

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As you coach, be a role model for effective listening.

Before you can effectively improve your listening skills, you need to evaluate them. Consider the following suggestions:

- ▶ Solicit feedback on your listening skills from coworkers, other leaders, friends, and your family. Choose people who will give you the unvarnished truth. Find out how effectively you listen to individuals both one-on-one and in group settings.
- ▶ Assess your typical behavior when you listen to people. Do you frequently:
 - ▷ Interrupt?
 - ▷ Show impatience?
 - ▷ Suggest solutions before the problem is fully explained?
 - ▷ Misinterpret what the person said, causing him or her to correct you?
 - ▷ Spend more time talking than listening?
 - ▷ Let your mind wander and miss what was said?
 - ▷ Think about your response instead of listening to the speaker?
- ▶ Review the feedback you received. What patterns do you see? List some of the reasons you don't listen to people. For example, perhaps you:
 - ▷ Don't have enough time for the conversation.
 - ▷ Don't feel like making the effort.
 - ▷ Think you know what the person will say.
 - ▷ Don't respect the person.
 - ▷ Don't like the person.
 - ▷ Believe the person's opinions are irrelevant.
 - ▷ Think the person is boring.
- ▶ Identify the top thing you could do to improve your listening skills. Treat it like any other project: pick your goal, make a plan, take action, measure your progress.

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- ▶ Ask two or three people to help you measure your progress. As you work on your listening skills, try not to become frustrated. Typically, it takes people much longer to recognize a change in your behavior than you would like. Remember that they can't measure your intention to listen better; they can only see your behavior.

Listen willingly to concerns expressed by others



Do you often learn about work concerns through a third party? Are you frequently surprised? Do people let you know what is happening on their projects, what they think, what their concerns are? If people don't communicate directly with you, perhaps it is because they think you are not interested, are unwilling to listen, or will become upset when you hear something you do not like. Consider the following suggestions:

- ▶ People need to know that you care about what's happening with them, their work, and their ideas and opinions. Ask people, and then listen when they talk with you. Listening is a key element that will help you create and sustain relationships.
- ▶ Listening is essential to engage employees. If you want your people to feel ownership for results and commitment to you and the organization, listening will help you foster this environment.
- ▶ Assess your attitude toward your employees and your willingness to make an effort to understand each of them. Regardless of how you feel about particular team members, recognize that each person has a part to play in your group or organization. Building a positive relationship will help you work together more effectively.
- ▶ If you are unwilling to listen to people, identify the reasons. For example, you may expect the worst, be uncertain of your ability to solve a problem, or be afraid that people will get emotional. Once you know why you don't want to listen, you can face the issue and listen despite your fears or concerns.
- ▶ Offer to serve as a sounding board. Sometimes people simply need to express their concerns or frustrations.

Help people understand that listening to a problem doesn't mean they are obligated to solve the problem.

Listen attentively and with empathy to concerns expressed by others

Empathy isn't about whether you feel the same way as the other person feels; it's about whether you care about how the person feels and respond appropriately. As you listen to concerns expressed by others, consider the following suggestions:

- ▶ Focus on the moment. You may have several things you would prefer to do other than listen, but your priority is to be present and pay attention to the person speaking.
- ▶ Listen carefully so you will understand what the person is saying, why it is important to him or her, and what he or she wants.
- ▶ Play an active role in the conversation. Ask pertinent questions that show you are listening attentively. This will encourage the person to continue and help you stay engaged in the conversation.
- ▶ Identify the person's main message. Also develop an understanding of how important the topic is to the person, and why.
- ▶ Notice the speaker's vocal pitch, intensity, and pace, and whether it differs from the person's usual way of speaking. The words may be neutral, but how they are spoken will give you clues about how important the topic is to the individual.
- ▶ To identify the speaker's feelings or how important the message is, listen for words like *happy*, *sad*, *worried*, *upset*, *annoyed*. Also watch for nonverbal clues to the speaker's mood. Use a reflective statement to show that you recognize the speaker's feelings.
- ▶ Refrain from problem solving, unless the person asks for ideas or suggestions. Often people need someone to listen more than they need an immediate solution.
- ▶ As you listen to people, try to put aside your own point of view and feelings. Otherwise you may find it difficult to truly listen and may start advocating your point of view.
- ▶ Identify people who are considered skilled listeners and watch them in action. Take note of how they convey interest and empathy. What are their nonverbal actions? What questions do they ask? How do people respond to them?

Explain that empathy involves understanding another person's point of view, not a deep emotional connection.

