



COVID-19: WHY LISTENING MATTERS

Action items for better listening

1. Set aside any potential distractions, such as your phone or incoming emails. Fully engage and don't try to 'multi-task' (it's a myth anyway!).
2. Adopt an open, relaxed body position. Your aim is to come across as committed to this conversation and keen to hear what the speaker has to say.
3. Be fully present and mindful. Don't let your thoughts wander away from the topic under discussion. Give the conversation your full attention.
4. Resist the temptation to interrupt. Allow the speaker to finish. Focus on what they are saying, not on rehearsing what you'd like to say next.
5. Listen with your eyes too. Notice non-verbal aspects of the conversation, such as gestures and facial expressions.
6. Use small signals and signs such as nods, smiles and 'mm' or 'yeah' to show your attention.
7. Ask questions to clarify and check you have fully understood both the speaker's meaning and their intention or purpose.
8. Demonstrate you have understood the speaker's emotions and feelings about the topic as well. Acknowledge and affirm these aspects through skilful paraphrase, using your own words, not simply repeating theirs.

Good listening is particularly important right now

In this challenging period, most organisations are dealing with very difficult issues and having to do so virtually. For a team, solving problems and making decisions using Zoom and other platforms can be an unfamiliar experience. It's different from the more common teleconference or webinar format where the emphasis tends to be on information sharing. There the task is simply to contribute your point as clearly and concisely as you can. But thinking well together is more complicated and thus cognitively much more demanding. To share your thinking processes in real time, synthesise ideas along with colleagues and create breakthrough solutions together – all this requires sophisticated listening skills.

The problem is that no individual operating alone can tackle the complex and unpredictable challenges now facing all sectors of our economy. Suddenly, the ability to listen well has become fundamental to success, yet it is so often one of the weakest business skills. Our education and business systems groom us to speak. They don't equip us to listen.

Listening – an overlooked driver of results

UGM's filmed research of professional teams demonstrates that all too often kudos is given to those who advance their own agenda by grabbing the spotlight. In too many leadership programs, the focus is heavily on rhetoric, persuasion, argument, presenting and debating. There is little or no space given to the complex and multi-faceted skills involved in listening well to others.

Ironically, poor listening is a frequent cause of miscommunication, misunderstanding, lowered productivity and disengagement. We filmed teams where the person with the critical contribution that would help solve the problem the team faced was not listened to. A meeting that should have taken one hour took two. We paused many meetings and asked team members to write down what the current speaker had just said. Depressingly few people could. They weren't listening. Instead, they were waiting for the current speaker's lips to stop moving so they could seize the speaking turn for themselves!

What's involved in being a good listener?

Often it's easier to describe a bad listener than a good one. We've all encountered people who look at their phone, laptop or watch when someone is speaking. They might fidget, interrupt or respond illogically to what was just said. They can be patronising, dismissive, defensive or even aggressive. But avoiding these things won't automatically turn you into a good listener. It will just be less obvious that you're a bad one! Good listening is, in fact, a complex skill set, with multiple facets. But these skills can be learned.

First, there is an attitude component. This is about genuine respect and inclusion, as well as a willingness to create a safe environment that fosters open conversation and mutual understanding.

Second, to be a good listener, you have to pay very close attention to what someone is saying since, when people speak, they don't always say exactly what they mean. This is generally not deliberate. Sometimes a good listener has to go beyond the content meaning to bring to the surface a speaker's underlying intention. This is particularly important in diverse teams comprising members with different backgrounds, genders, ages, professions and life experiences. A point or a line of argument may not be couched in an expected way. The good listener always seeks to understand the message behind the words, not just the dictionary meaning they carry.

In addition, a good listener is adept at decoding the subtle verbal and non-verbal cues that signal how the speaker is thinking and feeling. Good listeners characteristically engage in what's called responding behaviours, for example, eye contact, head nodding and other encouraging non-verbal signals.

They also assume everything is relevant and use skilful questions to seek clarification when they may not have fully grasped the speaker's intent. This prevents the business risks that flow from miscommunication and unchallenged errors. They use paraphrase and summary to link and connect team members' contributions, in order to progress the issue at hand in a dynamic way. Finally, in our research, it's notable that effective teams don't shy away from disagreement. They know that dissent frequently leads to better thinking and better decisions. Avoiding opposing views may be more comfortable but it also introduces the risk that something key will be missed. Listening well is a critical step in managing disagreement productively. If you listen to someone, they're more likely to reciprocate by listening to you.

Make listening well a team priority

When you're busy and stressed, juggling the multiple challenges of home-based work, you can easily forget to listen properly. You might come in too quickly with your opinion; jump to an unwarranted conclusion; assume you know what someone is going to say; misunderstand someone's real meaning or miss a crucial non-verbal clue. If these things happen, everyone loses. UGM research underscores that trust and rapport are actually more fragile in virtual contexts. Listening well involves a complex set of interrelated skills but everyone can improve with support and practice. As the philosopher Henry David Thoreau commented, "The greatest compliment ever paid to me was when one asked what I thought, and attended to my answer."