

effective environments newsletter



CONSULTANTS TO NONPROFITS, SMALL BUSINESSES & ENTREPRENEURS

Listening And the Art of Communication

Often, we think we can make everything right if we only know the right thing to SAY. Consider, however, that more problems of the world (and of our personal lives) may be solved through powerful, active listening than through all the wise words we might muster. Though it may seem counter-intuitive, listening has more power than speaking — and even makes our speaking more effective.

Have you ever had the experience of speaking to one or more people when no one seemed to care and no one was really paying attention? It can be extremely trying. Each word seems to come with effort, and your purpose can even be forgotten or lost in the verbiage. On the other hand, speaking to someone who offers rapt and undivided attention can prove effortless and remarkably successful. Powerful listening literally stimulates our creativity, encourages our enthusiasm, and draws out our very best. We wax eloquent and can even

surprise ourselves with the brilliance of our speaking. If we're not paying attention to what is happening, we may give ourselves all the credit for this experience. In fact, the active listening provides the environment that makes this kind of speaking possible.

Active listening, then, means having a commitment to truly "get" or understand what is being said by another without judgement. Active listening is other-focused and is a way of being in communication with another person that engenders empathy and understanding.

Active listening is a gift

Sometimes the experience of being truly "listened to" seems unfamiliar. We may go from day to day with a sense of feeling vaguely dissatisfied with our communications — as though we are competing for attention, never really fully heard. When we encounter an active listener, one who makes us feel that what is being expressed is more important

than any available distraction, the world is suddenly altered. The experience is intoxicating, supportive, truly a gift. It is such an easy gift to give. It need not be a rarity.

Active listening is the key to successful communications

People are complex. We don't always think through what we authentically think and feel before putting it all into words. We may speak unartfully — failing to carefully coordinate inflection and body language so as to ensure that our message is consistent. The result can be ambiguous (at best) and disastrous (at worst).

Consider the power of inflection alone. An entirely different meaning will be given to the sentence "I never said he stole money" depending upon which word is emphasized. Sometimes, it's a wonder we are able to communicate at all!

Hence, it is no small thing to truly HEAR what is said, before we respond to it. This means



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paying close attention and sometimes asking clarifying questions before formulating a response. If there is any doubt, reframe what was just heard, to ensure that you captured what was truly meant.

Listening solves problems

By waiting to ascertain what is truly meant before responding, we can avoid disagreements and conflicts that come from misunderstandings and from taking things personally that were not intended so. When we put ourselves in the shoes of the speaker, we are far less likely to take umbrage at what is said. We are also less likely to interrupt and not get the whole meaning, and we are more likely to hear with compassion and to respond constructively.

Listening builds relationship

To truly listen, it is necessary to hear the unsaid. It is also necessary to pay attention to who is speaking, to hear what that person is fundamentally committed to and to work to understand what is truly meant. Insofar as the listener succeeds, the result is a profound appreciation of that person, of who they are and what they stand for, even a sense of being inspired by them. That appreciation, and the compassion that stems from it, are great bridge-builders. With clarity and understanding can

come alignment and even partnership. Inevitably, affinity grows and relationships develop.

How is powerful (active) listening accomplished?

It begins with a commitment to make it happen.

Then, bring yourself fully to the job of listening. Be here now! Stop whatever else you are doing, eliminate distractions, turn away from thoughts of what you'll say when the other person has finished talking.

Hear the words, and think about what is being said.

Listen for the unsaid. What is the speaker's facial expression and body language saying? Is there excitement present? Sadness? A commitment to convey information or to share an experience? Test your understanding by asking clarifying questions.

Make your speaker feel heard by making eye contact, keeping an open body posture, and offering friendly, encouraging expressions of your own — including nods, smiles or serious looks as appropriate.

Respond appropriately: Ensure you have permission to speak. Don't interrupt. Be sure you communicate what you heard (and *that* you heard) before you offer your own

views and before you change the subject.

Listen proactively — to hear the underlying commitment rather than searching for the point with which you don't agree. Find your common ground, or at least the point you can appreciate in what is being said. Listen, in other words, with open heart and mind.

This Applies Everywhere

Every individual appreciates being heard. Apply the practice of active listening at work, at home and in your community. It will make a difference everywhere.

It's worth it!

Taking the time to listen is worth it. You will save time in the long run and cultivate relationships that support everyone.

Listen up. It's worth it.

2005 CALENDARS AVAILABLE

2005 Week-at-a-glance calendars for the effective environments Personal Accomplishment System are now available. Send your check for \$20, payable to **effective environments**, to us at the address on this newsletter. We also accept MasterCard and Visa.

EMPOWERING VOLUNTEER BOARDS

Do you serve on a nonprofit board of directors? Is your board as effective as it can be? Molding a group of people into an effective board takes both the commitment of the individual board members and a process for forming the board as an effective team to guide the organization. We are passionate about empowering volunteer boards. Our approach includes workshops, meeting facilitation and retreats. All our work with your board is designed to address the needs, issues and concerns of your board and agency. Call us to find out how we can make a difference with your board.