Take the Time to Listen

Listen is the second tool of civility. There are four skills of language, speaking, reading, writing and listening, all of which humans use to communicate with each other. There appears to be a consensus that listening is the most important. To accurately define listening, we need to separate that skill into its two types. Hearing is a physical process which is always occurring and often subconsciously. Throughout the day we hear a variety of sounds other than human voices. Very often we are preoccupied when someone is speaking to us and only pick a part of their words. Listening is a psychological process which requires our focus, concentration and both our mental and physical attention. Listening is the ability to accurately receive and interpret messages in the communication process.

Adults spend about 70% of their time in some form of communication, 45% listening, 35% speaking, 10% reading and 9% writing. Rachel Naome Kiment states “ Perhaps the most important thing we ever give another person is to listen”. I think it goes even rather than that. It is also the most important thing that we can give to ourselves, our community, out state, our country, our world. When we do not practice our listening skill in every conversation we have, we misunderstand the message. We take action on that wrong information. Let’s just consider a few effects on our personal relationships- you miss a luncheon date with a friend, your feelings are hurt because your friend did not remember an important event that you were involved with, a committee member did not bring the dessert for the meeting, and your friend no longer wants to maintain your friendship. Just imagine what might be the possible consequence on a wider scope. Some could be disastrous.

While knowing that listening is crucial, in this 21 century it is not always easy to be focused on every conversation we have. First there so many sounds that we are hearing at the same time. As I write this article, I am hearing the west wind blow, the sounds of the waves, my husband giving me some information, the furnace coming on, and my thoughts of what I want to write next. These are but just a few distractions that each of us face daily as we attempt to listen. We have tended to try and minimize their effects and believe we can do several things at once. In truth we are not truly listening and risk getting an inaccurate message.

As such we need to be more diligent in our listening. The following are 10 Principles that can be of help.

1. Stop Talking- Allow the person to complete their thoughts which may include pauses. You need to not interrupt, talk over and finish the sentence.
2. Prepare Yourself to Listen- You need to become aware of your current distractions and try to eliminate them from you thinking and focus on the speaker.
3. Put Speaker at Ease- You need to maintain eye contact with the speaker and use gestures like nodding your head to encourage the speaker.
4. Remove Distractions- You need to try to avoid any new distractions.
5. Empathize- Too fully understand you need to try and understand the experiences the person has had that has led them to have these ideas. You need to let go of your preconceived ideas. It may help to ask questions about their life experiences that will help you to better understand their perspective.
6. Be Patient- Each person has their own way of telling their thoughts. Give them the space to do so.
7. Avoid Person Prejudice- While we all have our preferences in all aspects of our lives, we need to be impartial about the speaker’s choices.
8. Listen to the Tone- Besides the words, the manner in which the words are spoken can give more information.
9. Listen to the Ideas- Usually the speaker is sharing the pieces of one’s opinion. You need to identify all these ideas to help you to fully understand.
10. Wait and Watch for Non-Verbal Communication- Words are not the only thing being communicated. The speaker will make gestures and facial expressions which will further help your understanding.

The power of words is that you listen and will understand.

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