

Intentional Listening — It's an Advanced Skill!

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If you think you are a good listener, think again. Study after study confirms that most people listen effectively only 25% of the time. Instead of listening, they are focused on responding.

What is often overlooked is that there are three levels of listening. At the very basic level, there is **passive** listening — where we only loosely pay attention to what the other person is saying. It is the type of listening one does while multi-tasking such as when doing e-mail and talking on the phone. The second type is **evaluative**. This is the kind of listening that most of us regularly do when with a customer or at a meeting. We determine whether something is right or wrong, and we respond accordingly. The most sophisticated level of listening is **intentional** where we listen with our mind, our heart and our ears. It is demanding and draining. It takes all of our attention. It is also a very advanced skill, and one that is necessary for anyone wanting to be perceived as a trusted advisor.

There are five things that intentional listeners must master.

First, the listener must internally commit to being fully attentive. He must be willing to set aside his own needs. Most of us come to the table with our own agenda, with a message we want the other person to hear. Intentional listeners willingly commit to allow the conversation to move in the direction the other person determines and only bring their message to the forefront if it offers insight or a solution. They never give the impression they are trying to sell anything.

Because of their commitment to be fully present, intentional listeners do not argue, defend, or put down, no matter what they hear. They refrain from

taking things personally, even if attacked. They choose to focus on what the other person needs or wants, instead of their own needs. They also demonstrate through their body language that they are paying attention. They nod, look the person in the eye, and even move closer to verbally and visually show they are following the topic.

Secondly, intentional listeners purposefully paraphrase. They want to be sure that they have accurately heard what has been said. Purposeful paraphrasing is much more than simply parroting back the speaker's actual words. It involves reading between the lines for what has actually been said, as well as what has been intended—the message behind the message. It is very specific. If the speaker has not been correct, the person will correct him. Whether correct or almost correct, the individual will applaud the person's attempt to be accurate.

Thirdly, intentional listeners empathize with encouragement. When they hear an emotion, they identify what they hear, and again very specifically. They take responsibility for any wrong that may have been incurred by them or their organization. They agree with the individual's point of view and never follow it with a "But" statement since it would negate what they just said. "Ok" or "Yes" are never used as empathic responses. Instead, they might say a statement such as, "I can see why you would worry about that because I know you are very concerned about accessing information quickly in order to respond to your customers correctly."

Next, intentional listeners want to be correct. They want to understand the problem in its entirety so they ask questions that might give them a better perspective, always cautious to avoid "grilling" the person. When asking their questions, they sometimes preface their statements with, "I am concerned that I am not seeing this correctly. Can you tell me more about...?"

Finally, intentional listeners offer insightful comments with a "tag and add" approach. Any idea or suggestion is linked to statements the speaker himself said earlier. By doing so, it seems

Continued on page 2

as if the person is just adding to what has already been discussed, rather than pushing his own point.

Being an intentional listener is hard work and time-consuming. It may take two minutes or two hours to hear what a person is truly saying. Intentional listening may necessitate doing these same things over and over until the individual actually feels heard. The process cannot be rushed. However, the payoff is that we are perceived in the manner we desire, as a trusted advisor.

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