

## That's Not What I Said

*By Marsha Freedman, M.S.*

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### Sharpening Your Listening Skills

How many times have you turned to someone and exclaimed, "That's Not What I Said!" or had those words directed toward you? Most of us, unfortunately, do not rate high in listening skills, even though we spend quite a bit of our day involved in one form of listening or another. The average person spends about 40% of the day listening, with executives (the better ones, of course!) spending up to 80 % of their time involved in listening to others.

Why aren't we better at this critical skill if we spend so much of our waking hours involved in it? After all, if you spent that much time exercising, cooking, or learning a language, you'd be better at it, right? Sadly, that's not the way it works with listening. One of the reasons is-- we're not taught how to listen. Think about it: have you ever taken a listening class? Chances are the answer is "no." To make matters worse, even though we're not instructed how to be better listeners, we're expected to be competent at it, especially in management.

**How can becoming a better listener benefit you professionally?** It is only through listening that you gain the knowledge you need to act. If you want to please the boss, you have to listen and understand. If you're selling, you need to know your prospect. My Uncle Harry, who had a successful sales job for 50 years, told me his clients thought he was the greatest conversationalist they knew. What he did, he said, was ask a few questions, then sit back and listen. Listening is truly the most important secret of powerful, successful sales and marketing.

The Chinese have a symbol for active listening with four components: eyes, ears, heart and undivided attention. When we use the **eyes**, we're observing body language, which tells us more than the words themselves. If the boss is looking at his watch or fidgeting while you're relating a problem, the message transmitted is he's not too interested in what you have to say. On the other hand, if she looks you directly in the eyes, leans toward you and nods as you speak, you know she's paying close attention and cares about your concerns.

With the **ears**, listen for both literal and hidden meanings. Listen to the tone and cadence of the other person's speech, as well as the words and phrases used. These give you an insight into real feelings. Too much hesitation, excessive use of filler words or sounds, like "um" or "you know" and word repetition are all signs of nervousness, discomfort or possibly, lying. When using the **heart** in active listening, put yourself in the place of the other person and show empathy, an excellent way to gain rapport with others. Use phrases, such as "I can appreciate...", "I really want to help...", and "I can imagine how you feel..."

To provide **undivided attention** means one hundred percent of your focus should be devoted to whomever is speaking, not to checking e-mail or answering phone calls. Remember that hearing—a physiological process, and listening—a mental process, are different. Hearing is not sufficient; we must listen to truly pay attention.

Another reason we're not more skilled listeners is there are many barriers standing in our way. Next, I'll cover several of the major barriers and offer suggestions for dealing with them:

**Jumping to conclusions**—Have you ever thought you knew what the other person was going to say and were wrong? I'm sure we've all been in that embarrassing situation! Force yourself to be patient, listen, and resist the temptation to speak (tough for professional speakers to do!) before the other person has completed his/her thoughts.

Having a **short attention span** is very common today, especially among young people. Here's a great way to improve your attention span. Concentrate on the other person's words as if you'll be quizzed at the end and must score 100% in order to keep your job! Also, keep in mind how important it is to the person

speaking that you're not off on a mental detour.

**Judging:** Hold back on judging until all the facts are in, even if you previously had a negative experience with the individual; this time may be different. We can positively influence others by our attitude and expectation of them.

**Outside noises:** Go to a quiet room, more conducive to conversation; then turn off cell phones, radios, and TVs.

Don't **plan a response** while the other person is still talking. You might miss a really important point. Instead, after the person finishes, take a long pause to gather your thoughts, and then speak. Don't be afraid of silence.

There's no doubt that being a good listener will make you a better leader, manager, employee, or marketer. Remember that being a good listener is more than being there while someone else is speaking. It is more than hearing; it is understanding the message that is being sent.

Although you never formally learned how to be a good listener, it's not too late. Get started right away and follow the suggestions in this article. Hopefully, you'll never hear the words "That's not what I said," because you'll be on your way to becoming a competent listener.

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