

The lost art of listening

(The first in a series of life-skills articles geared toward enhancing career and social performance in a digitalized age)

by Bob Rodgers

How many times have you been at a business lunch or in a meeting and set your digital device on “silent,” so as “not to disturb your co-workers?” Yeah, right! What you’re actually doing is trying to be someone who’s everywhere at once, so as not to miss a beat of your jam-packed life.



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Today’s technology

has helped us to perform many tasks at once, but at what cost? Poor communication skills on the part of management are the number one reason for employee dissatisfaction and the resultant turnover. People, in general, want to feel respected. One of the greatest gifts that a manager can offer his workers is uninterrupted, active listening, as the art of listening has become lost in today’s workplace.

Active listening is a state of mind that

involves paying full and careful attention to the person who is speaking; It’s a willingness and an ability to hear and to understand and most of all, to value to the speaker. In our digital era, active listening has become a skill that we all need to relearn and master.

It is helpful to think of active listening as an exchange between two people, with one person talking and the other actively listening. The keys to active listening are:

paying attention, holding judgment, and reflecting, clarifying, summarizing and sharing what has been said by the speaker. These skillsets are not weighted in importance, nor are they mutually exclusive. In one conversation, summarizing may take much effort, while in another, it may seem quick and effortless.

Paying attention while actively listening – to your own behavior and that of the speaker – helps to create the setting for a productive dialogue. Pay attention to your own frame of mind and body language for optimal effectiveness as well as to the other person’s nonverbal and verbal behavior in order to make sense of non-verbal cues.

Holding judgment helps you to understand how the other person sees the world by being open to new ideas, new possibilities and new perspectives. Even when tensions run high, practice empathy, indicate your open mind with body language and verbal prompts, acknowledge your differences and most of all, be patient.

Reflecting the other person’s information, perspective and feelings by saying something along the lines of, “So, as I understand what you’re saying ...” indicates that you hear and understand what is being said. Use this paraphrasing to confirm your understanding and don’t assume that you understood correctly or that the other person knows that you’ve heard.

Clarifying is double-checking on issues that might be unclear or ambiguous. Use questions to help.

Summarizing helps to identify key themes and solidifies your understanding of the person’s points of view. It also helps both parties to be clear on mutual responsibilities and follow up.

By now, you should have a good understanding of the other person’s points and feelings, and it’s time for sharing - introducing your own feelings, thoughts, suggestions and addressing any personal issues or concerns.

Active listening is not an optional component of leadership nor is it a nice way to make others feel good. It is a vital component of leadership in today’s digital age.

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