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How to be a better listener

"I have often regretted my speech, never my silence," said first century philosopher Publilius Syrus



Realise hearing and listening are not the same

If you want to see how people hear instead of listening, try the following experiment: When most people say “how are you?” the expected response is “I am fine, how are you?”

Next time someone asks you how you are, respond with just “I am fine,” what happens next shows how little we actively listen. Most people will automatically respond to you, telling you how they are, when in fact you have not asked!

The truth is, most of us are thinking about our response rather than what the other person is saying.

In a modern world, we have been taught to be productive and have answers quickly on hand. This fast pace can lead to us missing vital information that in the long run could actually save us time, money, and arguments!

Hearing does not mean we’re listening

Unless we have a physical disability, hearing comes pretty easily to most of us. Sound waves enter the ear canal and the brain processes these sound waves. However, hearing does not mean we’re listening.

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I can hear a person speak, but I am only listening when I acknowledge the emotions, repercussions, and meaning of what they are saying.

How to force yourself to listen

Check yourself

When someone has spoken to you, check your understanding of their message before you answer them. You can do this by thinking through the statement in your head, and analysing it for meaning and emotion. Once you understand their message, you can answer them, and try to get them to understand your message.

Stop

Most people feel under pressure to respond immediately to certain messages, but pausing for a few seconds before you answer can make all the difference.

By taking this time you can analyse what is heard in more detail. Sometimes these few seconds are all the mind needs to realise what a person is really trying to convey. This greater understanding could change your entire response.

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When these signals are given, a person will wait for your response, and pressure is removed. Signals can be a tilt of the head, saying “mmm” or “um”, taking a sip of coffee and moving hair from ones fringe.

Understand, don't judge

Our first instinct is to judge other's views or actions. Hold back on your judgement until you understand where they are coming from. Only when we understand their experiences, can we respond accurately

Clarify

A lot of people are afraid to clarify what they have heard before they respond. We assume we will look stupid, but by checking, we can actually seem more in tune and empathic. Try using “so what you are saying is....”

Don't interrogate

Asking a lot of questions puts people off. They feel like they are being interrogated and judged. It doesn't feel like you are trying to understand them.

Instead of asking lots of questions, try to use phrases like "tell me more" and "go on."