

S-TLC: Listening Effectively

A good listener in conflict will listen not only to what is being said, but also to what is left unsaid or only partially said. Effective listening involves observing body language and noticing inconsistencies between verbal and non-verbal messages.

1. Stop Talking. Don't talk, listen. When somebody else is talking listen to what they are saying, do not interrupt, talk over them or finish their sentences for them. Stop, just listen. When the other person has finished talking you may need to clarify to ensure you have received their message accurately. *"If we were supposed to talk more than we listen, we would have two tongues and one ear."* Mark Twain.

2. Prepare Yourself to Listen. Relax. Focus on the speaker. Put other things out of mind. The human mind is easily distracted by other thoughts – what's for lunch, what time do I need to leave to catch my train, is it going to rain – try to put other thoughts out of mind and concentrate on the messages that are being communicated.

3. Put the Speaker at Ease. Help the speaker to feel free to speak. Remember their needs and concerns. Nod or use other gestures or words to encourage them to continue. Maintain eye contact but don't stare – show you are listening and understanding what is being said.

4. Remove Distractions. Focus on what is being said: don't doodle, shuffle papers, look out the window, check texts or similar. Avoid unnecessary interruptions. These behaviors disrupt the listening process and send messages to the speaker that you are bored or distracted.

5. Empathize. Try to understand the other person's point of view. Look at issues from their perspective. Let go of preconceived ideas. By having an open mind we can more fully empathize with the speaker.

6. Be Patient. A pause, even a long pause, does not necessarily mean that the speaker has finished. Be patient and let the speaker continue in their own time, sometimes it takes time to formulate what to say and how to say it. *Never interrupt or finish a sentence for someone.*

7. Avoid Personal Prejudice. Try to be impartial. Don't become irritated and don't let the person's habits or mannerisms distract you from what they are really saying. Everybody has a different way of speaking - some people are for example more nervous or shy than others, some have regional accents or make excessive arm movements, some people like to pace while talking - others like to sit still. Focus on what is being said and try to ignore styles of delivery.

8. Listen to the Tone. Volume and tone both add to what someone is saying. A good speaker will use both volume and tone to their advantage to keep an audience attentive; everybody will use pitch, tone and volume of voice in certain situations – let these help you to understand the emphasis of what is being said.

9. Listen for Ideas – Not Just Words. You need to get the whole picture, not just isolated bits and pieces. Maybe one of the most difficult aspects of listening is the ability to link together pieces of information to reveal the ideas of others. With proper concentration, letting go of distractions, and focus this becomes easier.

10. Wait and Watch for Non-Verbal Communication. Gestures, facial expressions, and eye-movements can all be important. We don't just listen with our ears but also with our eyes – watch and pick up the additional information being transmitted via non-verbal communication.

Common Barriers to Listening

There are many things that get in the way of listening and you should be aware of these barriers, many of which are bad habits, in order to become a more effective listener. Barriers and bad habits to effective listening can include:

You find the communicator pleasant/unpleasant and you pay more attention to how you feel about the communicator than to what they are saying. Perhaps you simply don't like the speaker - you may mentally argue with the speaker and be fast to criticize, either verbally or in your head.

Not focusing and being easily distracted, fiddling with your hair, fingers, a pen, phone etc. or gazing out of the window or focusing on objects other than the speaker.

Identifying rather than empathizing - understanding what you are hearing but not putting yourself in the shoes of the speaker. As most of us have a lot of internal self-dialogue we spend a lot of time listening to our own thoughts and feelings - it can be difficult to switch the focus from 'I' or 'me' to 'them' or 'you'. Effective listening involves opening your mind to the views of others and attempting to feel empathetic.

Sympathizing rather than empathizing - sympathy is not the same as empathy, you sympathize when you feel sorry for the experiences of another, to empathize is to put yourself in the position of the other person.

You have preconceived ideas, bias or prejudice - effective listening includes being open-minded to the ideas and opinions of others, this does not mean you have to agree but should listen and attempt to understand.

You make judgments, thinking, for example that a person is not very bright or is under-qualified so there is no point listening to what they have to say.

Previous experiences – we are all influenced by previous experiences in life. We respond to people based on personal appearances, how initial introductions or welcomes were received and/or previous interpersonal encounters. If we stereotype a person we become less objective and therefore less likely to listen effectively.

Having a Closed Mind - we all have ideals and values that we believe to be correct and it can be difficult to listen to the views of others that contradict our own opinions. The key to effective listening and interpersonal skills more generally is the ability to have a truly open mind - to understand why others think about things differently to you and use this information to gain a better understanding of the speaker.

Selective Listening: This occurs when the listener thinks they have heard the main points or have got the gist of what the speaker wants to say. They filter out what they perceive as being of key importance and then stop listening or become distracted.

Defensive Listening: Perceiving personal attacks in the comments of the other.

Non-Verbal Signs of Ineffective Listening

Although with all non-verbal signals a certain amount of error has to be expected, generally signs of inattention while listening include:

Lack of eye contact with the speaker – listeners who are engaged with the speaker tend to give eye contact. Lack of eye contact can, however, also be a sign of shyness.

An inappropriate posture - slouched, leaning back or 'swinging' on a chair, leaning forward onto a desk or table and/or a constantly shifting posture. People who are paying attention tend to lean slightly towards the speaker.

Being distracted - fidgeting, doodling, looking at a watch or phone, yawning.

Inappropriate expressions and lack of head nods - often when a listener is engaged with a speaker they nod their head, this is usually an almost subconscious way of encouraging the speaker and showing attention. Lack of head nods can mean the opposite – listening is not happening. The same can be true of facial expressions, attentive listeners use smiles as feedback mechanisms and to show attention.

Adapted from: Skills you Need