

Key appointments

Listening is an underrated art

I recently listened to a speech made by a lady who talked about her organisation, Hearing Dogs for Deaf People New Zealand. I was amazed at what she had to say.

I knew there were eye dogs for blind people but had no knowledge of hearing dogs for deaf people.

These incredible little animals (they seem to use small dogs) when trained, take on the responsibility of communicating to their owners information that their owners can't hear — a knock on the door, a telephone ring, a baby crying, the smoke detector alarm.

After it all I reflected on how tough life would be if you couldn't hear. It almost made me feel guilty because, like most of us, my listening skills are sometimes left wanting.

The average person spends at least a fifth of his or her life talking.

Reg Garters



Ordinarily in a single day, enough words are spoken to fill a 50-page book. Over a year, we speak enough to fill 100 books, each of 182 pages.

On average, listening occupies around 30 per cent of our waking time.

Listening is used more than talking, three times as much as reading and four times as much as writing.

All the evidence suggests that listening is the weakest link in the communication chain. We simply don't listen well enough. It's not so

much that we don't hear, it's more a matter of zeroing in on what the person is saying and assimilating it.

There are many things that get in the way of listening, so it is hard work and it is easy to switch off.

Unless we listen attentively and with empathy we will not be able to clear up misunderstandings, arguments, delays, and mistakes that constantly bombard organisations, large and small.

It is impossible to listen and talk at the same time. While this seems common sense, we often break the rule. We want to get our own ideas across.

It may be that while we listen, our colleague says something that rings a bell and relates to something we'd like to share with them. The temptation is to chop the speaker off and interrupt with our input.

We must never be led into that

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temptation. If we cut people off, we put them down.

One of the key skills to listening is interpreting the message behind the words.

Constantly ask the questions: "What do they really mean?" "What are they getting at?" "How do the facts that they are relating right now tie up with the main theme?"

It is important that we make these interpretations all the time. It is important too, to assess just where the conversation is leading and, at the same time, not to prejudge the situation until the person has told us all they want us to hear.

As I said, good listening requires total concentration. This would not be so difficult if we were not regularly faced with blocks to the two-way flow of communication.

We all know what it is like carrying on a conversation with someone in a room full of people. We are listening to the person talking to us until all of a sudden we hear some comment that catches our interest in some other part of the room. Straightaway we try to divide our attention.

All we successfully do is miss both conversations.

We must try to avoid distractions when carrying out a two-way

conversation. As well as the obvious physical blocks that impede successful communication, there are others that relate to our emotions.

We might get annoyed when someone makes a comment we disagree with. This annoyance will automatically cause blocks to our comprehension of the full message. So we must try not to prejudge statements or facts until the speaker has finished.

Feedback is a major part of listening.

It's a good idea at an appropriate lull in the conversation to repeat back to the sender the message we have received so we gain clarification that our interpretation is correct.

It is important when listening that we do not give negative messages through facial expression. When people are talking to us they want us to face them and have eye contact.

We all know how disconcerting it is when we are talking to people who may be staring out the window or at some information on their desks. We should remember that there is no such thing as a disinterested speaker — only a disinterested listener.

To improve our listening skills we must consciously practise.

It is a good idea to look deliberately for a conversation with someone we often disagree with and make sure we keep emotions and judgments out of the way so that we actively listen and receive their message.

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