

# Active Listening Skills Pay Dividends

By Virginia Reeves

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Listening skills are of great importance. When people fail to hear and understand each other, the result can be costly. Here's some tips to help you be a better listener.

Such things as numbers, dates, places and names are easy to confuse. Misunderstanding, or just not comprehending the parameters and details of a project, can cause short-term and long-term problems. When mistakes are compounded, the resulting cost and inefficiency in communication becomes serious. Make notes and have the details confirmed.

Poor listening can lead to more paperwork because people fear not getting their point across in the manner they intended. Relying on memos and reports to share information takes away the easy give-and-take of oral communication. Questions can't be asked immediately to clarify a point. Also, the earnestness, sincerity and belief in the topic is missed when you are unable to hear the voice and view body language. Save paper, ink and time and talk to people; ideally face to face, but the telephone works well too.

People at all levels of any organization should feel free to talk to one another. Unfortunately, we all know that this too often does not happen. Failure to discuss a variety of problems, concerns, new ideas and proposals, suggestions for improvements, or other issues can lead to errors, more difficulty in accomplishing a task and frustration.

Active listening is the key to learning and encouraging others to talk with you. Here are some tips to stay involved in whatever you are listening to:

- \* Listen for key words and phrases that highlight the main point.

People who use analogies or metaphors are working to get you to notice the point in another way; pay attention.

- \* Don't interrupt unless you need to ask a question to verify a statement or concept. When appropriate, offer your observations.

- \* Use an active posture by leaning forward, nodding your head, making encouraging or acknowledging sounds and looking at the speaker.

- \* Listen between the lines and watch body language.

- \* Note any emotional content and presentation but don't let it sway you unnecessarily. Keep your own biases and beliefs in check while listening.

- \* Try not to pass judgment while the other person is talking; reserve it until they are done speaking (but keep it to yourself unless requested to share it).

- \* Do your best to keep your mind involved with the speaker rather than thinking about other things
- \* Take notes for yourself and to demonstrate to the other person that you care.

Listening takes discipline. The benefits include:

- \* increased respect from others as you gain a reputation for paying attention.
- \* becoming a better leader because you have grasped the major and minor point of the discussion
- \* when you talk, others will be more willing to open their minds to what you have to say.

Good listening habits will bring many positive dividends to everyday encounters as well as to long-term successes. Do your best to honor those who are speaking and the rewards will be presented to the listener, the speaker, and to all others affected by the communication.

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