

## Artful Listening

*by Jon Craighead*

*“Most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply.”* Stephen R. Covey

Most of us are more capable speakers than listeners. Effective listening is often described as an ability to receive and interpret spoken messages in the communication process. Without the ability to listen effectively, important messages are easily misunderstood, communication breakdowns occur, and the speaker of the message can become frustrated or disempowered. Effective communication requires the listener to temporarily suspend assessment and distractions until the speaker is finished, then respond as requested or request clarity. Ineffectual listening marginalizes the speaker’s intention to deliver a message. It is virtually impossible to receive a communication adequately until the message is completely delivered. It is a gracious act to hear the entire message before responding; not doing so often results in misunderstanding.

*Listening is not the same as hearing.* Hearing refers to the sounds that you hear, whereas listening requires more than that – it requires focus. Listening means paying attention not only to the story, but to how it is told, the use of language and voice, and how the other person uses his or her body. In other words, it means being aware of both verbal and non-verbal messaging. Our ability to listen effectively depends on the degree to which we perceive and understand the impacts of these intricacies of communication. Effective communication is a skill that supports positive and successful results.

In the business environment, listening is critically important. Many knowledgeable employers provide listening skills training for their employees. This is provided because successful leaders realize the vital importance of competent listening. This is not surprising when you consider that effective listening talent can lead to better customer satisfaction, greater productivity with fewer mistakes, less rework, and cost overruns. Unquestionably, expert listening and the effective sharing of critical information ultimately leads to more creative and profitable work productivity.

Listening skills also bring multiple benefits in our personal lives, our personal relationships with family and friends. Skilful listening especially benefits our children by improving self-esteem, confidence and general well-being, resulting in greater success in academic work.

Critical elements for being an effective listener are:

- (1) Stop talking and focus on the speaker. Be prepared to listen; as much as possible remove all the distractions you can. If this not possible, reschedule a time when you can bring your full attention to the conversation.
- (2) If this is still impossible, let the speaker know your current barriers so that you can mutually work through them.
- (3) Bring a level empathy to the conversation. Put yourself in the speaker's position.
- (4) Be patient. Allow the speaker to complete the communication before you respond; don't interrupt.
- (5) To the best of your ability, suspend your agreement/disagreement of the conversation until it's delivered. Look for agreement.

Communication mastery is a dance in partnership. Listening expertise, for most of us, is not natural and requires practice as does any other talent skill. The speaker cannot be successful unless you the listener bring a level of graciousness and intention to the conversation. This is of irrefutable importance in skilful communication. Successful communication requires a partnership between the speaker and listener.

There is nothing more frustrating or demeaning than speaking to someone who is not listening to you. Good listening reinforces and provides many great benefits, such as being known and respected both on a personal, professional, and social basis. Experts agree that the simple act of listening to another is a momentous and generous gift. It has further been pointed out that the speaker is often under duress to get their point delivered and often experiences emotional and physical effects, such as an increase in blood pressure. Cooperative listening can offset such stress and relieve the tension the speaker is experiencing. One could conclude that effective listening is a gift which facilitates a speaker's accomplishment. Perhaps the most graciousness thing we can share with each other is giving them our undivided attention.

Finally, to assure a successful communication one must consciously look for the value in any conversation. Regardless of agreement/disagreement, in doing so you might be pleasantly surprised to learn something very beneficial.