

The four sins of poor listening

PEOPLE KNOW WHEN YOU ARE PAYING ATTENTION

“Most conversations are simply monologues delivered in the presence of a witness.”

—Margaret Miller

Part of the challenge to be a better listener is that it's simply not specific. We must know where we are strong and where we are weak and get feedback around both. One executive may need to turn off his computer and turn to face people to prove he is listening. Another may need to paraphrase more to confirm that she, in fact, did listen. Either way, listening shows respect, competence and interest. It may be the most transcendent skill in business.

To help you monitor your own listening effectiveness, keep these following four sins in mind:

1. Interrupting. If you are a frequent interrupter, you may as well say, “I really am not interested in paying attention to what you have to say because what I have to say is more important than what you're saying.” Typically, you don't mean to communicate this idea to a client or supervisor when you interrupt, but that's the message you're sending. The problem is that we think we have good reasons to interrupt. Think back to a recent instance when you interrupted someone at work. Did you do so because the other person said something that energized you and you just couldn't wait to contribute your idea, you disagreed with the other person and were so angry or disturbed by his position that you felt compelled to state your own or you felt the other person was being

long-winded and you were too impatient to allow him or her to finish?

None of these are good reasons to interrupt. Try respectful, patient silence instead. It will pay dividends

2. Finishing the other person's sentences. This may seem like harmless enough behavior, but it conveys another message that hurts relationships: “I know how to complete your thoughts better than you do.” I'm sure that most of you who commit this sin do so with good intent. You think you're showing your boss that you're on the same wavelength, that you think alike. Or you're demonstrating to a client that you not only meet his needs but anticipate them.

3. Lying or faking it when you haven't been paying attention. For whatever reason, you're distracted. Your attention wanders and you miss everything someone is telling you. Rather than admit that you didn't get everything, you attempt to fake it. You nod your head. When the other person asks if you agree with him, you say yes. You remember one thing your relationship partner said and focus on that issue to demonstrate you were paying attention. You may think you got away with it, but you're probably wrong. Other people simply don't like confronting you when you're not listening. They may not call you on it, but they know your mind was somewhere else. When you're really listening, people know it. Remind yourself that other people can sense if you're not listening, so

don't fake it. Force yourself to be honest and admit you didn't catch everything that was said. Request that he repeat it. Ask for clarification or elaboration. In this way, you're being honest rather than deceitful — and deceit kills results-producing relationships fast.

4. Rehearse your agenda while the other person is talking. Doesn't everyone do this, especially when managing up? Isn't it natural to think about how you're going to phrase your request for a raise or a transfer to a new department as the other person is talking? Ideally, you'll do your “rehearsing” before you meet with someone. Of course, you have to think about what you're going to say in response to what your relationship partner is telling you. The problem is when you concentrate on what you're going to request or propose to the point that you're disconnected from the conversation. The best way to avoid this disconnection is by rehearsing prior to the performance. Know what you're going to say before you meet. In this way, you'll free yourself from having to figure out what you're going to say on the fly. The easier you make it to concentrate on the other person, the more likely you'll be perceived as a good listener.

Quick steps to take in order to gain listening wisdom:

- Practice silence.
- Eliminate distractions.
- Show nonverbal attentiveness.
- Use the “repeat principle.”
- Empathize.
- Ask good questions. <<

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