



toolbox

Listening Skills

hear more!

speaking less!

For many, the most difficult aspect of communicating is being able to listen well. Sometimes, rather than listening, we are making judgments, thinking about how to respond, or mentally discounting the other. When we are emotional or defensive, we may engage the situation as a win-lose situation, and this can make the situation worse. Therefore, a key leadership skill is listening well, in which you create a respectful climate, and maintain positive relationship, even if you disagree. Below are some pointers to communicate that you value the person to whom you are listening.

- ✓ **Do ... allow other speakers to express themselves without interruptions.** If you become unclear and need to interrupt, do so appropriately. For example, "I'm sorry to interrupt but I want to make sure I heard you right."
- ✗ **Don't ... finish the person's sentences.** Wait for the speaker to finish before starting your response.
- ✓ **Do ... remain focused on what the other person is saying.** Our brains process incoming information much quicker than the speaker gives the information, so it is very easy for our mind to filter the speaker's words to fit our expectations, race ahead, prepare a response, or to become defensive. Instead of losing focus, regain your commitment to attend; trust that your turn will come. In the meantime, listen with focus.
- ✗ **Don't ... jump to conclusions or judgment.** Your goal is to understand, and to be understood, so let the individual have an opportunity to express his or her own point of view, free of your filtering judgments.
- ✓ **Do ... maintain an appropriate physical posture to show your sincere interest.** For example, leaning forward, nodding your head, and maintaining eye contact is often considered the appropriate way to signal that one is paying attention. In some situations and cultures, such gestures may be inappropriate, so consider the cultural context. If you're not sure, ask. Nonverbal behaviors are extremely important, and can be easily misunderstood, so be mindful of your physical gestures when listening.
- ✓ **Do ... try to understand the speaker from her / his point of view.** This can be especially difficult if the situation is contentious. However, if you show that you understand their point of view – not necessarily agree with it – you signal respect, and this paves the way for easier communication and better problem solving. Respond in a manner that lets the individual know you understand what is being said -- even if you disagree.
- ✓ **Do ... ensure you are hearing her / him accurately, seeking to understand their main idea(s).** When appropriate, reflect back what you understand and ask if this is correct. For example, you can say, "Now from what you just said [maybe repeating back their statement], I think your key point is, []. Is that right?"
- ✓ **Do ... respect the speaker's right to their feelings,** rather than discounting them. Respect the individual's words and ability to know how he or she feels.

Ideas from several sources, including the Free Management Library and The Bureau For At-Risk Youth.