



This month:

JUST LISTEN



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One of the great things about radio is that you can do anything you want to and, at the same time, still listen. That works just fine if you are driving your car, working in the garden, jogging on a trail, or making dinner in the kitchen. But can we listen to our customers and employees at work, and do something else at the same time? The answer of course is 'no' but we constantly try it anyway. Experts say that about two-thirds of everything we learn, we learn through listening, yet very few of us are good listeners. This month we discuss how fallible we can be as listeners and the bottom line benefits of improving in this important area.



"NO MAN EVER LISTENED HIMSELF OUT OF A JOB."
- CALVIN COOLIDGE

"KNOW HOW TO LISTEN AND YOU WILL PROFIT EVEN FROM THOSE WHO TALK BADLY."
- PLUTARCH

There are no shortcuts to improve your listening skills, but here are some tips that might help:

- **Be attentive.** You have to make an effort to listen carefully. Don't daydream and don't talk.
- Concentrate on the **main point** the speaker is trying to make. Take notes if possible.
- **Paraphrase** or restate in your own words what the speaker is saying.
- Try to **leave emotion out** when you're listening. Try not to argue back in your mind. These things detract from what the speaker is saying.
- Ask for **clarification** if you don't understand a point the speaker is making. Be polite.
- **Avoid distractions.** Close your office door or turn your radio off.
- Pay attention to **body language** if you're face to face with the speaker.

I'm a pretty poor listener. Maybe you are too. Many people are. And for the longest time I've tried to figure out why this is. After all, my intentions are good; I mean well. But I just drift off from time to time and end up saying 'yes' to people when I probably should be saying 'no'.

Many years ago, my former wife complained that she thought I was going deaf. I went to a specialist and had all the tests. In the consultation, the specialist said that he had both good news and bad news. He said, "The good news is you have the hearing of a ten year old. The bad news is, what are you going to tell your wife?"

The message of course was that I could hear very well but that I wasn't listening. Guilty as charged. Well, I've come across some information that explains why I'm such a bad listener at times or, should I say, gives me an excuse to stop listening.

The author John Milton Fogg has given me a reprieve. He says that we hear at the rate of 125 to 150 words per minute but we can actually think at a rate between 1,000 and 3,000 words in the same period of time. That explains it. Thank you, John. So while you are talking to me at a couple of hundred words a minute, I'm gone.

One of the things I always do when leading training sessions is give my audience permission not to listen. After all, it is going to happen anyway at some point in the session. So why not remove any guilt people may have about it? When it happens in a class, I will refocus them, but they have no need to feel bad about it in any way.

The famous motivator Stephen R. Covey said, "Seek first to understand, then to be understood". I think that is code for 'shut up and listen to what I'm saying. Then and only then can you give a valuable response'. Have you tried it? It's not easy. But Covey is absolutely right. Each and every one of us must strive for this.

Just think for a moment about the business impact of being a great listener. Imagine the difference you could make within your company:

- You would actually know what your customers' issues and needs are
- More sales are likely to be made
- You will have a clear understanding of problems that are happening in the office or on the shop floor
- Employee and customer satisfaction would rise
- Fewer mistakes will occur
- Profits could rise and costs could fall



All of that is not bad for just listening!

Most training programs that deal with communication, coaching or leadership have a seminar on effective listening. It's a seminar that lends itself to fun activities that stress the importance of things like eye contact, restating and clarifying, nodding, and body language. As cheesy as these activities may sometimes be, they have a serious side that reminds us that listening is vital to our success and, by the way, that we may not be very good at it.

Let me leave the last word to my new best friend John Milton Fogg. "I wish I had learned to listen long, long ago".