

Keys to Focused Listening

Communication is a two way street and we are all both sender and receiver. We know how to talk but fear, preconceived ideas, filters, conflicts and ego-defenses can be barriers to actual communication. Here are some keys to focused listening, an essential ability of enlightened leaders.

1. Take a deep breath and give your full presence to the other person.

No matter what the purpose of a conversation or the roles in an organization, communication cannot occur if one or both people are operating from the ego. If you are not in the present and giving your attention to the other person, you are blocking energy and the other will know you aren't receiving their communication. In person it is important to make eye contact while deeply listening. And on the e phone you still need to put down everything and listen.

2. Suspend judgment.

To have a straight and authentic conversation with employees, co-workers or bosses, you must first give up judgment, pre-conceived ideas and personal biases. If you think you already know what someone else is going to say, you already have filters which will prevent you from hearing what they are truly trying to say. You will hear from your own script rather than the other person's words.

3. Take down walls by being authentic and open.

Communication is a two way street. Start from a place of equality and respect, regardless of titles or positions on an organizational chart. Great leaders know they do not have to be superior or appear above those they lead. Humility and integrity are the hallmarks of true leadership while arrogance is the result of the ego. Drama and politics block honest, straight communication. Understand that in today's world of uncertainty, people often put up walls quickly if they don't feel trust in leadership or the culture. Be aware of body language.

4. Listen deeply and with focus.

Deep listening requires focus on the other person but, most of all, it calls for you to be authentic. When you are operating from your own deepest self rather than the ego, you are calm, present, and able to listen without getting hooked into someone else's story or drama. You can honor the other person's authentic self when you are genuine, rather than validating the ego.

5. Ask questions and gain feedback.

Since you cannot read someone else's mind nor understand their point of view without input, start by asking questions. Even if you have a message you want to deliver, inquire about their feelings, ideas and thoughts. You are creating a safe space for a straight and clear conversation

by demonstrating honor of the other.

6. Own your own feelings and use “I” words rather than “you” or blaming someone for your feelings or possible upsets.

No one responds well to criticism. When we blame others we often back them into a corner or a defensive posture which results in reaction and counter-reaction. Getting and giving feedback requires trust and patience. Seek understanding by allowing others to finish their thoughts, expressions, and words.

Don't interrupt or try to take the conversation personally-- especially when someone is in a complaint mode (patient, customer, or employee). Sometimes all they really need is to be heard and to vent. Again, own your own emotions and don't get hooked into their script. Genuinely listen to understand. Ask for clarification and feedback so you both know what is being said.

7. Share key message.

When barriers are down and communication is flowing with trust rather than anxiety, you can discuss key topics, get feedback, offer help, and invite solutions to the goal or message. People who feel respected and valued are able to contribute from their highest potential. By reducing fear or judgment, you inspire others and help release their creativity. By creating an atmosphere of cooperation and common goals, you build teamwork and commitment.

Even if a discussion is a performance issue, building trust makes it easier for someone to receive the message. Refer to the “role” of the job (and the expectations) rather than his/her value as a human being. When you respect the total person and acknowledge talents and abilities, you will be able to describe the “role” of this particular job without threatening a person's identity. When you honor the spirit in others, you are able to convey the right message without the resistance of ego defenses.

8. Summarize and find agreement.

The final and essential goal is to summarize both sides of the conversation and find agreement—even if it is to agree to disagree with respect. It is always important that you both have a clear understanding of what was discussed and the outcome or conclusion. It is often helpful to write down the points of the discussion or next steps so you can both be on the same page. This could include actions to be taken by each person, agreement on the conclusion, a suggestion to discuss more at a later date, or even the signing of an acknowledgment, if this is a situation which requires documentation. Most importantly, avoid leaving the conversation until you both feel satisfied that you expressed yourself and you were both heard.