

Career Path: Listen Up Already!

Career Development



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When I teach law students about effective communication, I start by telling them the most important skill is none of what they're usually taught. It's not writing clearly or learning to be a great presenter. It is listening.

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Teaching lawyers how to listen is surprisingly hard. It's hard because it seems trivial. Everyone in my classes thinks they already know how to do it. Ironic, isn't it, that the greatest barrier to learning how to listen is that people don't listen to the lesson?

Master Skills to be Effective In-house Counsel

This article closes this series:

- The challenge (Why It's So Hard Being a Good In-house Lawyer);
- Writing plainly and clearly (The Day You Became Smarter);
- Taming the email monster (Write Better Emails Today);

- Avoiding time-wasting meetings (Maybe Don't Go to that Meeting);
- Influencing others (in Persuade Like Aristotle); and
- Engaging with others (this article).

For all the articles saying listening is important and giving advice about how to do it better, I find few digging into details about *why* listening is so important. They'll say listening well builds trust, encourages openness, or shows respect. Listening does do these things but they're not the most important reason to listen well.

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On a human level, we have a deep need to feel heard and be understood. Good listening builds a connection between you and the other person. That connection, in turn, allows both participants to engage in a conversation that tackles meaningful topics. We are far more likely to listen to someone whom we feel is listening to us. That's why, if you want to be a great communicator, you need to create connections by listening.

A good listener stands out

The great majority of modern interactions are superficial, fleeting, and of little consequence. In the work-from-home era, we're having fewer in-person conversations. Emails, social media, and Zoom calls punctuate our days. Thus, when someone slows down and appears to be willing to take time for a deep conversation, it stands out.

The traditional advice for listening better is to practice what's called "active listening." First developed as a tool to help clinical psychologists be more effective counselors to their patients, active listening has become mainstream in the business context. Unfortunately, the message got garbled in translation on the journey from psychology to business.

Active listening tips

I say this because there seems to be no consistent description of how to practice active listening. Most systems suggest listeners follow these steps:

0. Pay careful attention, listening to verbal and non-verbal cues.
0. Do not be judgmental or criticize what the person is saying, simply listen openly.
0. Think about what you hear and seek to clarify your understanding.
0. Repeat back what you heard and ask the person to confirm if it is correct.

Probably the biggest difference between active listening and what normally passes for conversation is the focus on the initial speaker. As the listener, you do not seek to introduce any new thoughts or ideas until you have luxuriated in the first person's thoughts. Explore their topic, look at it from

multiple angles, make sure you have really given their thoughts proper air time. You may never get to raising your own thought because, after all, this is about listening to the other person.

Contrast this with a normal conversation, which is you waiting for the other person to take a breath and stop blathering so you can get a word in edgewise.

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> first person's thoughts.

Turns out, however, that the advice for clinical psychologists on listening to patients doesn't transfer perfectly to the business world. These tips come from a study of managers' listening skills, What Great Listeners Actually Do, which I stumbled upon a few years ago.

Active listening in business

When we evaluate who is the most effective listener in the business context, we want something different:

- Paying attention does not mean silently listening. The best listeners **ask constructive questions**. This demonstrates that they are following along and understand what the speaker is saying.
- Withholding judgment is not enough. Effective listeners **give positive feedback** that encourages the speaker to be open. They do not necessarily agree with everything the speaker says, but nor are they trying to win a debate.
- A good listener also gives suggestions that make the conversation flow back and forth. They **serve as a sounding board** for the speaker's ideas and help develop and improve them.

I usually end these Master Skills articles by urging you to follow the checklist of steps I've outlined. Today I won't do that. Indeed, my advice for you is not to get hung up about whether you're actively listening or exactly what steps to follow.

While I hope the tips above inspire you to try some new things out, a single step will make you stand out as a super-listener. That is, simply paying attention and focusing on the other person without immediately trying to introduce your own point. Because listening is becoming a lost art, people will notice when you really pay attention to them.

Be well.

Question, comment? Contact Career Path columnist James Bellerjeau.

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James Bellerjeau



Lecturer

University of Zurich

James Bellerjeau is a lecturer in the LLM program of the University of Zürich and for the Europa Institut of the University of Zürich.

Bellerjeau served for two decades as group general counsel for Mettler-Toledo International Inc., an S&P 500 company with its worldwide headquarters in Greifensee, Switzerland. He then led Mettler-Toledo's global Sustainability program for several years through June 2021.

Bellerjeau shares thoughts on how to live a good life at Klugne. You can also follow him on LinkedIn.