

Shhh! Listen, Don't Just Hear

**by Lillian D. Bjorseth, president
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When my oldest son wasn't paying attention to an assignment in elementary school, his teacher asked him if he had trouble hearing. "No ma'am," he answered, "I have trouble listening."

My son was only 7 years old at the time, and he had no idea he had zeroed in on one of the business world's biggest challenges:

Most of us hear okay; however, very few of us listen well.

The irony is that listening is the most used communication skill and the least taught. It is, by far, the most valuable communication skill for management and employees alike.

Hearing is the first in a six-step hierarchical listening process i.e., all six must be done for the message to be received the way the sender wants it to be. "Hearing" means only that your ears are absorbing sound waves.

Listening, on the other hand, also involves interpreting, evaluating, understanding, responding and remembering! That's a lot to keep in mind when irate customers are loudly telling you what went wrong, you're participating in yet another meeting (when you would rather be returning phone calls or e-mails), or you're listening to a boring, at least to you, speaker.

The following suggestions can help you listen better:

Control your urge to speak

Remember the old folk saying:

*God gave us two ears and one mouth so we could
listen twice as much as we talk.*

Zig Ziglar put it another way when he said that when you talk, you say something you already know, and when you listen, you find out what someone else knows. I add to that "what someone else needs and wants." How can we possibly make a sale or provide top-quality customer service when we don't know what the customer wants and needs?

Be receptive

Be objective and willing to hear what someone else has to say. Don't approach listening as though someone is forcing you to change your views. Rather, be objective and willing to listen to new information ... and to learn!

*Our mind and a parachute have something in common:
they only work when open.*

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Guard against preconceived notions based on race, sex, age or accent. They can quickly close your parachute.

Empathize

Strive to understand, as though you were in the person's shoes. Listen to what people are actually saying, not to what you think they should be saying. Listen to the words and the vocal tone and watch the body language, if you are having a face-to-face conversation. To be an effective listener, you have to see the world through another's eyes, to take the time to identify how they are thinking and why. Remember the old Indian saying:

“Don't judge my footsteps until you have walked in my moccasins.”

Take notes

Write down what people are saying as they say it to make sure you capture the right words. This is especially helpful if you are a visual learner and need notes to reinforce your memory. Also, record the speaker's tone and body language to refine your interpretation as you review your notes.

Note taking also helps you remember key points of a phone conversation, especially, when you need to prepare a proposal without a face-to-face meeting.

Eliminate distractions

Very few people, if any, can effectively do two things at one time. While on the phone or talking to an employee, don't read materials on your desk, daydream or think about what is going on outside your window. Put on blinders and concentrate on the task at hand!

Consider a neutral area like a conference room or cafeteria rather than your power office. If you choose to stay in your office, come out from behind your imposing desk (and the work lying on it) and sit along side the other person.

And, two suggestions for at home: Turn off the radio or television, put down the newspaper and look at the person with whom you are talking. Move away from the sink, turn around and look at your children when they want to have those important end-of-day conversations. They will benefit much more from your attention than will the carrots you are grating.

Have you “listened” to what you read or did you just “hear” it? You may wish to ponder the advice my bartender friend gives new hires:

Listen to your customers. Listen. It's the quickest way to establish loyalty. They want you to know more about them then they want to know about you. That's why they come here.

What do your employees or customers want you to know about them? You have the answers ... if you listened!

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Lillian D. Bjorseth is known nationally for her infectious enthusiasm and her practical, insightful and pertinent content that you can apply on the spot and throughout your life. Lillian's a Lisle-IL based people-skills speaker, trainer and author of *Nothing Happens Until We Communicate* audiotope and workbook series that includes *Shhh! Listen, Don't Just Hear*. A top graduate of the University of Missouri School of Journalism, she's also a member of National Speakers Association. Her Fortune 100 experience includes more than 10 years at AT&T where she trained top executives in media and communication skills. Contact her at lillian@duoforce.com, www.duoforce.com, or 630-983-5308.

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