

A Special Report

'Discover How to Become a Better Listener'

by

Carole Spiers MIHPE MISMA
World Authority on Corporate Stress

Carole Spiers Group
International Stress Management &
Employee Wellbeing Consultancy



www.carolespiersgroup.co.uk



Effective Listening Tips

- Do you ever feel awkward in conversation with others – either at work or at home?
- Are there times when you are at a complete loss as what to say next?
- Have you ever been accused of interrupting or finishing other people's sentences for them?

If so, you are not alone.

Being a good conversationalist is an art. For some, it comes naturally and the words flow without effort but for many others, it is often a challenge.

If I sit back and listen to a discussion that is flowing well, I can actually hear the specific techniques that are being used quite naturally.

These inter-personal skills can be learnt and here are some tips to help you become a better communicator but before we look at these, let us review some of the barriers to good listening – what gets in the way of you being a good listener.

On-off listening

This unfortunate habit arises from the fact that most of us think about four times as fast as an average person speaks. Thus, we have 45 seconds of spare thinking time for each listening minute. Sometimes we use this extra time to think of our own personal affairs, concerns, or interests and troubles instead of listening.

Red flag listening

To some of us, words are like the proverbial red flag to the bull. When we hear them, we get upset or irritated and stop listening. These terms vary with individuals. However, to some, words like "should", "must", "ought", "management", "unions", are signals to which there is an automatic response. When this signal comes, we stop listening.

Open-eyes, closed-mind listening

Sometimes we decide rather quickly that either the subject or the person is boring and what they are saying makes no sense. Often, we jump to the conclusion that we can predict what the person knows or is going to say; thus we conclude there is no reason to listen because we will hear nothing new.

Glassy-eyed listening

Sometimes we look at a person with apparent intentness and we almost seem to be listening, although our minds may be on other things or distant places. We drop back into the comfort of our own thoughts. We can tell when people look at us in this way. Similarly, they can see the same in us.



'Too deep for me' listening

When we listen to ideas that are too complex and complicated, there is a danger that our mind will shut down or close off.

'Matter over mind' listening

We do not like to have our ideas, opinions or judgements challenged. Consequently, when a person says something that clashes with what we think or believe, then we may consciously stop listening or even become defensive and plan a verbal counter-attack.

Being "subject centred" instead of "person centred"

Sometimes we concentrate on the problems and not the person. Details about an incident become more important than that which the person is saying about the effect on themselves.

Fact listening

Often as we listen to people, we try to remember the facts and repeat them over and over again to drive them home. Frequently, as we do this, the person has gone on to new facts and we lose track of the story.

Distraction listening

Sometimes there are many distractions when we are listening – noise, movement of other people, or other matters clamouring for our attention that we lose concentration.





Your Top 20 Listening Tips

1. Be genuinely interested in the other person

This is not to say that the conversation should become a cross-examination with you firing questions like a machine-gun, but if you are really interested in the other person, what they have to say and what they do, then this will encourage an empathy and they will 'open-up' to you. It is important to get past this step before you move onto the next. Don't forget, it's much easier for you to be interested in the other person rather than them to become interested in you!

2. Be empathic and non-judgemental

You can be accepting and respectful of the other person and their feelings and beliefs without invalidating or giving up your own point of view or without agreement with the accuracy and validity of their view.

3. Concentrate on what others are saying

When listening to someone, do you often find yourself thinking about something else e.g. a job you need to do, a deadline etc and in the middle of the conversation, you realise that you haven't heard a word the person has said? It is very important to concentrate on what others have said so that an effective communication can occur. If you have been listening attentively, you should be able to repeat back the conversation from the person you have been listening to!



4. Send the non-verbal message that you have been listening

When someone is talking to you, maintain eye to eye contact with that person. Show the speaker that you are listening by nodding your head. This will indicate simple acceptance and not necessarily agreement and you can inject an occasional "mm-hmm", "OK", "I see" Demonstrate active listening with body language that shows you are actively engaged in the conversation. Switch off from all extraneous noise and concentrate on what is being said. Avoid looking at your watch or at other people's activities around the room. Be careful about folding your arms and appearing closed or critical.

5. Avoid assumptions

When listening, do you often make immediate judgements about what the person is saying and assume you know exactly what the person is going to say next? If you do this, you are failing to interpret exactly what the speaker is telling you and your evaluation may have been too hasty. It is especially important to avoid early evaluations when listening to a person with whom you disagree. When listeners start to disagree with a sender's message, they tend to misinterpret the remaining information and distort its intended meaning so that it is consistent with their own belief.



6. Ask meaningful questions

Ask open questions, 'what?', 'why?', 'when?', 'who?' and 'how?'. These questions will elicit an open response rather than a monosyllabic one e.g. 'Did you go out last night?', might just bring a response of 'Yes'. Instead, open the conversation with 'What did you do last night?'. 'How would you describe?', 'What do you think about?'. That 'open' question will bring about a response that you can build-upon and develop further.

