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Can You Hear Me Now?

It's time to address the lost art of listening.

By Libby Gill

Is anybody out there really listening? Because I have a feeling it's not just a coincidence that I've had so many people, including my own mother, suggest that I write about that apparently lost art. Fortunately, I listened.

When I was teaching at a local university, a student told me about an interesting feat she'd pulled off in her conversational French class. At the first class, the instructor asked everyone to go around the room and introduce themselves in French. Then he jokingly challenged the group for a volunteer to repeat the forty-plus names of the students in the class. The woman, a fearless type, piped up and told him she'd give it a try.

Each person offered up his or her, "Mon nom est Matt or mon nom est Suzanne," individually butchering the French language. When they'd completed the introductions, the instructor asked the young woman to recall each name. To everyone's surprise, she rattled off every name without missing a one.

When I asked her if this was some kind of mind game or memory trick, she responded, "It was simply a matter of focused listening. I made a conscious decision to listen more deeply than we normally do in everyday conversations, in social settings, or even in the lecture hall."

Intrigued with her instinctive understanding of intensive listening, I considered the basic and not-so-basic components of the skill. Most of us learn listening basics as kids, from our parents, teachers and friends. Then we further refine our listening skills so we can use them to form relationships and get ahead in the workplace.

See how you're doing with your basic listening skills by asking yourself the following:

- Do you maintain appropriate eye contact with the speaker?
- Do you lean in, mirror body language and show the speaker that you are actively engaged in what he/she is saying?
- Do you refrain from interrupting until a break in the speaker's thoughts?

- Do you summarize or reflect back the speaker's ideas in positive ways?
- Do you ask thoughtful questions that encourage further dialogue?

“Focused listening” is the kind that allows you to remember the names of all your classmates or understand multiple concepts discussed during the course of a strategy meeting. It requires a deeper discipline from basic listening. Focused listening calls for commitment, concentration and caring.

I'm sure you've heard the example: imagine you're on a plane listening to the flight attendant recite the same old security procedures you've heard a hundred times before. Now imagine you're listening to those same procedures, only this time you've just been informed that your plane is about to crash. You might listen to the first set of instructions, but can you imagine how much more intently you'd listen the second time around when you realized your life was on the line? You'd be committed to hearing the instructions, to concentrating on the flight attendant, and to caring about the message.

Try the following to take your listening to a deeper level:

- Before attending a function where you'll meet a lot of new people, make the conscious commitment to remember the name of everyone you encounter.
- Whether in a social or business situation, shut out all distractions and concentrate on the speaker by focusing on the face as you talk. If you feel your attention getting diverted, zero in on the eyes.
- Connect with the speaker by genuinely caring about what he/she has to say. Listen to the intent behind the words and observe body language and demeanor. Fuel your focused listening with compassion and curiosity about the other person's point of view.

At UCLA, there's a scientist who's been studying “cellular acoustics,” that is, the sounds that individual cells make. His goal is to distinguish healthy cells from unhealthy ones by listening to their vibrations. If listening can cure disease, just imagine what it can do for you.

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