

# Recognizing Opportunities: Getting Results Through Listening

When you think of how to get results, you don't often include listening. Yet when you don't listen first, problems take longer to solve. It takes longer for someone to give you information you need if you're trying to control the conversation. You may even end up solving the wrong problem, with the person on the receiving end of your efforts needing more help. If you're frustrated with the toll that emergencies take on your time and results, try a change in strategy. Listening will help you see results in your own work as well as in those you work with.

Listening efficiently can save you time by leading you directly to a problem. Only when that problem is truly resolved can you then invest time in other priorities. Listening solves problems quickly because you get the best information in the shortest amount of time, leading you straight to the heart of the problem. Listening helps you screen a situation before you jump in. You can take five minutes to get a sense of the issues to gauge what your involvement might be. Listening can empower other people to solve problems for themselves, saving you time and energy as you manage others.

In this article you'll read about the steps you need to take to recognize when to listen and to gain the benefits of listening.

- Start seeing opportunities to listen.
- Make the decision to listen.
- Use active listening skills.
- Use what you learn from listening as a basis for problem solving.

## Start Seeing Opportunities to Listen

You have probably seen the bumper sticker, "Start Seeing Motorcycles." Because motorcycles don't have the same presence on the road as do cars, it takes a heightened sensitivity to be aware of them and

their movement. Similarly, you might be missing opportunities to listen because those opportunities don't have the heightened presence at work as do emergencies, confrontations, and meetings you need to initiate. To reap the benefits of listening, here are some ways to heighten your awareness of these opportunities:

- Hold back on your advice.
- Listen for the "tip of the iceberg."
- Use your intuition.
- Read body language.

### Hold back on your advice.

When someone approaches us with a

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dilemma, the first thing we tend to do is give advice or ask questions in an attempt to solve the problem. Once you start giving advice or asking questions, it's difficult to come back to a place where you can listen. So when someone approaches you

with an issue, start by listening. Even five minutes of listening will take you far. Listen for "the tip of the iceberg." Within one conversation, you often hear the tip of the iceberg about a problem or concern. Only ten percent of an iceberg is ever visible above the water. Likewise, the "tips" you hear mentioned may be pointing to a much larger problem in need of a listening. If you see the tip of an iceberg in conversation, remember it. You can ask about it later, or if you have time, follow the conversation there at that moment.

### Use your intuition.

You may walk away from a conversation thinking, "I wonder what's eating him." While the other person never said that something was bothering him, you just had a feeling. Your hunch is a good indicator that someone does need to talk. Listen to your intuition.

### Read body language.

Even the people who don't say directly what they're thinking are still communicating—through the tone of their voice, slumped shoulders, or avoidance of eye contact. Read the body, and listen to it. Then reflect it.

## Make the Decision to Listen

The opportunities for listening are like open doors. You can pass by them or walk into the rooms they lead to. Here are some guidelines for choosing to listen:

- You choose when to listen.
- Know when to stop listening.

### You choose when to listen.

Just because there are opportunities every day to listen doesn't mean you have to. And simply because you know someone really needs to talk about something doesn't mean you should listen. If you don't have it in you to listen, don't. Half-listening is worse than not listening at all. It is equally damaging to the relationship, leaves the speaker just as stuck in the problem, and wastes time. If you can't listen with your whole mind, don't do it. It's your choice.

### Know when to stop listening.

As you're listening, you give the other person your full, nonjudgmental attention. Sometimes as you're listening, things come up that interfere with your ability to do that. You may have an external distraction (e.g., someone waiting to talk to you, a scheduled phone call, etc.)

You may have an internal distraction (e.g., a work deadline, fatigue, etc.) You may find yourself unable to listen without judgment. If you experience such a strong reaction to what you're hearing that you know you can't be an effective listener, you're taking sides.

Let the person know that you're unable to listen any longer and why. If appropriate and desired, you could invite the person to talk with you at a different time.

## Use Active Listening Skills

Once you've seen the opportunity and made the choice to listen, active listening skills help you gain the best information in

the shortest amount of time, and set the stage for problem solving if that's needed.

To listen well,

- Clear your mind and give your full attention.
- Restate the core of what you hear.
- Listen to and for feelings.
- Summarize the crux of the problem.

### Clear your mind.

When you don't have time to listen, say so. Likewise, when you decide to listen, do it fully. Clear your mind of other work you need to do. Turn away from things that will distract you (like your computer screen). Give the person your full attention. When you make the choice to listen, do it right.

To be a good listener, you also need to clear your heart, setting aside presumptions, judgments, and defensiveness. At the very least, hear the situation neutrally, with no response in your mind. At times it's a struggle not to interrupt, evaluate, or respond right away. Simply focus on the person in front of you, trying to understand things from that person's perspective. At those moments when you are able to do this, you will come to an even deeper level of understanding.

### Restate what you hear

With a clear mind and heart you are listening for the core issue the person is dealing with. Sort through all that's being said until you have a sense of the most important issue. Then say that to the person: "You're most concerned about . . ."

This restatement is called reflecting, because you as the listener are acting as a mirror to the speaker. You are not mirroring the speaker in a crude way: parroting back words, or pointedly matching your posture to theirs. The best reflecting feels to the person speaking as if you

said exactly what was meant, despite the rambling, confused way it was said. Reflecting mirrors the heart and mind of the speaker clearly, without feeling intrusive or judgmental.

