



CONSULTING SCOOP



## Are You Really Listening? Your Career Could Depend on It

[By Randy Siegel]

Most of us don't get it. Few skills are as critical to our success as consultants as our abilities to listen. And even though we may think we are good listeners, most of us are not.

In order to be good listeners, we must be active listeners. Active listeners:

**Make a commitment to listen.** They take deep, cleansing breaths, minimize distractions, look the speaker in the eye, and make a silent commitment to listen.

**Listen to understand first.** Instead of mentally framing their responses, active listeners pay close attention to what the speaker is saying. They listen with their eyes as well as their ears, place their agendas aside, reserve judgment, and don't interrupt.

**React to the message.** Active listeners are "whole body listeners." In addition to maintaining excellent eye contact, they offer positive cues like smiling, leaning into the speaker, nodding, and taking notes.

**Briefly summarize.** Active listeners paraphrase, but don't parrot. They allow time for the speaker to respond and confirm if they understood correctly.

We spend more time listening—55%—than any other form of communication, according to a U.S. Department of Labor study. Because

we listen so much, it also means that there are more opportunities for confusion and misunderstanding. A University of Minnesota study showed that nearly 60% of misunderstandings in the business world can be attributed to poor listening.

In today's business world, active listening is not enough. To be a great communicator—or what I call a "high-voltage communicator"—we have to listen empathetically. When we listen empathetically, others feel seen, heard, and understood. Empathetic listeners:

**Focus on feelings even more than facts.** They look for what is *not* being said. They look at facial expressions, notice tone of voice, and pay attention to their own gut reactions. They know that by focusing on feelings, they encourage the speaker to explore the core of the problem—his or her emotions.

**Nudge the speaker to a solution.** In most cases, if you allow the speaker to talk all the emotion out, he or she will start looking for solutions. I once worked with a young man who was

passed up for a promotion and was unsure of how to proceed. "What do *you* think you should do?" I asked. "Quit," he too quickly replied.

I then told him about one of my first jobs out of college; I was constantly making mistakes because I couldn't handle multiple projects. Instead of facing an upcoming review, I quit. Months later, in a new job, I found myself in a similar situation. Only when I learned how to manage multiple details did my career advance.

My young client identified with my story and soon came up with a plan. He would ask his boss for feedback on his performance and ask what he needed to do in order to get promoted. He would then draft a development plan, review it with his boss, and seek his help. My client's plan worked, and within six months, he was promoted.

**Mirror the speaker physically.** We must remember that empathy is a feeling, and as such, it transcends words. We can often convey empathy more effectively in silence—with a look or pause—than with words. Physically, we can become more empathetic by mirroring the other person's:



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- Breathing rate
- Voice speed and volume
- Gestures and posture (when appropriate)

These tips will help you become a more-active and empathetic listener and communicator. More importantly, they

will help you become a better employer, manager, consultant, salesperson-and person.

**About the Author**

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