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Listening: An essential skill

"Auntie Yang is not hard of hearing. She is hard of listening." — Amy Tan, *"The Joy Luck Club"*

Listening is probably the most important and yet the most neglected dimension of communication. How often have you heard these statements:

- "You're not listening to me."
- "Why don't you let me finish what I'm saying?"
- "If you'll only let me, I'll tell you."
- "I may as well be talking to a brick wall!"
- "You just don't understand."
- "But that's not what I said."

If you can relate, perhaps it's true you're not listening.

Listening is the art of connecting with another person so you fully understand what they are saying and feeling. It is an essential skill needed in communicating with coworkers, leading others and maintaining interpersonal relationships in all aspects of our lives.

Based on research by Ronald B. Adler, Lawrence B. Rosenfeld and Russell F. Proctor II in their 2001 book, *"Interplay: The Process of Interpersonal Communication,"* adults spend an average of 70 percent of their time engaged in some sort of communication. Of this, an average of 45 percent is spent listening compared to 30-percent speaking, 16-percent reading and 9-percent writing. In view of all the listening we do, you would think we'd be better at it. So, what can you do?

Read ahead for six basic principles of listening that will enable you to become a better communicator.

- **Pay attention** — This principle enables you to focus. Give the speaker your undivided attention. Stop what you're doing. Maintain good eye contact. Avoid mentally preparing your response.

- **Be alert to nonverbal cues** — Although it is critical to listen to what is being said, it is equally important to understand what is not being said. For example, while a person's verbal message may convey honesty and conviction, his/her gestures, facial expressions and tone of voice may convey doubt.

- **Listen to tone, pitch and volume** — Generally, everyone uses tone, pitch and volume of voice in various situations. Pay attention and let these factors help you to understand the emphasis of what is being said.

- **Be impartial** — Try to stay away from becoming irritated and letting the person's speaking habits, mannerisms or style of delivery distract you. Focus instead on what is really being said.

- **Avoid interrupting/finishing others' sentences** — Interrupting and finishing another's statement can be perceived as disrespectful and suggests you want to do all the talking instead of listening. Be patient. Allow time for the speaker to convey ideas and meaning.

- **Provide feedback** — Ask questions, get confirmation and clarification. Examples such as the following can help enhance understanding —

"sounds like you're saying ...," "let me make sure I understand ...," "let me see if I'm with you, you ...," and "if I heard you correctly, you ...".

Herbert G. Lingren wrote, "I speak because I know my needs/I speak with hesitation because I know not yours/My words come from my life's experiences/Your understanding comes from yours/Because of this, what I say/And what you hear, may not be the same/So, if you will listen carefully/Not only with your ears/But with your eyes and with your heart/Maybe somehow, we can communicate."

Effective listening can be the key to solving problems and reducing conflict, misunderstanding and unpleasantness, as well as enhancing your overall interpersonal communication. Additionally, the payoffs for improving your active listening skills are enormous. You will have fewer communication glitches, your relationships will improve, productivity and morale will increase in your organization, and you will be able to break through those barriers of poor listening to become a more effective and successful communicator professionally as well as personally.

I leave you with a quote that has always resonated with me: "One of the most sincere forms of respect is actually listening to what another has to say." — Bryant McGill, bestselling author, speaker and activist.

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