



Effective Listening Skills for Personal Growth

By Jerry Lopper

The Importance of Good Listening Skills

The skill of listening is often unappreciated because many believe that listening is a passive activity that doesn't permit people to actively demonstrate their knowledge. Yet effective listening is one of the more powerful factors of attractiveness to others and a significant contributor to improving relationships.

Why spend a week of personal development on sharpening listening skills? When you become an effective listener people will see you as a great communicator. They'll love to be around you because you'll make them feel important.

Syndicated Columnist Doug Larson noted, "Wisdom is the reward you get for a lifetime of listening when you'd have preferred to talk." Though people love to talk about themselves, what they've recently accomplished, and their opinions on current events, more personal growth occurs when listening.

People seldom learn by talking. Greater learning and personal growth occurs during effective listening. The Greek philosopher Epictetus commented on the importance of listening by observing, saying, "We have two ears and one mouth so that we can listen twice as much as we speak." Effective listening is not only a skill, it's a discipline that's achieved when adding patience and concentration to the act of hearing.

Benefits of Effective Listening Skills

Learning the skill of effective listening benefits personal growth and development in the following ways:

- *Effective Communication* – Clear and concise transmission of information is an important component of effective human interaction. Though the onus is often placed on presenting clear and concise written or spoken directions, the listener also bears a responsibility to hear and understand messages.
- *Fewer Misunderstandings* – Regardless of the clarity of written or spoken messages, the effective listener can prevent misunderstandings and salvage what otherwise might be a miscommunication by practicing active listening skills.
- *Improved Relationships* – Relationships are damaged by misunderstandings that can lead to unsatisfactory business transactions as well as hurt feelings in personal relationships. Excellent listening practices tell others that they are important, special, and what they have to say is valued. That is very attractive and contributes to strong relationships.
- *Personal Growth* – A person learns and grows by listening and understanding other viewpoints, differing ideas, and exploring conflicting viewpoints. Learning the skill of active and effective listening not only adds a tool to the personal development portfolio, but equips you to continue growing with tools for exploring new ideas.

Steps for Effective Listening

The skill of effective listening can be easily learned by practicing these steps:

- *Intend to Listen* – Make listening the goal of a conversation. Hearing comes naturally. Listening is an active skill that involves full engagement of the listener's concentration.
- *Be Patient* – Be mindful of the inclination to debate a point or add clarification. Resist the urge to jump in and take over a conversation. Instead, file these thoughts away to bring up at an appropriate time.
- *Maintain Eye Contact* – Eye contact shows the speaker that you are engaged in the conversation.
- *Identify Emotions* – Be watchful for clues to the emotions behind the speaker's words. Correctly acknowledging a speaker's emotion will show that you understand what is being communicated while not necessarily agreeing or disagreeing.
- *Acknowledge the Speaker* – Let the speaker know you're following her with nods, uh-huh's, and short phrases that echo without directly repeating.
- *Show Interest* – In addition to eye contact, display body language signifying your full engagement by leaning forward and keeping your body posture open.
- *What's Missing* – Sometimes what's missing conveys more information than what is being said. Be mindful of words and emotion that are missing or inconsistent. When appropriate, craft a gentle question to probe these areas.

Common Listening Mistakes

Marshall Goldsmith, author of *What Got You Here Won't Get You There*, summarizes several common communication mistakes which damage relationships. Among these are:

- *Interruptions* – Interrupting is rude and implies that your thoughts are more important than the speaker's. If you have the habit of frequently interrupting others, you've been unwittingly damaging relationships. Breaking this habit will provide an opportunity for valuable personal growth.
- *Finishing Sentences* – Though many couples who have been together for a long time will accurately finish one another's sentences, be cautious in doing this. While correctly finishing a sentence just the way the speaker would have can be a sign you understand her thoughts, if you are mistaken, it can have the opposite effect.
- *One-ups-manship* – The habit of topping another person's story with your own is demeaning and relegates the speaker's story to something less important.
- *The Last Word*. If you always have the last word with anything other than "thank you," you're practicing a form of one-ups-manship.
- *It Won't Work* – Dashing someone's excitement about an idea by pointing out all the reasons it won't work is a particularly harsh form of one-ups-manship.
- *Dominating Conversations* – A person who dominates conversations probably commits all of the above mistakes and is not listening at all. Effective communication is a two-way street, speaking clearly and concisely as well as listening actively and completely.

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