

Are You Listening to me?

Have you ever had the feeling that what you are sharing is falling on deaf ears? This is truly a growing reality and concern affecting all sectors of our society. In my role as a therapist and educator I encounter individuals on a daily basis from all walks of life who make the following statement: "I feel what I have to say doesn't really matter at all." This is all too often true in personal relationships as well as work related relationships, particularly between supervisors/managers and their team members. Good relationships require good communication and good communication starts with great listening skills.

I love how Susan Scott author of the best seller *Fierce Conversations* puts it: "Each conversation we have with our coworkers, customers, significant others, and children either enhances those relationships, flat-lines them, or takes them down. **Given this, what words and what level of attention do you wish to bring to your conversations with the people most important to you?**" (1)

Improving our listening skills involves a few simple basic steps. I have sized it down to four steps. The steps are easy; the discipline to follow through with them is where it gets a little challenging, but with some good old practice you can soon master the art of listening.

The first step is for you to start paying attention to how well or poorly you listen. This simply gives you a greater awareness of your own listening skills. Ask yourself these questions: How present am I in this conversation? How much do I value this person? What impact could the content of this conversation have on my relationships? The answers to these questions could significantly alter how personally invested you are in your conversations with people who matter to you.

The second step to better listening skills involves what I call "the be in the moment step." Drop everything! Don't think of your answers, get defensive, finish the other person sentences, jump to conclusions or judge the content of what is being shared. Just listen – be in the moment. Focus and let the other person know they have your full attention. Most certainly avoid comparing what the person is sharing with one of your own "this reminds me of ..." stories and please don't offer advice unless asked. Another small tip – this is not the time to check your text messages!

The third step is best described as follow: Listen for more than words, concepts or ideas. Listen for passion, emotions, and convictions – the non-verbal. Pick up on the nuances of the tone of voice and body language. This is particularly important for managers/supervisors when listening to their employees. This purposeful attentiveness can truly invite unusual opportunities for your best moments of effective communication and leadership. Author and medical doctor David Posen states: "Exemplary leaders are good listeners: They are not only receptive to new and innovative ideas, but also to uncomfortable truths and dissenting voices in the company. This includes messages relating to high stress levels and pressure points in the organization." (2)

And my fourth and final step: Engage with words that indicate you have been listening. Ask questions that will allow the person to elaborate. Convey an appropriate emotional response that lets the person know you are connecting to the content of what is being shared.

Now these steps can be turned in on yourself. Tune in to your own personal voice. Listening to your own personal inner voice is an invaluable exercise one needs to engage in on a regular basis. I call this listening for greater self-awareness, but that is a topic for another article.

Listening skills improve your self-confidence, polish your professional approach, and help nurture the relationships that matter to you.

1. Susan Scott, 2002, *"Fierce Conversations: Achieving Success at Work and in Life One Conversation at a Time"* p. 7.
2. David Posen M.D. *"Is Work Killing You: A Doctor's Prescription for Treating Workplace Stress"* p. 252.