



One of the most important communication skills you will ever learn is the art of effective listening. This skill alone has the power to transform any relationship. In your professional life, listening is at the heart of effective leadership, and in your personal life, listening is an act of love.

There are many signs that indicate you need help learning to listen. In this article, we talk about the signs, the “drama” that bad listening creates and the solution if you want to improve your listening skills.

1. Multi-tasking
2. Interrupting
3. Giving advice too soon
4. Discounting
5. Stage hogging

Multi-tasking

The Problem: When someone is talking to you and you are multi-tasking, you slip in and out of the conversation. The risk is that you only catch pieces and bits of the conversation. You risk pretending to listen and if the person talking to you needs your attention, you have just missed the nuances and inflections that help you offer valuable feedback or support.

The Solution: When someone is boring you or wasting your time with chatter, it’s easy to slip into activity to maximize your use of time, however it’s more authentic to simply end the conversation than to pretend to listen. This is how to say it: “Janet, I need to tell you that I only have two more minutes to talk. I have a stack of things on my to-do list and it seems that the time is slipping away.”

Janet will get the hint and you can politely say “good by” and get productive again without damaging the relationship.

However, when a friend or colleague really needs your attention but you don’t have time, you can tell them that you need to schedule a time when you can give full attention. Either way, you have remained authentic and present.

Interrupting

The problem: When someone is talking and you are so excited you want to add your two cents, the problem is, they don't care. They are concerned about finishing what they are saying; therefore what you say won't register with them anyway. They will think you are rude if you keep interrupting their thought process and even if you get them to shut up, they won't be listening to you because they will be frustrated.

If you happen to be a "fast processor" it will be very difficult to stay quiet when someone takes a long time searching for the right word, or fumbles around with a lot of um's ah's and long pauses.

The solution: Put your tongue on the top of your mouth and breathe. If you are sitting at a desk or table, (or on the phone) you might want to jot down a thought so you don't forget what you were going to say. Another solution is to apologize immediately and invite them to finish their last sentence.

Giving advice too soon

The problem: Have you ever tried to help someone with a piece of advice only to have it blow up in your face? When someone complains, it's normal to go straight to a solution; however, most people do not really want advice, especially when they are in the midst of deep emotion. In the beginning it is never really about the solution. It is about calming down the emotional energy so that a solution can be found.

The solution: Validate and acknowledge. This does not mean that you agree with what is being said. The way you validate and acknowledge is to listen for the emotion and then ask a question that indicates you are trying to understand. For example, if a co-worker is furious and in the midst of drama, instead of saying, "If I were you I would..." You say instead, "It sounds like you are really angry and you are tired of the way things are going..." then let them agree or clarify. If they are angry with you, do not defend. Seek to understand before trying to find a solution. You will notice that once the person reclaims their composure they are then more ready to discuss solutions.

Discounting

The problem: Someone comes to you with a little mole hill of a problem but they act like it's a mountain. You are likely to make the mole hill grow even bigger if you say, "Oh, don't worry about it, "or "It's really not a big deal."

The solution: Look for facts. You can simply say, "I want to understand more. Can you tell me about..." Then encourage them to give you the facts instead of just the feelings. Then you can use a validation technique to calm them even more.

Stage Hogging

The problem: You don't even know you are doing it. You talk fast and you talk a lot. Talking is how you work things out and how you sort out all of your creative ideas. You know so much about your product that you can't understand why it isn't as interesting to everyone else. This is the very worst listening mistake especially if you are a leader, a coach, a consultant or a sales professional. Others will absolutely feel drained by your hyper activity and massive energy.

The solution: Pay attention to how much you talk and how much you listen. The old saying is true, "when I talk I know what I know, but when I listen, I know what I know and I know what you know." Another solution is to always let the other person talk first. If you start talking first it's too easy to get carried away, especially if the other person is an excellent listener. Make sure to draw others in with questions and your own natural curiosity. Avoid the tendency to add one more comment or observation to every thing they say.

Use the matrix below to help you identify and become aware of your own patterns of listening and see where you can improve.

Problem	Solution	Observations/ Ideas/ Actions
Multi-tasking	End the conversation Schedule specific time to talk Sit in a place free from distractions	
Interrupting	Keep tongue on roof of mouth Breathe Apologize	
Giving advice	Acknowledge Validate their feelings	
Discounting	Seek the facts Validate Acknowledge	
Stage Hogging	Keep track of how much time you talk Let them talk first Ask questions Be curious	