Active Listening Wins Clients

By Kimberly Rice

All too often, we read studies, which report clients’ pet peeve with their services providers who do not listen to them. Or, cited another way, clients frequently do not feel heard.

Given the personal nature of a services provider-client relationship, neither party wants to maintain a connection and/or continue doing business with someone if she does not feel heard and affirmed. That does not even address the negative messaging being relayed through constant interruptions in the speaking exchange or the inaccurate inferences being drawn from a distracted or neglectful listener.

Given that listening is such an integral part of the communication process, it is essential that we analyze the listening process and how to harness the power of active listening for the sake of developing stronger relationships.

Fact: an untrained listener is likely to retain about 50 percent of a conversation shortly after it is finished. The retention rate drops to 25 percent merely 48 hours later. A n untrained listener’s recall of a conversation more than a couple of days ago will almost always be incomplete and usually inaccurate. It is no wonder, then, that miscommunications and disagreements ensue so frequently.

These facts may beg the question - how do we manage to deliver extraordinary client service and superior work product if we remember so little?

Could our world be any noiser? There are many of us whom remember a time when every single person did not hold a smartphone in her hands and that dozens of sounds would emanate from it. While adding the convenience factor to our lives has certainly come with a price, I would have never imagined the overwhelming “noise pollution” that our respective universes would become with all the dings, rings and buzzes we are confronted with every single day.

Listening vs. Hearing

Listening is a learned behavior. Notice that I did not state, an autonomic habit. In our noisy world, we have developed a default of letting the noise hover around us without even actually hearing a word. Personally, some individuals speak so quickly, I cannot even decipher the words they are speaking. In short, it takes a concerted effort and regular practice to become an active listener.

From the time we are born, we heard many sounds and noises around us. As we began to develop listening skills, we learned how to interpret what we heard and assigned meaning to those sounds. Listening is not an innate talent, but something we develop as a result of practicing sound principles which, in itself, requires frequent practice.
One of the basic problems we face is taking for granted the powers we have. We think because we have a brain, we can think. Because we have ears, we can listen. Not necessarily.

More often than not, we do not listen effectively. Because we live in a very noisy world, we can be overwhelmed by all the sounds. The good news is we also have the ability to interpret the noises, but what we actually do is a completely different question.

Let us learn how to move beyond merely hearing the words people utter to embracing and processing more completely the full message a speaker is attempting to communicate, verbally and nonverbally.

What is Active Listening?

Actively listening is a method of listening and responding to another individual(s), which improve mutual understanding. It is an essential aspect of effective communications between one or more people and involves a very human process. Moreover, active listening is a method by which to elicit information and emotions from a speaker, thereby gaining intimacy with him/her. As an active listener, you are an active participant in the communications process, which is vital if you want to be productive in all pursuits.

Four components of active listening:

1. Clarifying involves asking for more information and requesting the speaker elaborate upon a statement he made.

2. Repeating is best understood as mirroring another’s message in your own words to confirm that “message sent is message received”. This act ensures everyone is on the same page.

3. Reflecting includes restating or clarifying the underlying feelings that are attached to the speaker’s communication. That is to say, to reflect would be to ask someone to clarify her anger over what you are speaking about. By doing so, is to encourage your speaking partner to greater awareness of the feelings she is expressing, either verbally or nonverbally.

4. Summarizing is the act of reviewing and re-capping major points of a discussion/presentation.

Taking deliberate steps to incorporate the actions above into your daily communications with clients and colleagues will further your understanding and engagement into the communication process, and lead to greater awareness and sense of collaboration.

Below are five impediments to effective listening:

1. Considerable effort required. An active listener has increased blood pressure, higher pulse rate and more perspiration. Similar to learning to jog, one must begin gradually and work up to integrating these new behaviors into your daily routine. Doing so is as much a state of mind as a physical activity. The more you improve, the ever-increasing benefits will become clear.

2. Enormous competition for attention. In no time in history has there ever been more stimuli competing for our attention than in
this 24/7 world of endless media cycles. It is challenging to segregate our listening from information overload. All the more reason to tweak our active listening skills and develop the necessary discipline to hear what is truly important.