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Exhibit appropriate nonverbal behavior to show receptivity to others' spoken messages



Your nonverbal actions help establish the atmosphere for a conversation. They show whether you are interested, engaged, patient, bored, annoyed, dismissive. To exhibit appropriate nonverbal behavior, consider the following suggestions:

- ▶ Shift your attention to another person as the first step to being receptive. As you make a genuine effort to listen, your nonverbal actions will start to fall in line.
- ▶ Use a tone of voice that shows receptivity. A monotone makes you sound bored or disinterested. Use a range of pitches and emphasize words to show that you are engaged in what the person is saying.
- ▶ Stop doing other things when a person is talking, even if you are talking with him or her on the phone. Research shows that people can tell when someone is occupied during phone conversations. You cannot attend to the person and do something else at the same time.
- ▶ Use concrete nonverbal actions to indicate that you are receptive: put aside other work, smile, make eye contact, look interested, lean toward the person as you're speaking.
- ▶ Learn about nonverbal behaviors in other cultures by talking to experts or reading books. When you work with people from different cultures, use behaviors and gestures that show receptivity within their culture.

Have people practice using appropriate nonverbal behaviors during a coaching session.

Listen carefully to input



Anytime you work with people, you need to know how to listen to input. On the surface, it might seem easy—people talk, you listen. Unfortunately, it's not that simple. As a leader, you need to hear two things: what people are saying and what they're not saying. Consider the following suggestions:

- ▶ As a person talks, identify what he or she is saying. What is the main idea? What does the person think? Why? How important is it to the person? What are the facts? What is opinion?
- ▶ Ask questions and listen until the message is clear, you know what the person thinks, and why it is important to the person.
- ▶ If the viewpoint or message does not make sense, ask more questions and learn the context for the speaker's message. Figure out what background information you need in order to understand his or her viewpoint.
- ▶ Ask clarifying questions to confirm the main thoughts or ideas. This is especially useful when you are listening to people who include a lot of detail or who tend to ramble.
- ▶ Accept silence as part of a conversation. Even though it may make you uncomfortable, don't try to fill every moment with words. People need sufficient time to shape their thoughts. Waiting for people to speak will communicate your willingness to listen and give them a chance to express themselves more fully.
- ▶ Recognize that some people are reluctant to share their thoughts with leaders. If you want to hear from individuals, you're going to have to seek them out. You're also going to have to be especially vigilant about listening, and not pontificating about your own ideas.
- ▶ Watch your talking-to-listening ratio. Make sure you are listening more than 50 percent of the time, especially if you want to know what someone thinks.
- ▶ Be aware of any tendencies you have to tune out while a person is talking to you. This is a classic example of actions speak louder than words. Your actions will drown out what the person is saying and she or he will be convinced that you don't care.
- ▶ Recognize that some people may equate listening with agreement. They may not feel heard if you don't do what they say. State up front what you intend to do as a result of the conversation, for example, "I'm asking several people about this issue. Next week I'm going to make my decision, based in part on the input I receive."

Talk about whether people's questions elicit the type of information they need.

Ask questions to clarify others' points of view

▼ Asking effective questions is a skill. You need to learn what to ask, how to phrase your questions, and when to ask them so that people will be receptive, not defensive. Consider the following suggestions:

Point out when questions sound challenging instead of curious.

- ▶ Ask questions to understand, not challenge, the person. Be aware of your body language and your tone of voice—both reveal your attitudes toward the speaker and the topic. The person might get the impression that you're challenging him or her personally rather than ensuring understanding.
- ▶ Listen carefully to the answers you receive. You may find that the conversation goes in a direction you didn't expect, but the information you receive is richer.
- ▶ Learn how to use open-ended questions to clarify what people are saying: "Tell me about . . .," "Describe . . .," "What happened next?" Open-ended questions give the speaker a chance to give more information. Contrast this type of question with closed questions, which can be answered with a yes or no.
- ▶ Guard against asking too many questions at one time. If you pepper a person with questions, he or she may get frustrated, become defensive, feel like you're more interested in getting through your list of questions than in hearing the answers.
- ▶ Realize that all your questions may not be answered at one time. People may get overwhelmed or may not have all the answers. Know when to pull back and continue the conversation later.
- ▶ When you end a conversation, ask if you can follow up later with additional questions. Sometimes questions won't occur to you until you've had time to think.

Listen actively, reflect, and summarize others' comments to ensure understanding

▼ Paraphrasing, reflecting, and summarizing are three active-listening skills that can significantly improve your communication. These skills let the speaker know that you are listening and help you understand

what is being said. Active listening is much more effective than passive listening. Consider the following suggestions:

Paraphrasing: A paraphrase is a brief restatement of what another person said. It focuses on content: information, ideas, facts, opinions. Here is an example:

- ▷ *Person #1:* I can't figure out what to do with Sarah. She wants to be more involved with planning, but she doesn't understand the business context. Her ideas are interesting but they require changes that we don't have the time or money to explore.
- ▷ *Person #2:* You think her ideas are intriguing but they would be difficult to implement.

To develop your skill in paraphrasing:

- ▶ Make your paraphrase shorter than the original statement.
- ▶ Practice paraphrasing with a colleague who can give you informed feedback.

