

Five Tips for Listening Well

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Reprinted from Careers at MSN

Calvin Coolidge once said, "No man ever listened himself out of a job." You certainly know people have talked themselves out of work, and perhaps some have missed opportunities because they weren't listening closely enough. Don't let this happen to you. Refine your listening skills with these five tips.

Be Prepared

"Where observation is concerned, chance favors only the prepared mind." -- Louis Pasteur

Be mentally and physically ready to listen. Prep yourself by reading appropriate material and doing research before meetings. Don't show up only to find yourself lost after the first five minutes, and then scramble mentally to catch up or just zone out because you're lost.

A great athlete doesn't become a great athlete on game day; he prepares himself to be ready for a great performance on game day. You may have thought being a truly good listener was going to be easier than this. Sorry.

Shut Up

"I have often regretted my speech, never my silence." -- Publilius Syrus

How's that for straightforward? Clearly, you're a far more effective listener when you're not talking. Sure, it's important to speak up, but remaining silent the majority of the time can put an exclamation point on the things you do say. Being quiet and listening intently brings with it a good aura.

The Focus Factor

"Concentration is my motto -- first honesty, then industry, then concentration." -- Andrew Carnegie

This is the most obvious -- and most broken -- rule when it comes to listening. Be in the moment. Put other thoughts out of your mind. You can feel when people aren't truly listening to you, and you know when they are. Make sure whoever's speaking feels you are really listening.

Focus on what people are saying, and don't let yourself get stuck on any one point. Don't try to answer your question in your own mind while the person is still speaking. If you have to, make a note on a piece of paper about a question regarding what's been said, but don't let it debilitate you from listening to the rest of the conversation.

Likewise, conquer your own defensiveness. If someone says something that sets you off, let it go. Move on, and continue to listen to what he's saying. This is a challenge to the most mature among us. Being able to mentally process criticism openly and maturely is one of the best career moves you'll ever make.

Walk a Mile in Someone Else's Shoes

"Everyone and everything around you is your teacher." -- Ken Keyes Jr.

You may absolutely despise your coworker, but to be a good listener, you must always listen with empathy. It's easy to let your mind chew on a point of disagreement if you hear something that bothers you -- or if you just don't like the person who's speaking -- but you'll miss what's being said. Try to see the world through the speaker's eyes. Think of it as a practice run for when you're in discussions with people you like and respect.

Ask and You Shall Receive

"He who asks is a fool for five minutes, but he who does not ask remains a fool forever." -- Chinese Proverb

Reporters often say their jobs require them to be experts for a day depending on the story: one day an expert in aviation and the next an expert in politics. The truth is, their main expertise is asking insightful questions. And it's the same for successful listeners. Like a reporter, you must learn to put people at ease and ask questions that illicit revealing responses.

Here are some tricks for asking good questions:

- Ask "how" and "why" questions that require a certain amount of elaboration as opposed to questions that can be answered with a yes or no.
- It often times helps if you share a little bit of yourself while asking questions. Example: "I have been having a hard time getting productivity out of my workers. How do you suggest I deal with it?"
- Ask tough questions, but do it with a smile. You can ask difficult or even awkward questions without being confrontational. When you're asking killer questions, kill them with kindness.