

Practices of a Good Listener

A good listener:

1. Listens to understand what is being said, and not preparing how to reply, contradict, or refute. This is extremely important as a general practice.
2. Does not prepare an answer while listening. The speaker's last sentence may give a new slant to what was said before.
3. Knows that meaning involves more than the dictionary definition of the words that are used. It involves, among other things, the tone of the voice, the facial expressions, and the overall behavior of the speaker.
4. Is careful not to interpret too quickly.
5. Looks for clues as to what the person is trying to say, puts herself/himself in the speaker's shoes, sees the world through the speaker's eyes, and accepts the speaker's feelings as facts that have to be taken into account--whether the listener shares them or not.
6. Puts aside her/his own views and opinions for the time being.
7. Realizes that she/he cannot listen to one's inner self and at the same time listen outwardly to the speaker.
8. Controls his/her impatience because she/he knows that listening is faster than talking. The average person speaks about 125 words per minute, but can listen to about 400 words per minute.
9. Does not jump ahead of the speaker and allows the story to be told. What the speaker will say next may not be what the listener expects to hear.
10. Shows interest and alertness. This stimulates the speaker and improves her/his performance.
11. Does not interrupt. When asking questions it is to secure more information, not to trap the speaker or force him/her into a corner.
12. Expects the speaker's language to differ from the way she/he would say the "same thing".
13. Does not quibble about words but tries to get at what is meant.
14. Is not a debater.
15. Looks for areas of agreement, not for weak spots to attack and blast with the artillery of counter-arguments.
16. Listens to all participants in a conference, not only to those who are on her/his side.
17. In a particularly difficult discussion, may sum up what she/he understands was meant by the speaker before giving an answer. If his/her interpretation is not accepted, she/he clears up the contested points before attempting to proceed with her/his own views.

Communication Roadblocks

Although most people believe that listening is important for clear communication, many people do things which inhibit effective listening. Thomas Gordon has identified twelve “roadblocks” to good communication:

1. Ordering. Directing. Commanding: “You must...,” “You are not allowed...”
2. Warning. Admonishing. Threatening: “If you do that, then...,” “You shouldn’t do that...”
3. Moralizing. Preaching. Imploring: “If you want to do the right thing...,” “Please don’t do that...”
4. Advising. Giving suggestions or solutions: “If I were you...,” “May I suggest...”
5. Persuading with logic. Lecturing. Arguing: “Let’s look at the data...,” “The right way to do this is...”
6. Judging. Criticizing. Disagreeing. Blaming: “That’s a dumb move...,” “I strongly disagree.”
7. Praising. Agreeing. Evaluating positively. Battering up: “What a great idea...,” “Now aren’t you creative?”
8. Name-calling. Ridiculing. Shaming: “You should be ashamed of yourself for...,” “You blew it”
9. Interpreting. Analyzing. Diagnosing: “What they meant to say was,” “You are just frustrated...”
10. Reassuring. Sympathizing. Consoling. Supporting: “It will be all right...,” “Things will change...”
11. Probing. Questioning. Interrogating: “Why did you do it?” “Who have you been talking to?”
12. Distracting. Diverting: “Let’s not talk about it now...,” “Let’s do something and you’ll forget about it.”

Thomas Gordon, “Leadership Effectiveness Training.” New York: Wyden, 1977, p. 60-62.