

What Great Listeners Actually Do

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Connecting the strategy and needs of the organization with employees' talents, energy, and passion.

Chances are you think you're a good listener. However, people's appraisal of their listening ability is much like their assessment of their driving skills, in that the great bulk of adults think they're above average.

In our experience, most people think good listening comes down to doing three things:

- Not talking when others are speaking.

- Letting others know you're listening through facial expressions and verbal cues.
- Being able to repeat what others have said, practically word-for-word.

In fact, much management advice on listening suggests doing these very things—encouraging listeners to remain quiet, nod and “mm-hmm” encouragingly, and then repeat back to the talker something like, “So, let me make sure I understand. What you're saying is...”

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However, our recent research suggests that these behaviors fall far short of describing good listening skills.

We analyzed data describing the behavior of 3,492 participants in a development program designed to help managers become better coaches. As part of this program, their coaching skills were assessed by others in 360-degree assessments. We identified those who were perceived as being the most effective listeners (the top 5 percent). We then compared the best listeners to the average of all other people in the data set and identified the 20 items showing the largest significant difference.

With those results in hand we identified the differences between great and average listeners, and analyzed the data to determine what characteristics their colleagues identified as the behaviors that made them outstanding listeners.

We found some surprising conclusions, along with some qualities we expected to hear. We grouped them into four main findings:

- **Good listening is much more than being silent while the other person talks.** To the contrary, people perceive the best listeners to be those who periodically ask questions that

promote discovery and insight. These questions gently challenge old assumptions, but in a constructive way. Sitting there silently nodding does not provide sure evidence that a person is listening, but asking a good question tells the speaker the listener has not only heard what was said, but that they comprehended it well enough to want additional information. Good listening was consistently seen as a two-way dialogue, rather than a one-way “speaker versus hearer” interaction. The best conversations were active.

- **Good listening included interactions that build a person’s self-esteem.** The best listeners made the conversation a positive experience for the other party, which doesn’t happen when the listener is passive (or worse, critical!). Good listeners made the other person feel supported and conveyed confidence in them. Good listening was characterized by the creation of a safe environment in which issues and differences could be discussed openly.

- **Good listening was seen as a cooperative conversation.** In these interactions, feedback flowed smoothly in both directions with neither party becoming defensive about comments the other made. By contrast, poor listeners were seen as competitive—listening only to identify errors in reasoning or logic, using their silence as a chance to prepare their next response. That might make you an excellent debater, but it doesn't make you a good listener. Good listeners may challenge assumptions and disagree, but the person being listened to feels the listener wants to help, not to win an argument.
- **Good listeners tended to make suggestions.** Good listening invariably included some feedback provided in a way others would accept and that opened up alternative paths to consider. This finding somewhat surprised us, since it's not uncommon to hear complaints that "So-and-so didn't listen, he just jumped in and tried to solve the problem." Perhaps what the data is telling us is that making suggestions is not itself the problem; it

may be the skill with which those suggestions are made. Another possibility is that we're more likely to accept suggestions from people we already think are good listeners. (Someone who is silent for the whole conversation and then jumps in with a suggestion may not be seen as credible. Someone who seems combative or critical and then tries to give advice may not be seen as trustworthy.)

Many of us have thought of being a good listener being like a sponge that accurately absorbs what the other person is saying. Instead, what these findings show is that good listeners are like trampolines. They are someone you can bounce ideas off of. Rather than absorbing your ideas and energy, they amplify, energize, and clarify your thinking. They make you feel better not merely passively absorbing, but by actively supporting. This lets you gain energy and height, just like someone jumping on a trampoline.

Of course, there are different levels of listening. Not every conversation requires the highest levels of listening, but many

conversations would benefit from greater focus and listening skill. Consider which level of listening you'd like to aim for:

Level 1: The listener creates a safe environment in which difficult, complex, or emotional issues can be discussed.

Level 2: The listener clears away distractions like phones and laptops, focusing attention on the other person and making appropriate eye contact. This behavior not only affects how you are perceived as the listener; it immediately influences the listener's own attitudes and inner feelings. Acting the part changes how you feel inside. This in turn makes you a better listener.

Level 3: The listener seeks to understand the substance of what the other person is saying. They capture ideas, ask questions, and restate issues to confirm that their understanding is correct.

Level 4: The listener observes nonverbal cues, such as facial expressions, perspiration, respiration rates, gestures, posture, and numerous other subtle body language

signals. It is estimated that 80 percent of what we communicate comes from these signals. It sounds strange to some, but you listen with your eyes as well as your ears.

Level 5: The listener increasingly understands the other person's emotions and feelings about the topic at hand, and identifies and acknowledges them. The listener empathizes with and validates those feelings in a supportive, nonjudgmental way.

Level 6: The listener asks questions that clarify assumptions the other person holds and helps the other person to see the issue in a new light. This could include the listener injecting some thoughts and ideas about the topic that could be useful to the other person. However, good listeners never hijack the conversation so that they or their issues become the subject of the discussion.

Each of the levels builds on the others. For example, if you've been criticized for offering solutions rather than listening, it may mean you need to attend to some

of the other levels (such as clearing away distractions or empathizing) before your proffered suggestions can be appreciated. We suspect that in being a good listener, most of us are more likely to stop short rather than go too far. Our hope is that this research will help by providing a new perspective on listening. We hope those who labor under an illusion of superiority about their listening skills will see where they really stand. We also hope the common perception that good listening is mainly about acting like an absorbent sponge will wane. Finally, we hope all will see that the highest and best form of listening comes in playing the same role for the other person that a trampoline plays for a child. It gives energy, acceleration, height and amplification. These are the hallmarks of great listening.

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About Us

Zenger Folkman relentlessly seeks to rise above the inconsistent, and sometimes misleading, nature of popular leadership philosophies and beliefs brought on by opinion. The discipline of leadership and those who pursue it deserve better. Our most valuable asset is the expertise of combining hard data and statistical analysis with logical explanations and actionable application that help individual leaders thrive and organizations succeed.