



Fuel your curiosity. Listen with purpose.

Have you ever known someone who is passionately curious? There's a thirst for knowledge, a hunger for new experiences that inspires innovative thinking and growth.

Infusing your life with a sense of curiosity can ignite your conversations and your relationships. The first place you can start is in the art of asking questions - and listening to the answers with a sense of purpose. Now, by purpose, I don't mean you should have an agenda. Listening with purpose should be about listening with the intent to learn, understand, and possibly, be changed because of the exchange.

As a communications consultant, my clients know the lens with which I look at problems. So, one day when a highly frustrated CFO came to me exasperated with his team, he pre-empted any response from me with, "*and it's not about communications. They're not listening!*" He had forgotten a critical side of the equation; that effective communications is an *exchange*. It seems many people interact with the concept of listening as if it is a burden; an obstacle to getting things done. Listening feels like it takes away valuable time from our own agenda.

Perhaps the number one organizational challenge I see in companies – small, large, private, public, startups and well established – is communications. Think of listening as the "Quality Control" of communications. When there's a breakdown, it's like re-work; it's costly, inefficient, frustrating and threatens your reputation and the trust you've built. Being attentive to the "work" at hand, getting it right the first time, delivers a valuable exchange, builds a quality relationship and produces better results.

Hearing is simply the act of perceiving sound by the ear. Listening, however, is something you consciously choose to do. *Research indicates we remember 25-50% of what we hear.* Listening requires concentration and effort for your brain to process meaning. One client, who is a master multi-tasker, is incredibly good at hearing what is said by her staff, yet because she often appears distracted, they don't feel heard or valued. The impact can be demoralizing and lead to performance issues.

On my business card is one of my favorite quotes: "*The problem with communications is the illusion it has been accomplished.*" (George Bernard Shaw). It often elicits a laugh of recognition for its fundamental truth. Have you ever had the experience where you walked away from a conversation thinking you were totally aligned only to find out you were not on the same page – not even sure if you were reading from the same book?!

In coaching one executive who was dealing with a particularly challenging issue with a senior project manager, it was clear there was a communications breakdown. So, at their next meeting, the executive wrapped up the conversation in a new way. He asked his project manager, "*So, we covered a lot of ground today, what's your take away?*" To his disappointment, the project manager didn't actually take away the intended message. Fortunately, since he posed an open-ended question instead of just asking if the



project manager understood, he knew immediately that they did not have a meeting of the minds. Recently, when interviewing a client's client, the Project Lead stated he wanted more feedback to know that they understand the scope of the work, the expectations, the priorities and the timeframe by which it needed to be delivered. He was essentially asking they practice more active listening!

Hone your listening skills

In the spirit of the season, and in the quest of fueling your curiosity, give the gift of your time, and your attention to every person with whom you engage in a conversation. Hone your listening skills by practicing these tips:

1. **Listen with the intent to understand.** Focus on the person. Give them your full attention and respect.
2. **Set aside your own agenda and the need to be right for the time being.** Resist the temptation to speak your mind or defend your position. If you find yourself responding emotionally, say so, and ask for clarification. *"I may not understand you correctly, and I find myself getting defensive. What I heard was xyz, is that what you meant?"*
3. **Establish clear expectations upfront.** Just because it's clear in your head, doesn't mean it readily translates to others! Ask open-ended questions to make sure there is real understanding.
4. **Paraphrase!** *"So, if I understand you correctly,..."* or, *"What I'm hearing is..."*

We all crave to be heard. In fact, our need to have worth and value is fundamental. When we feel like we've been heard, we feel validated, respected and connected. So often we find ourselves in the role of "consumers" of our wants, but what if we practiced "manufacturing and distributing" what we desire? In other words, if you want to be heard, start listening!

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