

SMALL Business Times

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Now hear this

Listening is a trainable skill that is crucial to successful negotiations

Question:

I have a new employee who joined our team seven months ago. Recently, we visited a client to negotiate a contract. During that meeting, it became painfully obvious that this individual is not a good listener. Is listening a trainable skill? If so, what can I do to help him?

Answer:

The good news is listening is not a talent people are born with. It is a learned skill. With focus, discipline and ongoing practice, your employee can become a great listener. A study was conducted of an adult education class made up mostly of business professionals. After taking a listening skills course, all participants nearly doubled their listening scores.

The place to begin is with understanding why this individual is not a good listener. We have identified three primary causes:

1) The person has not been taught how to listen. Most business professionals have had no formal listening skills training. They are not even aware of what they are not doing. Coaching, feedback and on-going practice activities are needed to develop the awareness, knowledge and personal discipline required to be an effective listener.

2) The person does not understand the value of listening. People confuse making a positive impression with telling people about their expertise, successes or capabilities. Yet, the greatest need business professionals have today is "to be heard." To make a positive impression, begin by asking the other party questions, and then really

listen. The other party will always prompt you for the information he or she wants to know.

3) The person does not have the physical, emotional or mental energy available. Listening requires an intense effort. In fact, people who are actively listening show the same physical signs of energy exertion as people who are exercising: increased heart rate, elevated body temperature and faster circulation. After a particularly stressful negotiation, where an intense level of energy was required to listen and process, it's not unusual for people to sleep or rest. Their bodies are exhausted and require recovery time. When people are physically tired or pre-occupied with an emotional issue, they have limited resources available to listen fully.

External distractions

To be a good listener, an individual must manage a host of both internal and external factors. Of these, the external barriers are the easiest to manage. Some of those include:

Noise – A bell dinging every time a door opens or closes. Equipment running. Phones ringing. Intercom interference. Hallway conversations overriding into your space.

Visual distractions – People coming in and out of the room. Activity outside of a window. A piece of equipment working in the same room.

Objects – People playing with pens, pocket change, jewelry, notebook, Palm Pilots, etc.

The other person – The personal mannerisms, gestures, appearance, voice quality of the other party.

The environment – Uncomfortable temperature. Poor seating conditions. Offensive odors. Distance between the two parties.

Most external issues can be eliminated by simple actions. Refuse to tolerate the distractions and suggest changes.

On the other hand, internal issues are

more challenging. They require a higher degree of personal awareness and discipline to overcome. When undetected, they either block or distort what the listener hears, creating a gap in the communication.

Internal distractions

When negotiating, some of the most common internal issues include:

Anxiety – Personal issues, worry, concern, feelings of intimidation all create mindful distractions that can interfere with concentration.

Mental laziness – When a person does not feel the information the other party is offering is important, he or she "zones out."

Physical stamina – Lack of rest creates a tired body. A tired body does not have the same capacity as a refreshed body.

Close-mindedness – When the listener does not share the same opinion as the speaker, an emotional wall is triggered creating a barrier to hearing what is said.

Impatience – When the other party speaks slowly or doesn't formulate his or her thoughts in a clear manner, mind-chatter fills the space.

Self-focus – Intense self-focus makes it difficult to receive information from the other party.

Cognitive dissonance – When the listener's mental filters transmute the speaker's information to reflect his or her beliefs.

Once you identify the internal and external factors that may be distracting your team member's ability to listen well, move into performance improvement areas. Here are five ways your employee can enhance his or her listening skills.

1. Don't talk. While this may seem obvious, having the employee write these words on a piece of paper that can be looked at during the meeting will help him or her stay focused, especially when old tendencies kick in.

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2. Avoid interrupting. It's rude. It's distracting. It's unprofessional. Effective listeners wait until the speaker has finished, take a brief three-to five-second pause, and then ask a question or reply with information.

3. Demonstrate interest in the other party. Sit forward. Take notes. Make eye contact. Acknowledge the speaker's position by occasionally nodding your head.

4. Eliminate as many distractions as possible. Lower the blinds and turn on the lights. Unplug the phone. Move to another chair. Do whatever you need to do, even request moving to a new location if the environment is not conducive to listening.

5. Establish listening goals. Have the employee set regular goals. For example, if your employee is having difficulties maintaining focus during a conversation, he or she may want to set a goal to listen intently when visiting the next two or three customers. Or, if the employee wants to eliminate the habit of interrupting others, set a goal for the month to make a concerted effort at all sales and customer meetings, not to interrupt anyone. Have the employee keep a log, a simple checklist, of how many times he or she overcame the temptation and kept quiet.

This process will reinforce the importance to the employee of ongoing practice. It will also provide a forum to work together, measuring progress and identifying new areas of opportunity.

Listening skills can be practiced daily with co-workers, direct reports, during meetings or talking with family members and friends. Every conversation is an opportunity to hone listening skills.

Today, it is estimated that business professionals spend more than 40% of their time listening. In a negotiation, knowledge is power. The less you talk, the better your ability to concentrate on what others are saying. Everything the other party says is potentially important. Therefore, the more you listen, the more you learn and the better your chances of obtaining a mutually agreeable outcome.



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