Prepare to Become a Better Listener

Improving your listening skills requires some mental preparation. You must

- assess your current listening skills to identify areas for improvement
- become more aware of your own internal voice
- learn some ways to coach yourself
- develop greater empathy for others
- identify & control emotions

Develop Self-Awareness

Developing awareness and control of your own emotions can have an enormous effect on your ability to listen effectively. Nothing can prohibit your ability to listen accurately and objectively more than strong emotion. If you are angry, you may misinterpret what the other person is telling you, casting the message in a negative light to match your mood. If you are sad or depressed, you may tune out of the conversation.

However, it is not only negative emotions that can hinder effective listening. For example, if the person speaking is someone you feel very good about, you may assume you agree with the message and fail to pay full attention to what is being said.

The first step to understanding your emotions more is to pay attention to them. This is easiest to do with intense emotions. When you experience these emotions, name the emotion and notice the accompanying physical sensations. Some examples of these sensations are trembling, stomach ache, sweating, tingling, dry throat, euphoria, flushing, and heart palpitations.

Pay attention to your self-talk while you experience your emotions. Douglas Stone, author of *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*, suggests that the way to manage your inner voice is to turn up the volume of your self-talk, rather than to tune it out. This way, you can learn your self-talk patterns. You can learn what your inner voices tend to say and which ones are worth listening to.

Once you've started noticing your feelings, move in for a closer look. Keep a log of situations that provoke you. Describe the situations and the people involved as well as your feelings and responses. After several weeks of doing this, review the log. Look for patterns. Search for beliefs and actions that you would benefit from improving.

Or try the "left-hand column" technique, which was first invented by Chris Argyris for executive coaching. These are the steps for this technique:

1. Take a sheet of paper and draw a line vertically down the center.
2. In the right-hand column, write the details of a dialogue that did not go well, or at least not as well as you might have liked.
3. Write the actual statements used as well as a description of the circumstances.
4. Then, in the left-hand column, write what you were really thinking throughout the conversation.
5. Review the left-hand column. Answer these questions:
    - What effect did my inner voice have on the conversation?
    - What did my inner voice lead me to believe that may or may not have been true?
    - How did my inner voice open up my thinking and the thinking of my partner?
    - How did my inner voice close my thinking and discourage the thinking of my partner?
    - How did my inner voice make me feel? Make my partner feel?

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* Adapted from *Listening Pays Off - Effective Listening* by Chris Battell - http://common.books24x7.com/book/id_14414/book.asp?bookid=14414&refid=HQUJK

Learning New Self-Talk

- The next time you complain to yourself or even out loud, "They just don't listen," remind yourself: "Maybe the real problem is that I haven't been listening to them."

- Repressive, judgmental, or negative self-talk can stand in the way of your ability to listen clearly. The following table presents some examples of inner voice statements and inner coach responses that you can use to change your self-talk. You can also use these examples as models to create new responses to your inner voice.

Open table as spreadsheet **Inner Voice**	**Inner Coach**
I am the boss, and I don't deserve to be challenged!	Why not use the challenge to learn?
Her fear is a weakness, and I won't hear it.	Her fear makes her human; you should seek to understand it.
I am supposed to have the answers and tell him.	You are supposed to help him find the answers and become the best.
I shouldn't have to baby sit these employees!	Actually, dealing with employees is your job, isn't it? Why not work to get better at it?
I have *real work* to do!	Coaching employees may be your most important *real work*.
But I know the right answer. Why waste time talking?	Are you sure your answer is the best one? And, by the way, aren't you here to teach employees to think, not just to hand out answers?
I need to protect people from bad news so they don't get upset.	What makes telling the truth such a bad thing? Don't people deserve that?
What good will it do to hear his anger if I can't fix it?	Listening to him until he feels heard will open the door to possible solutions.

- What did I do based on the inner voice? Did that help or hurt?
- What opportunities did I grasp or miss based on the inner voice?
- What does the inner voice reflect about that particular relationship and how might it shape that relationship?

Greater awareness of your emotions will enable you to identify situations, events, and individuals that affect your ability to listen objectively. When you know what your emotional triggers are, you can take steps to control them.

Coach Yourself

Once you have surfaced the inner voice and decided that the voice needs lessons, turn on your inner coach. Your inner coach can firmly talk back to the inner voice, much the way a top coach may talk to an elite athlete. Counter the repressive or judgmental or negative self-talk with self-talk that opens up your mind and your opportunities. See the sidebar Learning New Self-Talk at left for examples of self-talk that can open you up to new possibilities.