7. Managing silences

Go with the silence. Allow for pauses. This is the responder's thinking time. Don't fill the space: when someone is struggling to express themselves, give them time to respond. This indicates a willingness to listen and understand what they would like to say. Slow, gentle, tone of voice. *'It's OK... there's plenty of time.... in your own time.....'*

8. Dealing with anger

Do not take it personally.

*Bill: 'You seem / sound angry...'
Saeed : 'How do you think I feel!'
Bill: 'I don't know, tell me'...*

9. Be specific

Ask 'how's life?' and you might just receive an 'OK!', and that can kill a conversation dead. But ask a specific question 'Tell me about your new job?' and that can develop into a whole conversation.

10. Avoid getting defensive

It is very easy to take what another person says personally when what they are saying is not meant to be personal. Attentive listening does not mean that you will always agree with the other party's point of view, but it does mean that you will try and listen to what the other person is saying without becoming overly defensive. Too much time spent explaining and defending your position or decision is a great example of not listening because you have now changed your role from listening to convincing. Sometimes it is useful to say something like, 'I appreciate your point of view [so that the person feels heard] but I think we might have to disagree on this one'.





11. Practice paraphrasing and check it out

This technique is certainly an art and you really do have to be listening to be able to achieve it. This skill is the technique of putting into your own words what you have thought you have heard being said and reflecting this back to the listening e.g. 'What I think I heard you say was that you had challenges with writing your business plan and I was wondering if I got this correct?' or 'I can see you are upset with this performance review, would you like to talk it through on another occasion?' Paraphrase in your own words your understanding of the message but don't parrot back the words verbatim as this can be very annoying and does not ensure accurate understanding of the message.

12. Watch for feelings

When you are listening, don't just concentrate on the words that are being said. The way that the person is standing, the tone of voice and inflection they are using and what the person is doing with their hands are all part of the message being said. A person looking down is probably embarrassed or shy. A person who raises their voice is probably angry or frustrated. Interruptions may suggest fear or lack of confidence. People who make eye to eye contact and lean forward are probably exhibiting confidence. If you have been listening attentively, you should be able to make summary responses like 'You feel the manager has favourites in the department' and while doing do, keep you tone neutral and try not to lead the person to your conclusions which may not be accurate.



13. Give positive comments

You can always find a reason to say something positive to someone and there is no easier way of getting someone else's attention than to deliver a compliment or flattering remark.

14. Listen attentively

Active listening is not about listening with just 'half an ear'. It's about giving your full attention to what is being said to you, and not about planning your own next comment. Active listening is about replying after you have listened to what has been said to you and there's a big difference.

15. Use humour

Humour can be used to 'break the ice' with someone you've not met before. However, be aware that what is amusing in one culture, may not be so in another. Try telling a short personal story, with empathy and a smile. A genuine smile can be very disarming and a great 'ice-breaker'.

16. Build rapport and empathy

If you can build rapport with the other party, you are half way home. Ask any successful salesperson. They are ones who know what it feels like to walk in the other person's shoes. The chances are that if the salesperson communicates a friendly, open attitude, rather than an aggressive one, you'll be more likely to buy from them because an initial relationship has been established. And we all like to buy from people who we like. And it is no different in a conversation.



17. Don't interrupt

Allow time to the conversation to continue without interruption and don't finish other people's sentences for them. You really don't know that they are going to say and if you hear the sound of your voice more than the sound of theirs, you are certainly not listening.

18. Avoid confrontation

When you are listening attentively to someone, try and avoid direct confrontational questions like 'You are joking', 'This is not so', 'Prove it', 'You're not right'. If you go down this route, you will put yourself in a position of taking sides and this is not listening!



19. Give encouragement

When someone touches on a point you would like to know a little more about, then some simple encouraging words like, 'you mentioned before about spending more time to finish off your work, can you tell me a little more about this'.

20. Know when to stop using active listening

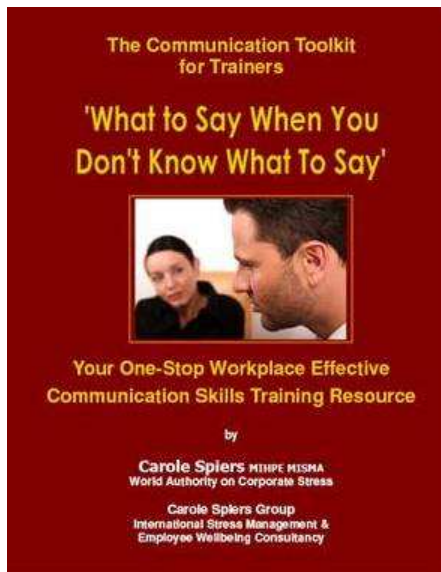
Once you have accurately understood the sender's message, it may be appropriate to respond with your own message. Don't use active listening to hide and avoid revealing your own position.

There are certain people with whom I can have a really good conversation. The synergy is right, the conversation flows. It is two-way. They listen to me and I listen to them. At the end of the conversation, I feel good, and because of that I always look forward to speaking with them.

