

Good listening is fundamentally important in our personal and professional lives no matter where we live or what our occupation or age.

It is so easy to be distracted. The ringing phone in your pocket or handbag, the message alert box popping up on your screen while you are typing an email, Twitter notifying you of direct messages, the never ending list of “to dos” running through your head while speaking to someone or the whining of a child by your side...the list is never ending.

Re-learning how to focus and concentrate is important, because good listeners have more opportunities to succeed at networking, in interviews and when making a sale. I can't tell you how often I have interviewed a potential new employee or a client, asked a question and gotten an answer that isn't really related to what I was asking. Clearly, the person was not practicing active, contextual listening!

Listening is the ultimate mark of respect and the basis for true collaboration. Listening is also the key to making the sale, to being of true service and the secret weapon to being an effective networker.

## The Four Types of Listening

1. Contextual
2. Active
3. Passive
4. Spousal

## What is Contextual Listening?

Many people are familiar with the form of listening taught in many courses – Active Listening. Contextual Listening takes it one step further and is a method of listening beyond the words in order to discern all there is to be heard and understood.

To practice contextual listening you need to:

- Listen for clues
- Ask questions to draw out the context
- Say what you heard to verify your understanding
- Remember the focus is on the other person (set your own agenda aside)
- Build rapport and establish trust ('be with' the person rather than listening too hard)
- Listen more than you speak (avoid thinking about what you will say in response while they are still talking)
- Observe their body language (context is critical)



## 10 ways to improve your contextual listening skills

Most of us have room for improvement in our contextual listening skills and techniques. I encourage you to practice the methods below over the coming weeks. In the beginning it may not feel natural, but be patient learning a new skill takes time and a layering of knowledge to build brain plasticity.

- 1. Really listen to one person for a whole day.** Choose one person and commit to listening to them- not just hearing them-for an entire day. After each listening practice, ask yourself: Was I able to quieten the voices in my head? Did I listen more than I spoke? Did I note what was not being said as well as what was said? Did I notice any words they used that told me more about their feelings?
- 2. Learn to listen with your eyes.** It is harder to be distracted if you are really focusing on the speaker. Also be aware of observing their verbal, vocal, and visual clues – what are their body language and eye pattern movements telling you?
- 3. Don't overdo eye contact.** Sometimes newcomers to the skill of listening can get carried away with eye contact and body language. They know they're supposed to have eye contact, so they'll stare so much the speaker will feel intimidated. Taught to nod their heads to show they're understanding, they'll start bobbing their head like a seagull waiting for a hot chip-this will break rapport.
- 4. Be slow to speak.** Don't interrupt. If someone else is interrupting, avoid the temptation to reply in kind - it'll just widen the rapport gap between you. Instead, be the one who shows restraint by listening to them, then quietly, calmly, taking up where you left off.
- 5. Hold the space for them.** Sit still and nod your head. Make sure your body language shows your interest and that you are almost holding an invisible space for them between you both (like Maxwell Smart's Cone of Silence). Lean in and keep your body turned directly to the other person.
- 6. Show gratitude.** Thanking someone for a specific piece of advice or information clearly shows that you were listening and paying attention. Plus, people love to be thanked...It really helps form a connection that could result in more opportunities to share and learn in future.
- 7. Practice mind-mapping.** An excellent method for taking a mental note of what the other person is saying is "mind-mapping." This free-form technique helps you take mental notes (or depending on the scenario written notes) quickly without breaking the flow of the conversation. Create a rough diagram to connect primary pieces of information, then break it into appropriate subtopics.
- 8. Be aware of your own body language.** What you do with your eyes, face, hands, arms, legs, and posture sends out signals as to whether you are, or aren't, listening. For example, if you are glancing sideways, sighing, yawning, frowning, folding your arms you are sending very strong messages to the other person. No matter what words come from your mouth, your body would be sending them a very different message.
- 9. Listen with empathy.** Listening with empathy means asking yourself, "Where is this person coming from?" "What is he or she asking for?" "How can I best support them?" I'm not suggesting you become everyone's shrink, however genuinely listening well is, at its heart, an act of love and kindness.
- 10. Commit to practising contextual listening.** Learning to be a contextual listener is like learning to be an active jogger. It takes effort. You start little by little and work upward. It's as much a state of mind as a physical activity. Besides, as you work longer and get better, it pays ever-increasing benefits. Start by appreciating that listening is as powerful as speech. What someone says to you is just as critical as what you have to say to them. Realise that listening saves time and effort meaning you will make fewer mistakes and have fewer misunderstandings.

### **About the Author**

*Coach, author, speaker, teacher and property investor, Heidi Alexandra Pollard, publishes Value Ad, a free monthly ezine for smart, savvy professionals who want more prosperity, passion and purpose in life.*

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