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Develop Empathy

According to Robert Bolton, author of *People Skills*, empathy is one of the three essentials of effective communication. He defines empathy as "the ability to really see and hear another person and understand him or her from his or her perspective."

Three characteristics affect the quality of empathy:

1. A sensitive and accurate understanding of the other person—thoughts, feelings, actions—while remaining separate from the person.
2. An understanding of the situations that trigger another person's experiences.
3. Communication of that understanding to promote a feeling of acceptance and being understood in the other.

Daniel Goleman, author of *Working With Emotional Intelligence*, describes empathy as sensing other's feelings and perspectives and taking an active interest in their concerns. People who are empathetic

- are attentive to emotional cues and listen well
- show sensitivity and understand other people's perspectives
- help out based on understanding other people's needs and feelings.

Although empathy involves a sincere attempt to understand the perspective of the other person, it is not "psychologizing" or invasively using pop psychology theories to explore another person's life. Nor is empathy agreement or acquiescence. Understanding the other person's perspective does not automatically lead to yes answers. Empathy improves communication and fosters relationships.

Identify and Control Emotions

A common thread that runs through many effective listening tactics, strategies, and habits as well as leadership skills is the importance of emotional self-control. Out-of-control emotion stops a person from being able to listen.

Emotional triggers in communication are in one of three areas: speaker, topic, and words. Can you remember an occasion when you got angry with a speaker that you don't get along with? Were you able to listen to what he or she had to say? If the speaker used a word or phrase that insulted you, were you able to continue listening?

Note also that your emotion as a listener can stop the speaker from continuing. Your nonverbal behavior broadcasts your emotions and can shut the speaker down. In the end, what you have is failed communication and the loss of all kinds of opportunities.

Not only negative emotion can affect your ability to listen. Positive and neutral emotion can also affect it. When you aren't aware of your positive reaction to certain speakers, topics, or words, you easily become lazy in your listening. Because you like what you hear, you may relax your listening and not pay attention to the details.

Although neutrality seems like the way to go in listening, it can result in ineffective listening behaviors. Emotional neutrality can lead to passive and uninterested lack of activity. In essence, neutral emotions can lead to an "I don't care" attitude that stops you from listening effectively.

So how do you control your negative, positive, and neutral emotions? First of all, you identify the individuals, topics, and language that trigger these emotions in you. Because these shift continuously, it's helpful to make it a habit to write down lists of negative, positive, and neutral triggers once a quarter for at least a year. What is the benefit of doing this? Once you know your emotional triggers, you are in a better position to control them.

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The second step is to learn to exercise control. To do this, purposely seek out individuals, topics, and language that negatively affect your emotions and listening. Practice emotional control by

- taking responsibility for accurately sensing and interpreting the messages
- identifying the purpose of the communication
- identifying the structure of the communication
- taking meaningful notes
- withholding emotional judgment and responding rationally.

If you continually practice these techniques, you will reduce the effect of your emotional triggers and focus on the speakers message, purpose, and content. You will find some additional suggestions for controlling your emotions below.

Six Simple Suggestions

Changing deep-seated emotional responses to people, topics, and language is hard. It takes a lot of time, and it takes a lot of effort. However, these six simple suggestions can help:

1. Prior to every listening situation, identify the people, topics, and language that affect you emotionally (don't forget that this applies to positive and neutral emotions also). This practice will make you aware of who and what stimulates your reactions, which puts you one step closer to self-control.
2. Determine why these people, topics, and language affect you the way they do. Think about past experiences or encounters that have influenced your emotional evaluation and reaction.
3. Reduce the emotional impact of people, topics, and words by developing a defusing defense mechanism. A good one to use is rationalization, which involves attempting to convince yourself that the person, topic, or word isn't as bad as you think it is. No matter what defense mechanism you use, try to eliminate your emotionally conditioned responses.
4. To compensate for an initial bias—whether positive, negative, or neutral—defer judgment. Remember that you need to sense and interpret the entire message before you can respond.
5. Exercise empathy by trying to take the speaker's point of view while you listen. Seek to understand the reasons for the speaker's views and arguments, even if they are different from your own. Remember: Understanding another person's perspective is not agreement or acquiescence.
6. Put your personal feelings into perspective. Remember your experiences, including your cultural and educational background, have made you who you are. If you critically evaluate your own views, you will be better able to relate to the ideas of others.

Adapted with permission from Lyman K Steil and Richard K. Bommelje's Listening Leaders™ The Ten Golden Rules to Listen, Lead, and Succeed.

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