

A P P E N D I X C

Participative Listening

Most people think of listening as something that comes naturally—that we do every day—and generally this is true. Yet good listeners, like good leaders, are ones who learn from what they hear. To really hear what someone is saying you have to be able to suspend your preconceptions and judgment which can act as “background noise,” distorting or drowning out the meaning someone is trying to convey. Moreover, a good listener needs to encourage communication by focusing on what is being said and providing verbal and non-verbal indications that she is following the speaker’s train of thought. Below are some suggestions to aid you in listening and participating in dialogue. Try them out at home or at work to experiment with which strategies work best for you.

Listening

Suspend Assumptions: Suspending assumptions respects the speaker. It allows her ideas to come to you unhindered by your own predeterminations and prejudices. To do so demonstrates confidence in your own cognitive processes and your ability to assess information on its own merits. People who are most fearful about suspending judgment tend to lack confidence in their own position or beliefs.

Enter the Speakers’ Frame of Reference: To help you understand another’s point of view, try to imagine the speaker’s frame of reference. Ask yourself, what has she experienced that has led her to these convictions? What is the background or context for the perspective she is conveying? Try to imagine how you would feel or what you would think if you had experienced the same.

Pay Attention: Paying attention may seem like an obvious aspect of listening, yet it may be the hardest to achieve. Following a speaker’s arguments or train of logic can be difficult, especially if the speaker is repetitive, or uses difficult words or an unfamiliar style of speaking. Listening can also be taxing if the speaker’s use of language demonstrates a different level of education or if she is slow at framing her ideas. A good listener can sift through a speaker’s word choice to hear the speaker’s ideas without bias.

Participating in Dialogue

Provide Non-Verbal Responses: What you do not say in a conversation can carry as much meaning as what you do say. Consciously and unconsciously we all give non-verbal clues about our thoughts and impressions of what others are saying.

There are many non-verbal cues that you can give to demonstrate that you are paying attention and have heard what the speaker is saying. Leaning forward, keeping your arms uncrossed and open, looking alert, making eye contact, and nodding when you agree are just a few ways of encouraging someone who is speaking to you.

Provide Verbal Responses: Listening is not only a mental and physical exercise; there are also verbal cues you can give to demonstrate that you are listening to and following what a speaker is saying. Among them are:

- **Expressions and Exclamations:** Important verbal indicators include simple expressions or exclamations in response. For example, saying “yes,” “of course,” “bmmm,” or even “ub-buh,” when a speaker pauses or finishes a point she is making.
- **Paraphrasing:** Another tactic is to paraphrase (summarize in your own words) back to the speaker what she has said. Paraphrasing forces you to pay close attention to what the speaker is saying and provides an opportunity for the speaker to confirm whether you have understood her meaning. For example, paraphrasing a speaker’s comments might sound something like, “So, you are saying you have had so many past unpleasant experiences working with that organization that, even with its new director, you feel it is not worth taking the risk to work with them again?”
- **Follow-up Questions:** Very often, follow-up questions can be a good way to guide a speaker. Sometimes a speaker may have only a general sense of what she means to say, and follow-up questions help her to formulate more specific conclusions. Successful follow-up questions are ones that truly enhance your understanding of the speaker’s narrative or perspective. By listening attentively to the speaker you may perceive gaps in her narrative about which you can inquire. Questions that seem merely antagonistic or are unrelated to the topic at hand can have the negative effect of hindering a speaker’s ability to communicate effectively and may even silence her. Constructive follow-up questions relate to what the speaker is saying but remain open-ended. For example, “What did you do next? Were you able to help?” Or, “What would you have done if you had been told of the problem sooner?”

The best thing about constructive listening is that it tends to be contagious. As you find yourself being more attentive and learning more from what others are telling you, you will be participating in a dynamic that fosters respect and interest among others. Whether you are in an employment, family, or social situation, you will find that when individuals feel that they have been heard, they will usually become more open to listening to others.