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Tips for listening – really listening

WOMEN AT WORK

Sally Ward

In a recent survey (Axton) of more than 200 leaders and managers, more than 70 percent ranked listening well in their top two attributes for effective leadership.

Yet studies show that the average person doesn't listen well and recalls only 50 percent of what is said. That's because most people listen at the first and most basic of three levels, internally focused listening.

Level one listeners are preoccupied. While the other person is speaking, they're busy mentally rehearsing a reply or rebuttal, judging what's being said, and interpreting according to their own experience.

Level two listeners are actively engaged, listening closely with the intent to understand. They tune out distractions, concentrate on what is being said without worrying how they'll reply, and try not to let their thoughts wander. Upgrading your listening to level two is as easy as these practices:

- Maintain eye contact.
- Offer acknowledgement with non-verbal gestures such as head nodding or smiling.
- Use subtle encouragers such as "Oh?" "Uh-huh" or "Say more."
- Acknowledge feelings. For instance, if the person you're speaking with is about to explode, say, "You seem very angry."
- Reflect back what you've heard, paraphrasing the other person's words. "You're saying that ____."
- Don't interrupt.
- Ask open-ended questions starting with "what" or "how" for clarification. For example, "What is your main concern?"
- While gathering information, withhold your opinions.

Finally, to step into your full power as an effective listener, tap into Level three, global listening. Pay close attention to what lies *beneath* the words. Notice body language, tone of voice, emotions, and mood.

Do you sense confusion? Hostility? Enthusiasm? Uncertainty? Name it. Don't be attached to your intuition. if it's wrong, you will still have opened the door to a meaningful discussion.

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