So next time, someone tells you that you are not listening to them, don't retaliate with 'It's not me, it's you!'. Maybe this is an opportune time to think about improving your skills. I know it's easy to say, 'You can't teach an old dog new tricks!' Well, the answer is, you can. We can all improve our listening skills, at whatever time and at whatever age.

Don't forget that poor listening skills can reduce personal performance and team productivity! And if you need some more help, then buy our Communications Toolkit for Trainers below. This will give you all the tools you need to listen, motivate and inspire your team.





'The Communication Toolkit for Trainers' **'What to Say When You Don't Know What to Say!'** **Your One-Stop Workplace Effective Communication Skills Training Resource**

- Are you a Manager who is sometimes lost for words?
- Are there times when you actually say the wrong thing and make a difficult situation worse?
- As an HR professional, do you know what to say in a crisis situation?
- Do you need to stage a communication skills training programme but have no time to prepare.

If you have answered 'yes' to any of these questions, then this one-stop training resource is just right for you.

Written by **Carole Spiers**, Author of *Tolley's* 'Managing Stress in the Workplace', World Authority on Corporate Stress, Motivational Speaker and trainer to blue-chip corporations. As a Professional Counsellor, this valuable training resource draws on Carole's 20 years of workplace counselling and business management experience distilling it into a key communication skills workbook for managers and HR professionals.

Your One-stop Professional Training Resource – ready to download and use today!

- Powerpoint slides for presentation
- Workbook for copying in any number

Just download the slides onto your computer (they're in generic format, easily tailored for any industry.) Copy part or all of the workbook. Distribute as you wish.

Easy as that! Buy Now!

<http://www.carolespiersgroup.co.uk/conversation-toolkit.html>

Remember ...

Poor communication skills can reduce personal performance and team productivity!

Use these tools to help you motivate and inspire your team.

Stress Management Training, Workplace Counselling and Consultancy at the Service of Top Corporations

***'Our mission is to empower organisations to achieve sustainable success through a
healthy corporate culture' Carole Spiers***

Established in 1987, the Carole Spiers Group (CSG) is a leading provider of stress management and employee wellbeing services working with equal success in the contrasting cultures of the UK and UAE.

Through its cutting edge programmes, CSG has delivered proven benefits to both commercial and public sector clients around the world including names such as Accenture, Al Habib (Oman), ADMA (Abu Dhabi), Debenhams, Dubai Cables, Etisalat (Dubai) Kanoo Group (ME), London Underground, Panasonic, Phoenix Pharmahandel (Germany), Tecom (Dubai), WH Smiths and many others.

CSG consultants have introduced personal anti-stress strategies that have been shown to have improved productivity and competitive advantage decisively by encouraging a healthier corporate culture into many companies and organisations

With a network of professional consultants, trainers and a nationwide Employee Counselling team, CSG are uniquely equipped to advise professionally on both the human and the legal aspects of workplace stress, including workplace bullying, organisational change, violence, post-trauma, and absenteeism.

Training Courses, Coaching and Employee Counselling Service

- Specialist stress management courses, individual coaching for all employees
- Professional counselling for stressed employees and post-trauma cases
- Demonstrating ways to de-fuse a crisis by eliminating stressor-elements
- Reading whole workplace situations, through experience on blue-chip business

Media Commentator, Columnist and International Motivational Speaker

CSG are regularly called for professional comment by the BBC, Sky, CNN and other media as well as being a regular contributor to the UK national press e.g. Guardian, Financial Times, The Times, Observer, trade press and professional journals.

Carole Spiers is a weekly columnist for Gulf News (Dubai) on managing corporate stress and human resources issues and is the author of *Tolley's 'Managing Stress in the Workplace'* – industry's bible on stress management published by LexisNexis^{UK}.

She is an Expert Witness before the UK Courts and launched National Stress Awareness Day on behalf of the International Stress Management Association^{UK} of which she is a Vice-President. Carole is also the Past President of the London Chapter of the Professional Speaking Association.



Continue Where This Special Report Leaves Off!

Get deeper into stress reduction – with CSG’s selective catalogue of Special Reports, Trainer packs, Manuals, CDs and Audio by Carole Spiers, World Authority on Corporate Stress. Visit our ecommerce site www.carolespiersgroup.co.uk for the definitive solutions to stress management.



‘Discover how to become a better listener’ is just one Special Report out of a series, so please contact us for details of our other titles, email: info@carolespiersgroup.co.uk

We would love to hear from you and don’t forget to pass on this Special Report to other people who could benefit from reading it.

Contact us to read Carole’s weekly Gulf News column, or for more information on CSG’s in-house Stress Management Training, Nationwide Employee Counselling Team, Workplace Bullying, Post Trauma Support, Mediation, Coaching and Mentoring Services, please contact us at:

Carole Spiers Group

International Stress Management & Employee Wellbeing Consultancy
Gordon House, 83-85 Gordon Ave, Stanmore, Middx. HA7 3QR. UK
Tel: + 44 (0) 20 8954 1593 Fax: + 44 (0) 20 8420 7618

Email: info@carolespiersgroup.co.uk Website: www.carolespiersgroup.co.uk

