

This is one of a series of occasional papers by The Dilenschneider Group to bring clients and friends a different perspective. We hope you find it of interest.

THE “LOST ART” OF LISTENING

We all do it, and most of us do it badly. We listen, but we often don’t hear.

How many times have our children or our spouses complained: “You’re not listening to me!” How many times has a friend or family member told us something important that we can’t remember hearing? How many times have we sat in a meeting and realized we weren’t absorbing anything of substance that was being said? How many times have we sat across from an employee or a boss and heard what we wanted to hear, not what was actually being said? How many times have we engaged in a dispute with an adversary and, instead of listening to what was being said, we were too busy thinking about the arguments we wanted to make? And how many times have we failed to listen because we were just too busy talking?

PEOPLE ARE TALKING MORE THAN LISTENING

The problem is pervasive in modern society. Many of us don't listen because we're too busy talking. There's an overwhelming cacophony of opinion and viewpoint in the age of talk radio and blogging, much of it nasty and ill-informed. Much of it is nothing more than shouting.

Because most people have gotten used to talking without listening to their adversaries, and even their allies, this tendency to transmit rather than receive has become the hallmark of the cyber-era.

In addition, social networking is all about talking and telling and much less about listening. Talk radio is about shouting people down and denying them the opportunity to state their opinions. And since the attitude that characterizes our narcissistic society is "no view is as enlightened and informed as my view," we don't even bother to consider what others have to say.

That the ability to listen has lagged so in this digital age, when the channels of communication have multiplied, seems especially ironic and counter-intuitive.

CHANGE YOUR LIFE

The "art" of listening is just that—an art form that takes practice to perfect. Mastering it costs nothing, but it can change your life for the better and make the people around you like and respect you even more.

WHY DO WE NEED TO LISTEN WELL?

When we listen, we communicate. How we listen determines how well we communicate. If we listen well and honestly, we become part of a creative dialogue that invigorates, challenges, renews, excites and may contribute to an exchange of ideas that benefits everyone.

If we don't listen well, we will not grow or learn or interact with others in a way that is rewarding to everyone. Not to listen well is to be selfish because we shut ourselves off from others. It is not necessarily a form of arrogance, but it may well be interpreted that way. People will find themselves not wanting to be around the inattentive, mind-wandering listener. In fact, people flock more readily to the good listener than to the self-involved, brilliant declaimer, who mainly wants to hear himself, or herself, be witty or smart or sarcastic or funny.

Just as we sometimes need to talk out our problems, having someone truly listen to us may make us feel better about life in general. We may not even be looking for advice or counsel as much as we are looking for validation of who we are. Being listened to is reaffirming and comforting. And to listen—truly listen—is often the best form of learning about life or helping to solve a problem, either at work or in a personal relationship.

HOW DO WE LEARN TO LISTEN?

Many of the most successful people in the world—whether in business, politics, the arts, or social relations—have been good listeners. It is a skill that is rarely instinctive, but it can be learned. What follows are some basic rules that anyone can master:

At the very outset, becoming a good listener requires *empathy*, which dictionaries define as “identification with, or vicarious experiencing of, the feelings, thoughts, or attitudes of another.”

When President Obama stated that he wanted an “empathetic” person on the Supreme Court, many did not understand what he was referring to. Some feared he wanted an emotional “touchy-feely” person, who might be too soft on criminals. But, as he explained, he wanted someone who could put himself/herself in another’s shoes to understand that the law is a powerful force that dramatically affects people’s lives. To listen well, you must want to hear what the other person is telling you.

Just as one should be empathetic, *one should not be preoccupied*. Giving someone your undivided attention is not only plain old good manners, it’s essential to becoming a good listener.

Sometimes you may be just too tired or worried to be a good listener. If so, try to set another time for the conversation. If that is not possible, tell yourself sternly that you have to listen and can deal with your own problems later.

AVOID PASSING JUDGMENT

Above all, *avoid being judgmental*. That is difficult in a society, where people are condemned ideologically every day by partisans.

We are polarized in so many ways. Democrats versus Republicans. Fundamentalists versus atheists. The Haves versus the Have-nots.

A person who is speaking from the heart, whether about an intellectual or emotional issue, wants to be heard. Such persons do not want to encounter an immediate torrent of abuse or second-guessing or admonitions. To be sure, that may come later! But a major duty of the listener is to be open-minded and, initially, reserve judgment.

By all means, express what you think or feel, but *avoid being argumentative or aggressively competitive*. There is a difference. There are some of us (sometimes, many of us) who like to engage in intellectual gamesmanship. If someone says the sky is blue, the argumentative person immediately insists it is gray and may never see that he, or she, has turned off the conversational spigot.

A huge mistake too many of us make is to be so eager to make one's point, we stop listening as we search for a way to grab the conversation.

BE PATIENT

To be a good listener, one must also exercise restraint—*be patient and do not interrupt*. Sometimes, persons who are talking cannot approach what they really want to say in a direct way. It may be a frustrating experience, but the relaxed, attentive listener who patiently waits for the point, or is even gently encouraging, may be the one who truly hears the message. The speaker will be grateful and happy that his, or her, words were heard and understood.

PAY ATTENTION

Another critical step is to *pay attention and not be distracted*. Serious conversation is not easy on a noisy street or a noisy room. You may have to suggest moving elsewhere to a quieter location.

ASK

Misinterpretation of what someone else may be saying is yet another considerable barrier to becoming a good listener. Never hesitate to ask for clarification, or to restate what you've heard in your own words, to make certain you heard what was intended. In short, don't put words in another person's mouth. If you are confused or unsure of what is being said, ask about it. Done properly, this will tell that other person you are truly listening and want to understand the points being made.

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ISTENING AT DIFFERENT LEVELS

Also, always *be alert to coded messages*. Sometimes, what you are being told is communicated less in words than in sighs, pauses, laughs, asides, gestures, tears or facial expressions. Be aware of the total range of human communication.

No guide to the art of good listening would be complete without some reference to *body language*. Leaning slightly forward implies both attention and interest as does the occasional nod. Sitting or standing with your arms across your chest gives the impression that you are not interested or are being critical. Frowning or smiling inappropriately may send the signal that you are not really listening.

Finally, and not insignificantly, do not assume that *you must solve all problems*. Often, those who are speaking do not want you to have all the answers or provide a blueprint for their lives. Sometimes, just the experience of sharing a problem or an experience or a feeling is all that is needed to create joy or serenity or even the energy and will to get on with the day.

“We do not believe in ourselves until
someone reveals that deep inside us
something is valuable, worth listening to,
worthy of our trust, sacred to our touch.
Once we believe in ourselves we can risk
curiosity, wonder, spontaneous delight or
any experience that reveals
the human spirit.”

– *E. E. Cummings*
(*American poet 1894-1962*)

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