

Building Reflective Listening Skills

Listening shows respect for the speaker. One of the most important skills you can develop is the ability to listen in the context of the other person's experience. This is known as reflective listening.

You can show that you're listening to someone by your facial expressions — smiles, frowns, nods, grimaces. But reflective listening requires you to take this a step further. To be a reflective listener you must demonstrate that you've heard and understood the speaker by mirroring what the speaker said — repeating their thought back to them in different words. This gives them the chance to correct any wrong perceptions you may have.

The highest level of reflective listening is to mirror back not only the content of what was said, but also the *feeling*. Highly experienced reflective listeners can mirror back the feeling even without words. This is especially important if the speaker is presenting you with a problem or an opposing point of view. When people talk about their problems they want to know you understand the situation they're in, that you see their point of view. Reflective listening means you reflect back the other person's content and feeling *to their satisfaction* before you make your own point.

If the other person doesn't agree that you have accurately understood their point of view, ask for more information — ask them to help you understand. Reflective listening doesn't necessarily mean you agree with the other person's viewpoint. In fact, the best reflective listening doesn't agree or disagree, or even evaluate what is being said. It merely faithfully translates what the other person is saying.

There are many specific techniques you can use to help you listen more effectively.

1. Listen with your ears, your eyes, and your heart so body language can be understood when receiving the message.
2. Never assume anything. If you think someone *means* something other than exactly what is being *said*, ask for clarification.
3. Keep an open mind even when you don't agree with the information or the point of view being expressed.
4. Set aside your prejudices. Listen with the idea that what you are hearing will lead you to greater understanding, and greater understanding will lead to better relationships.
5. Desensitize yourself to trigger words that shut off your listening. You may tune out valuable information that you need for better understanding.
6. Tune out any issues or thoughts that keep you from listening effectively. Keep track of details from the speaker by mentally repeating them. Practice listening to a lecture or a church service with a rubber band around your wrist. The second your mind starts to wander, snap the rubber band to break the thought. Make a conscious effort to refocus on the verbal material.
7. Eliminate distractions (move away from coughing or other noises and ignore interruptions from others). Be “present” for the person you're listening to. Wherever you are, be *all there!* Don't interrupt the speaker.

8. Keep laughter, enthusiasm, and mental rebuttals to a minimum as you listen. Listening comprehension drops as listeners become animated.
9. Don't sit in judgment on the speaker's delivery. Very few people are excellent speakers either formally or informally. If you get distracted by *how* they are expressing themselves, you may shut off your listening.
10. Respond appropriately to the speaker's words. For instance, nod to indicate understanding and frown without verbalizing if you must disagree.

If you practice these techniques you'll certainly become a better listener, but this is just the tip of the iceberg. The more important part of effective listening lies under the surface. Under the surface is how much you really believe in the importance of the relationship. How much do you respect what the other person is saying?

Many business owners are sharp, quick minded people who like to get right to the point. Or they feel they don't have time for this kind of reflective listening. It seems much easier to skip this step in communication.

When an employee comes to you with a problem or with a new or opposing idea, do you jump to conclusions or ask questions based on your own perspective? Do you say things like, "Here's the solution." Or, "Why did you do that?" Or, "That will never work." Or even, "That's a great idea." None of these responses, if given in the initial stages of a new or opposing idea, will create trust or empower an employee.

Reflective listening that avoids evaluation gives oxygen to your employee and empowers them to come up with their own solutions, or at least to learn the process of how to diagnose a problem or idea. Yes, it takes time to be a reflective listener, but does a doctor have time to do the diagnosis? The time you spend up front doing this reflective listening/diagnosis will save you much more time later on.