

ARE YOU LISTENING? CAN YOU HEAR ME NOW?

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Did you know that hearing and listening are not the same? Hearing is the act of perceiving sound by the ear. If you do not have a hearing impairment, hearing simply happens. Listening on the other hand is something you consciously choose to do. It requires focus and concentration so that your brain can process meanings from words and sentences. Listening is known to be the key to all effective communication. Listening is so important that many top companies provide listening skills training for their employees! It makes sense when you consider good listening skills can lead to greater productivity with less mistakes, greater customer and employee satisfaction and lead to a more creative work environment. There are many opportunities to use and practice attentive listening in all aspects of life. In short, our conversations can provide feedback, communicate assignments, new knowledge, deadlines, clarify feelings, ideas or opinions. Besides our spoken words, significant information can also be interpreted through tone of voice and body language.

Most of us think we have excellent listening skills. But a study at Wright State University in which 8,000 people were polled, results showed that not to be the case. So, can we become attentive listeners? The answer is absolutely yes! With lots of practice and training across all communication styles attentive listening can be learned and mastered.

There are some straightforward strategies that Dr. Travis Bradberry, President of Talent Smart, has identified that will help you become an attentive listener starting with **staying focused** only on what the other person is saying. Do not focus on what your reply should be or anticipate what the speaker is going to say next. Stay in the moment so the meaning doesn't become lost. **Be totally present**. Put away your phone. It is impossible to listen when you are texting or glancing at your phone. Do not carry on multiple conversations. Conversations are more enjoyable and effective when you immerse yourself in them, one at a time. **Paraphrase** the meaning of what is being said, using your own words to make sure you have a clear understanding. This gives the speaker a chance to clarify what he or she is saying. **Asking clarification questions** is a good way to show that not only are you listening but that you care about what the speaker is saying. Make sure that your questions add to your understanding of what is being said. **Open your mind** to the views of others. Even though we all have preconceived ideas and biases, being open minded to the ideas and opinions of others is important. It does not, however, mean you have to agree with them. Put yourself in the position of the other person, and do not pass judgment. **Body language** is extremely important and can make the difference in a conversation. Be aware of your gestures, expressions, eye contact, tone of voice and overall body language. Make sure they are positive! **Keep quiet** unless you ask probing questions or are clarifying information. Don't solve the problem prematurely. Jumping in with ideas or solutions to the speaker's problem shuts down their communication. If the person is being repetitive you could say something like "Think I understand what you are saying."

In management and leadership roles attentive listening is highly rated and can be measured by the understanding that you gain. Attentive listening is one of the best ways to learn and will help you grasp knowledge and new ideas from your conversations with others. Attentive listening leads to more in depth understanding and will likely develop stronger and more meaningful relationships with others both personally and in the work place. So it is worth the effort to learn and practice!

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