



The Gift of Listening

By Avrum D. Lapin

“The art of conversation lies in listening.”
Malcom Forbes

When engaging in conversations, we usually believe that we are listening, but in reality, we are often barely hearing. Too many times while we hear people speaking, we are consumed with formulating our response, rather than simply trying to understand the intent or the import of the speaker. Modern technology makes it easy to multi-task, only making focusing a greater challenge. Active listening is a critical skill that needs to be consciously developed, nurtured, and implemented. Truly listening while people are speaking takes willing commitment, not just passive reception.

There are many techniques to becoming an active listener, and all of them require dedication, awareness, and purpose. The most obvious initial step is to put down devices, look away from screens and engage with the other speaker. Give the person speaking your full attention and respect. Needless to say, eye contact is a good indicator that what is being said is important and that the listener is ready to communicate.

Tips for Being a More Effective Listener:

1. **Use Engaging Body Language.** This means not slouching or slumping or turning away from a person. Do not fidget or look around the room. According to by Prof. Albert Mehrabian of the University of California in Los Angeles's now widely accepted study from the 1970's, 55% of communication is body language, 38% is tone of voice and 7% are the actual words that are spoken. This means that be aware of the speaker's body language; it is almost as important as what one's own nonverbal cues are communicating. That's why in-person meetings, even real time video chats or meetings, are always more meaningful and productive than conference calls.
2. **Focus on what is being said, not what you think is being said.** When others are speaking, for that moment try to set aside your own thoughts and agenda. Don't

mentally fill in the blanks or try to jump ahead until it is your “turn” to reply. If possible, jot down notes or phrases that capture the essence of the speaker’s thoughts.

3. **Repeat back to create an agreement of understanding.** Before you change the subject or move onto another topic, it helps to create a consensus around what you just heard, and a basis for continuing the thought process and planning leading to agreement. Summarizing phrases like, “So what you are saying is...” or “I understand that you mean...” demonstrate that you are truly listening to what is being said. Ask relevant questions to clarify or confirm.
4. **Don't create solutions.** Especially in the world of organizational advancement and fundraising, leaders and donors should be given space to come to conclusions on their own and not be told how to solve their problems, or the size the gift they must make. By coming up with their own solutions, guided by personal interest – and an explanation of the needs and the difference the dollars will make – supporters will feel more vested and a deeper sense of engagement.
5. **Circle back.** Nothing says “I was listening” like having one’s own words respectfully repeated back later in the discussion. Referencing conversations and suggestions lets people know that they were heard and that what they had to say was important and impactful. When following with a donor, bring up specifics. Show that you their words carried weight and had a lasting effect.

Active listening invites a host of benefits. Chief among them is the creation of a meaningful relationship where people feel understood and respected. Honing listening skills will also make for smoother dialogues with fewer misunderstandings, leading to more effective and smoother solutions.

And, while listening skills elevate all types of relationships, it can be especially beneficial for volunteer and professional leaders to create meaningful and engaging connections. Meeting with leaders and donors are a regular part of a development leader’s and professional’s job description. Those interactions are prime opportunities to update and engage leaders and donors around programs, activities, and events, advance opportunities, and shed light on and addressing issues and concerns.

These meetings are wonderful venues to encourage donor input, hear donor’s suggestions, and understand their vision and how their experience aligns with the mission of your organization or initiative. Imagine how much more productive meetings could be if the time was spent listening to donors, rather than speaking to them! Donors resent being made to feel like ATMs. This helps avoid that.

In fact, in training organizational and campaign leaders we always stress that in the context of the “ask,” the asker should talk 30% and listen 70%, leaving a guided but open platform for the donor to arrive at his/her decision on their own terms.

And because donors are not ATMs, they must be enabled and empowered to contribute more than just through their checkbooks. They are being asked to be, and must feel, part of the solution, part of the change that is making a difference and having a real impact on their communities.

Whether in meetings, in person or through social media, there are many opportunities to engage with donors and give them an opportunity to be heard. Listening to donors is a free, easy, and essential way to foster a sense of engagement and ownership. Donors who feel part of the process are more likely to continue and deepen their support.

The act of active listening is a gift, not only to the speaker but also for the listener. Being able to fully appreciate and engage with someone who is trying to communicate will pay dividends long after the conversation has ended.

My colleagues and I are interested in your experiences. Let us know what you are thinking.

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