

Listen Your Way to a Win

Community

Career Development



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Like many kids diagnosed with Lissencephaly, repeated pneumonia, respiratory illnesses, and periodic aspirations are all common parts of the families' journey, and also the most common cause of death to those kids.

My kid was admitted to the ICU a few months ago, for pneumonia. Sounds like a normal thing given his condition. As his primary caregiver, naturally, there is no one who knows his baseline like I do, which is far from how it looks like in regular kids. Right?

While I tried to explain to the admission doctor what my kid's normal looks like so we "agree" on a plan and next steps, he was not engaged and would not "actively listen." My kid is just another case that was hospitalized. And, the medical system rewards seeing more patients, based on pay for volume instead of providing individualized quality care to the patients.

So, for days, we were both reaching nowhere. My kid was not getting better, and the doctor kept being surprised that my kid wasn't receptive to the medication. He failed in two ways: asking me about my kid's history and recognizing that my kid's normal is different than others. Hence, his approach to the situation should have been tailored to meet the individual needs of my kid.

Active listening

While this is a personal situation, it triggered a professional thought. As in-house lawyers, we forget amid the high volume of work and contracts to review, that we (and our clients) can use some active listening too. Here is *why*…

Your active listening skills affect your clients and stakeholders' experiences…and yours! You and your client have the same objective: to find a solution to the client or stakeholder's problem. You are not in an adversarial relationship with the other party at fault.

Fortunately, active listening can be learned. Here are my takeaways to the *how*…

Practice mindful listening, focusing on your stakeholder's agenda or imminent need that needs solving.

You can't do that if you're thinking about what you are going to say after the other person finishes. You can figure that out in an instant — and with a more effective response — if you are fully listening to what the person is telling you. Both at the beginning and during the discussion, allow the stakeholder to finish his or her thoughts before you jump in.

Be open minded and concentrate on what they are saying: the specific words about the situation, things that are working well, challenges, and their concerns.

Concentrating on the client or stakeholder when they are speaking is not just a sign of respect, it is a vital aspect of understanding the situation at hand. They may bring up legitimate issues you need to address.

Establish trust through a friendly rapport. Don't rush to judgement. Validate feelings and offer affirmation.

What you are trying to achieve is active listening.

> **Active listening**: a conscious effort to not just hear the words but understand the complete message your client is communicating.

You may be tempted to be dismissive of a stakeholder who complains about you or your team being unsupportive or not responsive. But an important aspect of active listening is how you respond. When listening to a stakeholder, whether you agree or disagree with their opinion is irrelevant. Demonstrate concern and validate their feelings to improve your rapport.

Validating can be as simple as saying, "That sounds frustrating," or "I can understand your concerns."

Affirmations come in simple displays of gratitude, such as, "Thank you for sharing that with me."

But taking a moment to say these things creates a useful segue into further conversation and gives you a moment to understand before responding.

Eliminate distractions and maintain interest.

To be able to listen actively, you need to remove distractions. Time constraints and pressures are often unavoidable, but they should not compromise your support and focus when you are speaking to others, especially your clients. Maintaining interest is the key element of capturing important details. Approach every conversation with the mindset that this person has something valuable to teach you. Listen for hints between the lines, as well as to get a better understanding of the bigger picture.

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So, for your next meeting, sit down without any barriers between both of you. And whether online or in-person, no *multitasking*. This includes the computer or mobile phones.

Observe verbal and nonverbal messages while minding your own body language and nonverbal communication.

Don’t allow yourself to get distracted or bored. Communication is more than what you say, it is how you say it. The tone of a person’s voice can often tell you more than his or her words.

Make sure to provide feedback that indicates you have heard the message, which can be as simple as just nodding in agreement. Even this will help them to be more open and trusting.

Don’t interrupt and let there be silence.

Don’t be intimidated by periods of silence. These moments often ignite a desire to speak in your stakeholders. When they finish a story, give a 10-second pause to ensure they have nothing else to add. If you ask a question that gets an evasive answer, let the silence run longer.



Listening is an art that requires attention over talent, spirit over ego, and others over self. Artwork by Benjavisa Ruangvaree Art / *Shutterstock.com*

The silence is also a reminder for you to pause and reflect on the answers. Rather than interrupting to ask expansive questions, make a note and wait until your client is done speaking before asking for clarification or more details on specific topics.

Clarify and paraphrase.

Asking open-ended questions is the best way to have someone expand on what they've said and offer more information. Repeat their words back to them and ask if you're understanding correctly or if there are things that need further clarification, hence creating efficiency in your workflow.

Finally, make sure to ask if all of their questions have been answered.

While you should be seeking their questions throughout meeting with them, you don't want them to leave without fully understanding the next steps or your recommendations. Nor should you wait until there is an issue that is last-minute nor a bigger problem that needs to be resolved.

Listen your way to a win

My take home message here is "listen your way to a win."

While I recognize that it is difficult to satisfy all the stakeholders, actively listening will still help you

engage fully with your stakeholders and clients, make better decisions for the company, and increase business results.

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Yosr Hamza is a known champion of DEI, women empowerment, and creating opportunities for others who come from under-represented backgrounds (especially for those who are most marginalized and cast aside) to thrive throughout their career journey through mentorship, sponsorship, and authentic storytelling. She co-leads Gartner Legal and Compliance DEI Council and serves on Gartner's Middle East CSR Board Committee, the Board of Mosaic at Gartner, and Women at Gartner Employee Resource Groups (ERGs). She serves on the leadership of Small Law Department Network, New to In-House Network, and International Legal Affairs Network.