

IMPROVE YOUR LISTENING SKILLS

By Stephen D. Boyd

We are good at talking, but we have trouble listening. One sage said, "The only reason we listen is because we know we get to talk next." Here are some tips that can change your listening behavior now.

Names!

First, repeat a person's name when you first meet him or her. This will make you listen first and talk second. You want to have a mental set to become a better listener, and repeating a person's name will help you do that. Don't hesitate to ask a person to repeat the name the second time, especially if the name is unusual. You are showing concern for the other person, which is an important aspect of listening. Use the person's name in your response. "Is this your first time here, Suzanne?"

Ask a question!

Second, when you are anticipating making a comment on what a person has said, ask a question instead. This will keep you listening longer, and often the added information will help you make a higher quality contribution to the conversation. Get information before you give information.

Pause!

Third, don't rush to answer the phone when it rings. Pause a moment so that you can be mentally ready to listen to the person calling you rather than thinking about what you were doing when the phone rang. Taking these few extra seconds to think will make you a better listener from the beginning of the phone conversation. In addition, listen as though you are going to report the message to someone else. This keeps you focused on the main reason or idea of the call.

Streamline!

Fourth, eliminate clutter around the phone and your desk so you won't easily be distracted when you are talking by phone or have a person talking to you in your office. Notes, pens, folders, clocks, and knickknacks can distract you, and you may not even be aware of the distraction until you realize you have no idea what the person just said.

Choose your time!

Fifth, when possible choose your listening time during the part of the day when you are mentally alert. If you are a morning person make your most important appointments, interviews, or phone calls during that time. If mornings are difficult for you, make afternoon calls. You lose listening acumen when you are tired physically or mentally.

Admit!

Finally, don't be afraid to admit that you're having a hard time listening and make necessary adjustments. You might say, "I'm sorry I missed that last point. Please repeat that for me." Or "I'm having a hard time concentrating; let me move to another chair." Or "Could we pick up the conversation at a later time this afternoon? I need a break and some lunch." Any of these responses will tell people that you want to listen to their messages, and that what they have to say is important to you.

Some listening skills, such as suspending judgment, dealing with biases, and avoiding daydreaming, take time to develop because of the mental self-discipline they require. Following these tips, however, will improve your listening immediately.