

Listening Attentively

By Tony Alessandra, Ph.D.

Haven't you attended dinner parties where the talk wasn't really a conversation as much as a series of monologues? First, somebody tells about his or her vacation. Then somebody else brags about his kid getting into medical school, which leads another guest to talk about her own college days.

On and on it goes, leaving you with the impression no one is really paying attention. Instead, everybody's just rehearsing what he or she is going to say next. By evening's end, everyone will have talked--but people really won't have communicated much or gotten to know each other very well.

Unfortunately, many of our everyday conversations are like that, too. While we *hear*, we only pretend to listen. Listening doesn't just mean shutting up while someone else speaks--though that's a start.

But listening--*real* listening--takes more work than that. To get a full appreciation of what someone's saying, you need to ask questions, give feedback, remain objective, figure out what's being implied, and observe and interpret body language.

How Good a Listener Are You?

When we think of charismatic people, we tend to think of those who talk well. But if you seek to influence others, listening is just as important because it draws people to you.

In fact, leadership is practically impossible for the person who can't listen effectively. Conversely, miscommunication, mistakes, and work that need to be re-done are common byproducts of poor listening. In addition, people view poor listeners as self-centered, disinterested, preoccupied, or aloof.

Roadblocks to Effective Listening

Why do we fail to listen well? Well, for starters, it takes effort to really concentrate on the other person. Second, the enormous competition for our attention from radio, TV, movies, computers and the like causes us to screen out lots of information--including, unfortunately, some important things.

Third, because we think we already know what someone's going to say, we don't take the time to hear people out. The *fourth* reason stems from the fact that the mind can listen and think up to three times faster than a person can talk. That gives us plenty of time to jump to conclusions, daydream, plan a reply, or mentally argue with the speaker.

And the *fifth* reason we don't listen well is because *we don't know how*. But I bet you've never had a course in listening, have you? So this neglected and least understood aspect of communication springs largely from bad habits; we just haven't been trained to listen.

Levels of Listening

We typically listen at one of four basic levels of attentiveness. Where would you place yourself?

1. **The Non-listener** doesn't actually hear the speaker at all. In fact, it's pretty obvious no real effort is being made to pay attention. Blank stares, nervous mannerisms, or interruptions

usually greet your attempt to make a point. Non-listeners really want to do all, or most of, the speaking.

2. **The Marginal Listener** hears the sounds and words, but not the meaning and intent. Marginal listeners stay on the surface of the conversation because they're too busy thinking about what they want to say next. They're easily distracted, and, in fact, may look for outside distractions--an incoming phone call, say, or an e-mail message--as an excuse for pulling themselves away from the conversation.

3. **The Technical Listener** concentrates and actively tries to hear what the speaker is saying. This is the label most of us would give ourselves if we consider ourselves to be "good" listeners.

However, technical listeners often don't understand the speaker's *intent*. More concerned about content than feelings, they judge the message merely on what's said, ignoring the speaker's vocal intonation, body language, and facial expressions. In other words, technical listeners believe that they understand the speaker--*but the speaker doesn't feel understood*.

4. **The Active Listener** is the most powerful level of listening. It's also the most demanding and tiring because it requires the listener suspend his or her personal thoughts and feelings and, instead, focus on understanding the speaker's *point of view*. This includes what's *not* being said--as well as the actual words.

It also means sending out verbal and nonverbal feedback that tells the speaker you're absorbing what's being said. This is critical. If you expect to get the speaker's support, he or she needs to know they're being heard.

The Six Skills of Active Listening

To reach this highest level of listening proficiency, you need to develop six separate skills. I've combined them into the easy-to-remember acronym of **CARESS**:

Concentrate.

Focus your attention on the speaker, and only on the speaker. To do so, you must eliminate physical and psychological barriers, whether they come from you or the speaker.

Physical barriers may be in the environment, like noises in the room, other people talking, telephone calls or visitors. Or maybe there's something distracting about the speaker, such as a thick accent, poor grooming, or disturbing mannerisms.

Or maybe the barrier has to do with *you*, the listener. Maybe you're not fully listening because you're hungry, tired, or angry. Or, perhaps you're close-minded to new ideas or resistant to information that runs contrary to your beliefs and values.

In any case, there are lots of potential distractions, internal and external. If you can't avoid them, minimize them. Turn off the TV. Hold your calls. Silence your computer. Try to provide a private, quiet, comfortable setting where you sit side by side without distractions.

The point is, make your partner feel like you're there for them. Don't be like the boss who put a desk-size model of a parking meter on his desk, then required employees to feed the meter--10 cents for 10 every minutes of conversation. What a signal he was sending out!

Acknowledge.

Think about how you like to be listened to. What are the important responses you look for when someone else is listening to *you*? **First**, there's eye contact. When you don't have eye contact with your listener, you may feel like you're talking to a brick wall.

Second, verbal responses such as, "hmm", "yeah", "wow!" and "no kidding?" show interest in what's being said. **Third**, gestures--smiling, nodding one's head, and appropriate

facial expressions or body language--say, in effect, "I'm really interested in what you have to say."

And, the **fourth** kind of acknowledgement is making clarifying remarks that restate the speaker's points, such as "If I understand you correctly, you're saying that..." or "In other words, the biggest hurdles are..."

Research.

"Research," as the term is used here, involves asking questions and giving feedback. In short, it makes the conversation a two-way street. A listener who doesn't ask questions, give feedback, or make comments at the appropriate time isn't really participating.

Exercise emotional control.

If you react emotionally to what a speaker is saying, you'll have an almost irresistible tendency to interrupt and argue. You may feel your pulse speed up, your breathing become more rapid, or your face become flushed. You may lose your train of thought.

This is usually prompted by the speaker himself or by something he says, such as a "loaded" word involving a racial, religious, or political reference. So you may tune out when you hear something you don't like, and, as a result, miss the true substance of what's being said.

Instead, try pausing to delay your response (by counting to 10, say, or taking in some long, deep breaths). Or, thinking about what you have in common with the speaker, rather than focusing on your differences.

Sense the nonverbal message.

It's critical that you read the nonverbal messages in the speaker's communications. If you don't, you're missing a major aspect of the message.

Watch what the speaker does with his or her eyes, face, hands, arms, legs, and posture for signals about what he or she is really saying. Crossed arms on the chest, for instance, may suggest defensiveness, while fidgeting in chair or looking at the ceiling while talking may signal anxiety.

Structure.

Structuring the information is probably the most sophisticated of the listening techniques. You can use the time gap created by differences in listening and speaking speeds to structure the message you're listening to.

Do this by outlining--mentally or on paper--what the speaker says. It'll dramatically increase your comprehension and recall. You can note the major idea, the key points, the sub points, and so on.

Another technique is listening for order, or priority. Sometimes, such as when you're being given instructions, the sequence is crucial. So, listen for words like "first," "second," "next," or "then, last." Don't be shy about double-checking with the speaker to make sure you understand the proper sequence or the relative weight that you should give each element.

Using the CARESS model can gradually help you break a lifetime of poor listening habits. It's vital that you try. Because, as show-biz wit Wilson Mizner once said, "A good listener is not only popular everywhere, but after a while he knows something." Thus, *listening is power...*and, therefore, a key to charisma.

Adapted from CHARISMA: Seven Keys to developing the Magnetism that Leads to Success, © by Tony Alessandra, Ph.D., to be published February 1988, by Warner Books.

