

Improving Your Listening Skills

While there are no hard and fast rules for good listening, there are some general guidelines that can help you improve your listening skills.

Develop Listening Responses Nodding your head occasionally, remarking, "I see...I understand," and so on indicate that you are paying attention and are actively involved in the conversation. Not only *look* accepting of what is being said, *be* accepting.

Learn How to Phrase Your Questions Questions can be OPEN or CLOSED. Closed questions tend to elicit a "yes" or "no" response and yield a minimum of information. When listening to an employee complain about the department's work schedule, a manager may ask, "Do you think the schedule is made for your benefit?" Open questions encourage more productive responses and will not, as a rule, put the other person on the defensive. The same manager could ask, "How would you arrange the schedule if it were up to you?"

Avoid Making Value Judgements A critical listener can bring a conversation to a quick end. Good listening means creating an atmosphere of trust, mutual respect, and warmth. Remember the value of empathetic listening.

Don't Anticipate Resist the temptation to finish a speaker's sentences or jump to conclusions when you've heard part of an argument or discussion. Most of the time your guess will be wrong. Give the speaker time to find the right words.

Ask for Clarification; Restate Important Points Make sure you understand the terms the other person is using. Restate what they've said in your own words so you understand the points as the speaker intended. Don't assume you know what they mean.

Be Ready to Give Feedback When asked, give feedback as soon as you can. Be as specific as possible and speak from an "I" framework. Instead of saying, "Your thinking seems fuzzy here," pinpoint what you think can be changed or needs to be done. "I feel an important step has been overlooked. I would suggest checking with inventory before planning that large of an order."

Five Bad Listening Habits

Why do people hear so little of what is said to them? Cited here are five of the most common habits people develop.

Faking Attention Someone is talking and you try to look interested, but your mind keeps wandering. All it takes is one pointed question and you're caught. Listening takes energy, and the expenditure of that energy means you look alert and alive to what is being said.

Listening too Fast This habit can result in a great waste of time. For example, a customer asks a sales clerk for a size ten blouse in white. The clerk quickly pulls one off the rack only to find that the customer wanted long sleeves and--but the clerk is back at the rack again. This time when she returns, she discovers the customer wanted lace on the collar and cuffs. Make sure you have all the information you need before you act.

Avoiding Difficult Listening If someone is talking about a complex or difficult subject, some people may "turn off" and miss what is said. Unfortunately this habit tends to reinforce poor listening abilities. Rather than ask questions and keep an open mind, people turn to something easier. On the job, however, you may be required to follow complex instructions, listen to the solution to a difficult problem, or have a complicated procedure explained to you. If you have not developed the capacity to listen carefully, you will know as little when the speaker finishes as when he or she began.

Criticizing Delivery or Appearance You may take one look at how a speaker is dressed or hear what their voice sounds like and stop listening. Physical characteristics can tell you a great deal about people but should not be an excuse for refusing to listen to them.

Becoming Easily Distracted You are trying to listen to the speaker, but traffic sounds from outside attract your attention. You hear a phone ring in the background and wonder who is answering it. While you may catch the general drift of what the speaker says, you also miss several crucial points. As a listener you can either remove the distractions or develop the ability to shut out sights and sounds that take your attention away from the speaker's words.