Reflecting: Reflective statements are short declarative statements that repeat the speaker's emotions or feelings. They help you create rapport, give the speaker a chance to vent his or her emotions, and allow the speaker to feel understood. Here is an example:

- ▷ *Person #1:* Since I've become a unit manager, I'm not sure how I'm doing. I don't know if I'm really in control. Sometimes I think I made the wrong decision in accepting this promotion.
- ▷ *Person #2:* You're worried that you may have made a mistake in taking the new position.

To create reflective statements:

- ▶ Listen for words that indicate feelings: excited, glad, concerned, depressed, irritated.
- ▶ Watch for nonverbal clues to the speaker's mood.

Summarizing: A summary statement briefly restates both content and feelings. It helps you identify the key elements of a situation, shows that you are making an effort to understand a person's point of view, and promotes further discussion.

Talk about how to put people at ease during a conversation. Individuals who are too intense or overly eager to listen may make others uncomfortable.

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For example: "As I understand it, you think the problem with the first-line supervisors is their perception that they do not have enough responsibility and authority."

To practice creating summary statements:

- ▶ During meetings, create summary statements on your copy of the agenda. (This will also help you remember what was said during the meeting.)
- ▶ Write summary statements as you listen to interviews, podcasts, or radio and television.

Interpret nonverbal messages

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Talk about reasons why words and nonverbal actions might be inconsistent.

If you listen only to someone's words, you're not going to get the whole message. Communication studies show that 70 to 80 percent of the meaning in a message is communicated nonverbally. Nonverbal actions fill in the details, provide clues about attitudes, and help you understand how someone really feels about a topic or issue. Consider the following suggestions:

- ▶ Pay attention to nonverbal behavior. For example, if someone looks tense but is speaking calmly, coolly, and objectively, it might help to say, "It looks like you're concerned about this situation." This will encourage the person to tell you what he or she is concerned about.
- ▶ Compare the person's words with his or her nonverbal actions. If the actions and words appear to contradict each other, this is a clue that something is going on under the surface.
- ▶ Pay attention to the person's vocal intonation. Listen for shifts in tone or emphasis. Also notice whether the person's level of enthusiasm matches his or her words.
- ▶ When appropriate, inquire about contradictory behavior. "You said it was okay that Jeff did not deliver his part of the project on time, but you sound very angry and frustrated." Speak quietly, without judgment, and in a tone of voice that indicates you are checking your understanding. This approach will allow the person to tell you whether you interpreted the behavior correctly.

- ▶ Be aware that nonverbal behaviors vary among cultures. Learn about the differences before you try to interpret the actions of a person from a different country or culture.

Listen patiently to others without interrupting

Interruptions shift the focus to the interrupter and stifle the flow of ideas. They also can be used to intimidate people, especially when they come from someone with more expertise or from a different level of the organization. As a leader, you need to understand how frequently you interrupt others and recognize the effect it has on your group. Consider the following suggestions:

- ▶ Become aware of how often you interrupt people. Over the next month, ask people to point out when you interrupt them. Keep track of each incident and analyze it by asking the following questions:
 - ▷ Whom did you interrupt?
 - ▷ What was the situation?
 - ▷ What was the topic?
 - ▷ Why did you interrupt?
 - ▷ How did the person react to the interruption?
- ▶ Look for patterns. Do you tend to interrupt only in certain situations, such as when you talk to a specific individual or about a certain issue? Raising your awareness level will help you catch yourself.
- ▶ Ask others if they consider your interruptions disruptive. Some interruptions may be helpful. They may add to the conversation by stimulating the other person to expand on his or her ideas. If it seems to contribute to the conversation, it may not be important that you stop.
- ▶ If your interruptions are disruptive, set realistic goals for changing your behavior. Avoid sweeping declarations like "I will never interrupt again." Instead, focus on one event at a time: "I will not interrupt during this meeting."

Identify situations in which people interrupt because of disinterest, time constraints, or other reasons.

Listen well in a group



It's not always easy to listen when you're in a group. Sometimes the topic does not involve you directly, or you believe people are going on and on about an issue that could be resolved easily. However, because much work is done in groups, you need to learn how to listen well and demonstrate that you are involved and are a team player. Consider the following suggestions:

- ▶ Resist doing other things during group discussions. Wait until the meeting is over before you do paperwork, have a side conversation, or check your messages.
- ▶ During the discussion, ask relevant questions. This will help you be a participant, not just an observer.
- ▶ Sit with the group. Don't automatically head for the back or the side of the room, where you can ignore the main activity.
- ▶ Challenge yourself to learn something from the speaker, even if the discussion does not pertain to you or your area of responsibility. For example, watch how the speaker tries to influence others, builds support for his or her position, or the way in which he or she uses visual aids.

Give people timely feedback on how well they listen.