



“Knowledge speaks, but wisdom listens”

Jimi Hendrix

# Listening

---

“We have two ears and one mouth, so we should listen twice as much as we speak”. This famous quote from the Greek philosopher Epictetus remains as valid today as it was two thousand years ago.

Good listening skills are essential for communication and co-operation and are also the hallmark of effective and engaged leadership.

## Four different levels of listening

There is more to listening than simply listening or not. In fact, there are four different levels of engaging in a conversation - pretending, selective listening, attentive listening, and empathic listening. Different situations may call for different levels.

**1. Pretending** is listening without paying attention. In this case, you are hearing more than you are listening. Your attention is not really given to the other person, though you may try to pretend that it is. Think of a scenario where you're involved in a conversation when suddenly your phone beeps loudly with a notification. You quickly skim over the message while the other person continues talking. You appear to have missed only a few seconds, but in practice you stopped listening even though you heard the words.

**2. Selective or reactive listening** is listening with an intention to make your point, give advice or win the argument. While hearing the other speak you are already busy formulating the answer. You might even break in to let the other know your opinion. You enter the conversation fueled with your own beliefs, which can be very frustrating for the other side. Selective listening is more self-centered than other-centered.

**3. Attentive listening** is when you mindfully pay attention to the other person and internalize their message. You listen to learn, giving verbal and non-verbal cues that you are fully engaged in the exchange. You allow for pauses, refrain from talking too much and check to ensure that you understand correctly. Attentive listening is what we should ideally practice in our day-to-day interactions, especially in the work environment.

**4. Empathic listening** entails making an emotional connection with the other person. It combines mind and heart as you give your full attention to the other person and probe what is happening under the surface. You are mindful of what is not being said and pay attention to body language, especially any signal indicating that the other person may be holding something back, or that they feel uncomfortable.

Both attentive and empathic listening styles let a person feel seen, heard, and understood. Team members that feel this way are more motivated, engaged, and proactive.

## Body language - beyond words

Body language is the unspoken part of communication that we use to reveal our true feelings. When you become mindful of the non-verbal cues in a conversation, you understand the complete message the other person is telling you. Attentive and empathic listening takes body language into consideration, too. A few examples of non-verbal cues include:

**Negative** (e.g. frustrated, defensive, disengaged)

- Sitting slumped, head down
- Tapping fingers
- Biting a lip
- Folding arms in front of body
- Eyes downcast, making little contact

**Positive** (e.g. interested, engaged, proactive)

- A genuine smile
- A firm handshake
- Direct eye to eye contact
- Head nodding
- Leaning in

### Moment of reflection

- Take a moment to reflect without judgement on your listening style. What level/s do you practice most often, and with whom? Why is this your preferred listening style?
- How often do you attempt to understand vs. give advice or express your opinion?
- How free do your team members feel to express their opinion? How proactive and engaged do they tend to be?
- Consider your state of mind or mood. For example, how do you listen when you are tired, stressed, or in a rush? How do you listen when you're back from holiday or after doing some physical exercise pre-work? What difference do you notice, if any?
- What would change for the positive in your personal and professional life if you would use more attentive or empathetic listening?

## Call for action

In the coming week practice not giving any advice while in a meeting. Simply listen and ask open questions. Refrain from responding or trying to fix things. What do you notice?

## Conclusion

Listening is one of the most powerful tools you possess as a leader. It helps you build trust and encourages active involvement within the team. It lets your team members know that they are important to you and that you value their opinions. It reduces misunderstandings and allows for compassion to your employees' often unexpressed needs. Fostering good listening skills helps you develop the necessary rapport, influence, and credibility to lead.