With any problem comes complexities and subtleties. Your job as a listener is to shape what is often chaotic and confused in the other person, restating it more clearly. Don't insert your perspective, and avoid restating all the information. Search for the heart of what the other person is talking about: "Sounds like the biggest challenge for you is..."

As you restate what you hear, the other person—now satisfied that you have understood—will venture deeper into the situation, or build on what you've said. In this way, even though the focus is on the other person, you're now in dialogue. There is a give and take, a mutuality in exploring the issue, and an increasing trust that allows the speaker to continue uncovering the situation.

### Listen to and for feelings

When there's a problem, feelings are inevitably involved: frustration, anger, helplessness, and anxiety. You may be tempted to avoid the feelings you see or hear in the person talking. It's uncomfortable. If you do, however, you dilute the power of your listening. Feelings are tied to the most powerful part of the problem. Your listening to the feelings releases them in the speaker. Once released from those feelings, the speaker can move forward, putting feelings into thought and action.

Sometimes it's hard not to take on those feelings yourself. If you listen to someone who is upset at an injustice, you may feel upset. If someone is deeply sad, you may feel it too. This means you've been connecting well with the other person. But be

careful. You may start to become overly invested and find yourself doing one of two things: either wanting to fix the situation yourself, or wanting to make the person feel better. Both are dangerous.

In the first situation, you're disempowering the other person by trying to fix the problem. You'll damage the trust you've just built. Besides, do you really need to take on one more thing? In the second situation, you're fighting a losing battle. You just can't control how other people feel. Negative feelings are part of the human experience; they have their own life cycle. The moment you try to control those feelings, you're endangering the trust you've been building.

Think about it this way: when you say, "Don't be mad," do people stop being mad? No. Rather, they simply get the message that you don't want to hear their anger. When you say, "Time heals all wounds," do grieving people feel better? No. They know that the conversation with you about their grief is over. You're not changing other people's feelings; you're shutting them down.

Feelings have great power when they are unnamed and unacknowledged. Listening affects people's feelings because it names and acknowledges them. Instead of saying, "Time heals all wounds," try, "It feels like this wound will never heal." Your courage to hear deep grief will itself help the healing. Instead of saying, "Don't be mad," try, "Wow, you're mad." Now you're at the heart of things. If you're brave, you can withstand the truth of the anger in order to deal with what is real. Once you deal with what's real, the anger subsides. It has done its job, by leading the person to the heart of the problem.

#### **Summarize the Problem.**

When you listen well, you peel back the

superficial layers of a problem until you get to the core issue. You'll know when you're there because you'll sense a change in the other person. His or her energy for speaking subsides, or may circle around one issue. Then it's time to summarize the problem: "The real problem is . . .," "Bottom line, you . . ." When the other person hears that, he or she will clarify the issue for you as needed.

If you feel like the conversation is going nowhere, you may be tempted to stop listening. That is your right. But before you do, think about why the conversation doesn't seem to be making progress. Are you giving the other person your full attention? Are you reflecting or have you tried to solve the problem or give advice? Are you acknowledging and tracking the feelings as well as the thoughts? If you're doing your best, think about the other person. Is the other person being straightforward? Does it seem like there's something not being said? Try a little more reflecting.

#### **Set the Stage for Problem Solving**

Once you have identified the core problem, you're back on more familiar ground. You can create positive momentum and commitment to resolving the problem when you

- name the goal.
- invite the other person to think of solutions.
- create a dialogue by sharing your ideas.
- summarize next steps and follow up.

#### **Name the goal.**

When people think about problems they face, they feel heavy, drained of energy. But when they think of their goals, they become motivated and inspired. Lurking within every problem is an unstated goal. For example, if the problem is being over-

weight, a goal might be to feel fit again. It's much more motivating to want to feel fit than to have to diet because you're overweight.

Likewise, a writer dealing with copyright issues felt overwhelmed about having to confront former colleagues who were using her work without permission. She brought this problem up to a friend who is skilled in listening. As the friend listened, the writer realized that underneath the permission issue was a desire to see her work put to use, and a need for feedback from those who used her work, allowing her to make improvements. Because she was listened to, the writer was able to recognize the larger goal of improving the pieces she'd written so that she could then sell them to a wider audience. As a result, the writer successfully initiated the difficult conversations. She was able to address the permission issues with her former colleagues and set the stage for working collaboratively with them to improve her material.

#### **Invite the other person to think of solutions.**

When the goal has been identified, it's easy to offer advice and solutions. However, the person who has talked about the problem may now be pumped up about the goal, and have ideas of his or her own. This is a time for you to remain as a sounding board, allowing the other person a chance to say the ideas out loud. In the end, that person has to live with the solution; better that he or she identifies the solution whenever possible.

#### **Create a dialogue when by sharing your ideas.**

Once the other person has had a chance to speak about their ideas, ask if he or she is interested in your perspective. As you talk about your thoughts, create a dialogue. Share one idea at a time, asking each time

for the other person's reaction. Remember, it is the other person who has to live with the idea. In this collaborative conversation, talking about different ideas will create a solution. Keep the conversation mutual. Summarize next steps and set follow up. Before you wrap up the conversation, it may be helpful to summarize the next steps, or to ask the other person what his or her next steps will be. Then choose a time to follow up.

**Conclusion**

Once you start seeing opportunities to listen, you'll also start realizing the benefits of using listening to help others solve problems. Listening helps you make efficient use of your time, harness positive energy for solving problems, and build stronger relationships in the process.