

Listening

by Tahra Millan & Cathy C. Bonczek

When people seek out communications coaching, they almost always want to improve their **Executive Presence**, their **Impact**, their **Messaging**, and their **Clarity**.

We rarely have someone come to us who says, my primary goal is to become a better listener. And yet, so much of being a master communicator is about being able to receive information, by listening and by observing. Heightening these skills will yield huge rewards. Robert Bolton, the author of *People Skills*, and the father of the Social Styles construct, talks about listening in three clusters: attending, following, and reflecting.

Tahra summarizes his thoughts here:

Attending is a way of nonverbally communicating that you sense the importance of what the speaker is saying and that you're committed to trying your best to understand them. Practice attending by assuming a relaxed-but-alert posture of involvement, in which you face the speaker squarely, leaning forward just slightly. Keep your arms and legs uncrossed to avoid communicating defensiveness and maintain an appropriate distance of about three feet. Eye contact is also essential; when your eyes flit around the room, it suggests indifference.

Following is about staying out of the speaker's way so you can find out how they view the situation. This means paying attention to nonverbal cues that suggest they have something on their mind, as well as sending noncoercive invitations to talk, or door openers. "Tell me more," "I see," "Really?," "What's on your mind?"

You practice **Reflective** listening when you exhibit the following listening skills:

- Paraphrasing is when the listener relays the essence of the speaker's content in their own words. A paraphrase is concise, cuts through the clutter, and focuses on the speaker's central message.
- Reflecting feelings or meanings, on the other hand, is when the listener relays the emotional crux or summarizes the key points of the speaker's message.

These are wonderful ways to gauge how you might be currently listening to someone. It seems easy, but what gets in the way of hearing what is being said?

- Distraction: You might be giving some of your attention to text messages on your computer while you're in the meeting or thinking about what you're going to say next, which prevents you from hearing what's being said now.
- Judgement: You completely disagree with a position that the other person holds.
- Discomfort: You may be preoccupied by internal distractions like being overly tired or in an uncomfortable seat.
- Time: We are always trying to squeeze over-sized messages into 30 or 60- minute slots and as we hurry to make a timely exit, we may stop listening to whoever is speaking.

The bottom line is this, listening is as important as speaking when you are making a connection or furthering a business relationship. Remove the barriers to listening that you can (Turn off the phone! Change your sun-filled seat! Eat a healthier lunch! Shorten your messages to fit fewer minutes!) Use one of the three ways of listening that Robert Bolton suggests in your very next meeting.



Painting "Art of Listening" by Leon Zernitsky