Home &Digital --- WORK &FAMILY: Tuning Out: Listening Becomes a Rare Skill

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ABSTRACT

A 2006 study of college students showed they spent about 24% of their time listening to others face to face or in groups, down from 53% in 1980, when a comparable study was conducted, says Laura Janusik, an associate professor of communication at Rockhurst University, in Kansas City, Mo. Participants sat in pairs and took turns focusing for three minutes on their partners' words, body language and emotions without interrupting or reacting, then repeated back to the speaker what they heard, says Peter Bostelmann, the company's director of mindfulness programs, who ran the listening program.

FULL TEXT

Plenty of programs teach people to speak -- but few train them to listen.

Even before the age of digital distractions, people could remember only about 10% of what was said in a face-to-face conversation after a brief distraction, according to a 1987 study that remains a key gauge of conversational recall. Researchers believe listening skills have since fallen amid more multitasking and interruptions. Most people can think more than twice as fast as the average person talks, allowing the mind to wander.

The failure to listen well not only prolongs meetings and discussions but also can hurt relationships and damage careers. However, it is possible to improve your listening skills -- first, by becoming aware of the ways you may tune others out.

Some people are busy thinking about what they want to say next. One salesman repeatedly urged a customer to set a meeting with company decision makers, says Paul Donehue, who coached the salesman. "The customer said yes, and the salesman said again, 'If we could just schedule that meeting.' You could see that he totally missed it," says Mr. Donehue, president of Londonderry, N.H., sales-management consulting firm Paul Charles &Associates.

Others listen only long enough to figure out whether the speaker's views conform to their own, says Bernard Ferrari, author of "Power Listening" and dean of the Johns Hopkins University Carey Business School, in Baltimore. Still others interrupt to spout solutions -- often before the problem has fully been identified, Dr. Ferrari says.

A major obstacle to listening is a common tendency to filter and judge others' talk based on pre-existing assumptions, expectations and intentions, says Julian Treasure, an author and speaker on conscious listening. Many people listen in a critical way, brushing off information from people they think have little to offer, says Mr. Treasure, chairman of the Sound Agency, of Surrey, England, which helps companies link their brands with sounds

or music.

A 2011 study in Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes found that the more powerful the listener, the more likely he is to judge or dismiss advice from others.

With such filters in place, "I'm listening from a kind of concrete bunker that I've built many years ago, that I'm not even conscious of," Mr. Treasure says.

People may be getting less practice in listening. A 2006 study of college students showed they spent about 24% of their time listening to others face to face or in groups, down from 53% in 1980, when a comparable study was conducted, says Laura Janusik, an associate professor of communication at Rockhurst University, in Kansas City, Mo. Many people don't try to remember what they hear because "we can always Google it and find it again," she says. "Our ability to communicate face to face has decreased a lot."

After years of training in speaking and presentation, Ella Morgulis, a product manager in Palo Alto, Calif., for SAP, a maker of business-application software, had training in "mindful listening" last year. Participants sat in pairs and took turns focusing for three minutes on their partners' words, body language and emotions without interrupting or reacting, then repeated back to the speaker what they heard, says Peter Bostelmann, the company's director of mindfulness programs, who ran the listening program. The program is based on a 2012 book by Google engineer Chade Meng-Tan, "Search Inside Yourself."

Ms. Morgulis says she learned not to react if she disagrees "but to absorb things, and to get into this calmer state." She also learned to think positive things about other participants before starting a meeting or conversation. She has noticed that she feels closer to co-workers, and "people go out of their way to help me with my projects."

Improving listening skills can help teams work more smoothly. Anne Hardy's 20-member team at SAP encompasses 14 nationalities, and it is sometimes hard to get them to listen to each other, says Ms. Hardy, an SAP vice president. After she had the group take the training in January before a three-day team meeting, colleagues listened better, as well as "paying attention to emotion and trying to calm down before they responded to someone." The session was unusually productive, she says.

To prepare for an important conversation, write a list of things you want to say or questions to ask. This "relieves the brain of that burden of thinking about what you're going to say next," Mr. Donehue says. "When the conversational thread comes to a natural end, instead of panicking about where you're going to go next, you have it written down."

Barbara Miller, an Austin, Texas, communications skills coach, recommends doing a brain dump on paper before a conversation -- writing down all the thoughts that might distract you from listening and setting the paper aside until later. She also advises asking clarifying questions during a conversation, such as, "What do you need from me right now?" This "makes people focus their gripes."

Taking notes or making eye contact can keep the mind from wandering, Mr. Donehue says. Setting a goal for a talking-to-listening ratio also can help, such as talking 25% of the time and listening 75%, he says.

During a conversation, Mr. Treasure recommends keeping in mind an acronym, RASA -- for receive, by paying attention to the person; appreciate, by making little noises such as "hmmm" or "oh"; summarizing what the other person said, and asking questions afterward.

Employees who don't believe their bosses are listening to them are less likely to offer helpful suggestions and new ideas, says a 2007 study of 3,372 workers in Academy of Management Journal. They're also more likely to become emotionally exhausted and quit, according to another study, published recently in the Journal of Business Ethics.

In many workplaces, talking is more valued than listening -- or at least that is what people assume. For a long time, Bill Gamelli thought his job as a manager was to do most of the talking "and come up with an answer for everything," says Mr. Gamelli, senior vice president, customer services, for William Raveis Real Estate, Mortgage &Insurance, in Shelton, Conn.

Working with a coach, Amy Ruppert, Mr. Gamelli learned to listen "at a deeper level, not just for words but for the feeling and meaning behind them," says Ms. Ruppert, chief learning officer in Chicago at Coaching Out of the Box, a training firm. Ms. Ruppert advises focusing closely on the speaker, watching facial expressions and tone of voice, asking probing questions and using pauses to draw out more information. "People will tell you so much to avoid the discomfort" of a long silence, she says. Mr. Gamelli believes the techniques have enabled him to solve problems, give the kind of feedback employees need and retain some valued managers who otherwise might have quit.

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DETAILS

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