

Listening: A Forgotten Skill

by Jon Craighead

The most basic and powerful way to connect to another person is to listen. Just listen. Perhaps the most important thing we ever give each other is our attention. -Rachel Naomi Remen

In my previous article I focused on speaking to each other. This article will focus on the skill of listening to each other. A good definition of listening is giving one's attention to a sound or to another's speaking. In addition to mastering the skill of listening for the sake of politeness, it also keeps you engaged in the game of life. In the business environment speaking and listening skills are undeniably consequential for achievement. Most of us have minds that are so over loaded with data and so many things to do we don't take time to really listen to each other. Additionally, many of us think we listen much better than we actually do. Listening is a key dimension of successful relationships. Nothing is more demoralizing than the feeling of not being heard. When poor listening exists, messages are easily misunderstood; breakdowns occur creating irritation, frustration, and undesirable outcomes.

Listening is not the same as hearing. Hearing refers to sounds that you hear; conversely listening requires more than that – it requires focus. The difference is a *creative intention* to hear what is being said. It's like generating a partnership with the speaker to produce an intended outcome together. Such intent requires that you take into consideration the many dimensions of the speaker's presentation (whether it is spoken or written). This includes the language used, the story being told, voice modulation, and finding the underlying intent that is being expressed both verbally or nonverbally. Your ability to listen is sourced by your commitment to understand. In business, this process often determines the difference between success or failure. Good listening skills have benefits in our personal lives as well. These benefits include friends and social networks, academic achievement, empowering others, and a sense of overall social wellbeing.

In their book [Interplay: The Process of Interpersonal Communication](#), professorial colleagues Ronald B. Adler, Lawrence B. Rosenfeld, and Russell F. Proctor propose ten principles for listening:

1. Stop Talking. If we were supposed to talk more than listen we would have two tongues and one ear.

2. Prepare to listen. Focus on the speaker; put other things out of mind.
3. Put the speaker at ease. Help the speaker to feel free to speak.
4. Remove distractions. Focus on what is being said.
5. Empathize. Try to understand the other person's point of view.
6. Be patient. A pause even a long pause does not mean the speaker has finished.
7. Avoid Personal Prejudice. Try to be impartial, don't be irritated, and don't let personal habits or mannerisms distract you from the topic.
8. Listen to tone. Volume and tone add to what someone is saying.
9. Listen for ideas – not just words. You need to get the whole picture, not just isolated bits and pieces.
10. Wait and watch for non-verbal communication. Gestures, facial expressions, and eye movement can all be important.

When I apply these principles to myself, I realize that among my own shortcomings I often interrupt the speaker with my assessments, only to find that if I had given the speaker time to finish his or her thoughts, my disruptive questions would have been addressed. Another foible is that I think that I will forget my point if I don't speak. This often results in a redirection of the intent of the speaker, causing not only a loss for me, but for others as well. I therefore miss the message offered, which was much more valuable than what I had to say. I share this because I have been trained to listen. Listening is never handled. Honing your listening skills is always in demand and needed.

Listening is a skill that takes practice like any other skill. While the primary responsibility of getting the message across lies with the speaker, without your listening participation you burden the speaker and create missed opportunities. Speaking and listening are like dancing; there is one who leads and one who follows the leader. The dance doesn't happen until they both connect to the music and each other.