3. “Know it all” attitude - You know the type of listener who thinks he knows what you are going to say before you even say it. Check yourself from being this person. Though you may know well the substance of what is being discussed, do not assume a full understanding whereby you feel compelled to interrupt. For courtesy’s sake, hear others out. You may actually learn something new.

4. The speed gap – Scientifically, there is a time difference between the pace at which we speak and how fast we listen. The average person speaks between 135-175 words per minute though she can comprehend between 400-500 words per minute. In short, there is plenty of time to jump to conclusions, daydream, or plan your reply. Avoid the temptation for your mind to wander. In those precious seconds or minutes, you may miss a few points, which may be critical to your relationships or business opportunities.

5. Don’t know how – As initially stated, most individuals have had no formal training in how to actively listen so it is no great surprise that listening effectively is the most neglected and least understood of all aspects of communication. By taking a few thoughtful steps, however, you can introduce new actions to improve and with practice become a strong active listener.

Steps to Become an Effective Listener

• Concentrate. Focus your attention on the speaker by blocking out distractions such as noise, lights, things going on around you, extreme temps, etc. Empty yourself of “mind clutter”.

• Blocking may mean you must move out of the sight line of distractions, people moving around near you, whispering, lighting up their phone, etc.

• Speaker: avoid becoming distracted by some physical characteristic of the speaker such as his dress, presentation style, mannerisms, accent, or grooming. Close your eyes if you need to really focus on what is being said.

• Examine motives – are you open to new ideas/information? It can be instructive to weigh what is being discussed against any personal value and belief system. Check any judgments at the door.

• Acknowledge. Active listeners show interest and attention both verbally and nonverbally in some of the following ways:

• Eye contact - is likened to a mental handshake and can be an effective form of connecting.

• Verbal responses and vocal cues (“hmm,” “amen”, “that’s right”) - show interest.

• Non-verbal cues (smiling, leaning in towards speaker, nodding head occasionally, etc.)

• Actively engage. Make clarifying statements. Restate or paraphrase speaker’s point to ensure understanding. (“If I heard you correctly...”; “If I understand you...”).

• Research and respond. Gather and observe information about the speaker. Ask questions and give feedback. This two-way flow creates a “meeting of the minds” between a speaker and listener and allows the speaker to expand upon her topic.

• Exercise emotional control. Address highly-charged messages in a thoughtful manner. Wait until the entire message is received before reacting.

• Sense nonverbal message. Be aware of what a speaker is saying/not saying with his body language and gestures. Body language comprises 65% of communication so you want to pay attention.
• Structure and organize information as it is received. It can be a productive use of the time gap between speaking and hearing speeds.

• Indexing, like outlining - mentally or on paper - what a speaker says dramatically increases comprehension and recall. Listen for “for example,” or “let me elaborate on that,” and you will know that a rationale, a sub point, or a supporting point is likely to follow.

• Sequencing - listen for an order or priority. This technique is important when order is crucial (listen for “1st, 2nd, 3rd “, and so on). Sometimes the sequence of information is essential.

What Using Active Listening Skills Will Do

• Increases trust, credibility, rapport and cooperation.

• Helps to sharpen your radar when trying to identify business problems with which you can help.

• Makes others feel appreciated and valued.

• Saves time by reducing mistakes and misunderstandings.

• Helps alert you to prospective business development opportunities.

• Relationship building and, along with it, active listening is a process of proactively, intentionally and strategically cultivating rapport over time that leads to new and more work. If you listen to be heard as a part of building relationships, you will be heard and your efforts will be more successful more often.

• A general misconception exists that states if you are not speaking, you are not educating someone to working with you. A shift in thinking is necessary to understand that asking sound questions and active listening are more powerful than talking. It places you in a position to learn what your colleagues and clients are thinking and they will make a decision to engage with you based more on what they are thinking than on what you are saying.

• Ultimately, active listening is one of the greatest gifts you can give yourself and others, in the furthering of all relationships.

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