

## Listening Skills:

### One Key to Successful Negotiation

The best listeners almost always turn out to be the best negotiators. Why? Invariably, the best negotiators observe the communication skills, both verbal and nonverbal, of their counterparts; they note how other negotiators use word choice and sentence structure for effect; and they study vocal skills like pitch, tonal quality and rate of speech. Experts on listening suggest that we all make at least one major listening mistake each day. For negotiators, such mistakes can be costly.

### Common Listening Mistakes

Negotiators tend to run into three pitfalls that hinder effective listening:

- \*They think of negotiation primarily as a job of persuasion—and to them, this means talking. They seem to forget that it is difficult to persuade other people when you don't know what motivates them!
- \*They tend to overprepare for what they are going to say next, and use their listening time just waiting for their next opportunity to speak. In doing so, they may miss information vital to the negotiation.
- \*They fail to hear what they do not want to hear. They may not even be good enough listeners to know when people have no intention of buying their product or using their service—and thus they waste their time in fruitless negotiations.

### Attentive Listening Skills

Learning to be a great listener is hard work, but the rewards make it worth the effort. The following rules of attentive listening will help you become a successful negotiator.

1. **Be motivated to listen.** Realize that the person with the

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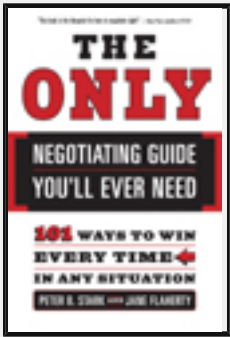
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most information usually receives the better outcome in a negotiation. This fact should be incentive enough to be a better listener! The more you can learn, the better off you will be.

2. **If you must speak, ask questions.** Your questions should have two goals: to get more specific and better refined information, and to uncover your counterpart's needs and wants. With this in mind when asking questions, move from the broad to the narrow, and eventually you will have the information you need to make the best decision.

3. **Be alert to nonverbal cues.** Although it is critical to listen to what is being said, it is equally important for you to understand the attitudes and motives behind the words. A negotiator doesn't usually put his entire message into words. His verbal message may convey honesty and conviction while his gestures, facial expressions and tone of voice convey doubt.

4. **Let the other party tell her story first.** A printing salesperson once told me how he had tried to impress a new prospect by mentioning that his company specialized in two- and four-color printing. The prospect then told the salesperson that her primary need was for one-color printing. The salesperson replied that, of course, his company also did one-color printing, but the prospect had already made the decision not to give him her business.

5. **Do not interrupt when the other party is speaking.** When you interrupt a speaker, you are not only being rude, you may also be cutting off information that could help you later in the negotiation.

6. **Fight off distractions.** Try to create a situation in which you can think clearly and avoid interruptions. Interruptions tend to prevent negotiations from proceeding smoothly, and may even cause a setback.

7. **Write everything down.** It is amazing how much

conflicting information will come up later in the negotiation. If you are able to correct your counterpart or refresh his memory with facts and figures from earlier in the session, you will earn both credibility and power.

**8. Listen with a goal in mind.** Know what you want to find out, and then listen and look for verbal and nonverbal cues that provide the information you are seeking. When you hear specific bits of information, such as your counterpart's willingness to concede on the price, proceed to more specific questions.

**9. Give the other party your undivided attention.** Your goal is to create a win/win outcome so your counterpart will be willing to negotiate with you again. Thus, he needs to think you are fair, honest and decent. One way to help achieve this goal is to pay close attention to your counterpart. Look him in the eyes when he is speaking. Also observe his nonverbal behavior--what message is it sending? Does he seem nervous and desperate to complete the negotiation? Is he lying or telling the truth? Careful observation will help you determine the true meaning behind your counterpart's words.

**10. React to the message, not the person.** If you are going to react to something the other party says or does, attack the message, not the person. If you offend your counterpart's dignity, she will not be willing to negotiate with you again. Try to understand why your counterpart says the things she does. Negotiators are people who are trying to change a relationship. Your counterpart is trying to change it according to her best interests. If you were in her shoes, wouldn't you do the same thing?

**11. Don't get angry.** In the angry mode, you tend to shut out your counterpart, and you are probably not in a frame of mind to make the best decisions. Emotions of any kind hinder the listening process. If you are going to get angry, do it for the effect, but retain control of your emotions so you can keep control of the negotiations.

**12. Remember, it is impossible to listen and speak at the same time.** If you are speaking, you are tipping your hand and not getting the information you need from your counterpart. Obviously, you will have to speak at some point in order to meet your needs and goals, but it is more important for you to learn your counterpart's frame of reference. With this information, you will be in control of the negotiation.

In your next negotiation, make a point of speaking less and listening more. Remember that to achieve a win-win outcome, you must understand your counterpart's needs. To gain this understanding, your listening effectiveness is critical.

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