

People, Partnerships, and Communities

The purpose of the People, Partnership, and Communities series is to assist The Conservation Partnership to build capacity by transferring information about social science related topics.

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Listening Skills

Character is one of the most effective traits involved in persuasion. Judge people by what they say and how they say it, what they do and how they do it, what they think and why they think it.
— Anonymous

What good are listening skills?

Effective listening is a learned skill that can help you more effectively communicate with people either individually or on a group basis. As you improve your listening skills, people tend to listen more to what you say. Effective listening can improve relations with your family, friends, colleagues, acquaintances, and even strangers.

Who can use listening skills?

Everyone in the Conservation Partnership who needs to communicate with others.

When do you need to make use of listening skills?

Listening skills are used every day in all different types of settings — at home, at the office and in the field. Listening is especially important as The Conservation Partnership explores locally led conservation planning opportunities. We need to listen closely to traditional and non-traditional stakeholders as they identify local priorities and conservation options. Hearing and listening are as different as night and day. Hearing is a mechanical function in which your ears process vibrations

and noise. Hearing is passive. Listening is hearing plus interpretation, evaluation, and reaction. Listening is active.

Some of the information contained in this sheet cannot be applied without modifications for non-traditional audiences. When dealing with different cultural groups, read information on how best to effectively communicate with them.

How do you improve listening skills?

Improving listening skills requires active commitment and effort. When you actively listen, you can improve and enliven the interaction. There are often times when you engage in “serious” listening; such as listening intently to your teacher before the mid-term or final exam, or negotiating a contract on a house or car. Serious or active listening requires that you do the following: comprehend, sort and categorize, suspend your disbelief, be a mentally active critic, and continuously evaluate the messages the speaker is sending.

Listening attentively can be challenging. The average person talks at a rate of about 125 words per minute, while we can listen at a rate of 400 words per minute. Consequently, listeners have a lot of time on their hands, which they can use positively or negatively. An active listener can prepare to use this time wisely by forming positive habits.

Characteristics of a Good Listener

- Looks at the person who is speaking
- Controls their emotions
- Shows concern by asking questions about feelings (“How did you feel when...?”)
- Repeats information given
- Does not rush a speaker
- Uses short phrases effectively (yes, I see, okay)
- Uses body language effectively (nod of head, smile, a frown)
- Does not interrupt
- Stays on the subject until the other party has finished his/her thought

Characteristics of a Bad Listener

- Writes everything down
- Impatient
- Jumps to conclusion
- Changes the subject
- Does not give any response
- Tries to complete someone’s sentence
- Loses temper
- Often interrupts
- Does a different task at the same time someone is talking

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Positive Habits

- ◆ **Prepare yourself through proper body language:** maintain eye contact, sit up straight and on the front part of the chair, lean forward, open your arms and yourself to the message.
- ◆ **Prepare the environment:** turn off the radio and television, maintain a comfortable room temperature, minimize noise and distractions, turn on your telephone’s answering machine, etc.
- ◆ **Think ahead of the talker:** anticipate where the person is going.
- ◆ **Assess the accuracy of the information**
- ◆ **Mentally summarize the information**
- ◆ **Listen “between the lines”:** be alert for nonverbal communication, such as facial expressions, gestures, tone (sarcasm), speech patterns. For example, when people talk quickly, this usually indicates an underlying emotion such as excitement or anger, while talking slowly may indicate someone is very careful, precise, unsure, or is thinking while they speak. Interpretations of these kinds of behavior can be very tricky, especially when dealing with people that come from a different part of the country or that have a different cultural background than yours.
- ◆ **Listen to both the content and the delivery**

Negative Habits

- ◆ **Daydreaming:** don’t be a “Walter Mitty” and finalize your “get-rich” scheme while someone is talking.
- ◆ **Facts only listening:** don’t preoccupy yourself with a speaker’s minor points or missteps.
- ◆ **Poor posture:** don’t slump, yawn, cover your face, prop your head on your palm, or fold your arms.
- ◆ **Faking attention:** don’t act like you’ve been listening and ask “general guess” questions. When you ask questions that are way off the mark, it can embarrass you and the speaker.

Feedback and questions

Here are some ways to give feedback to stimulate conversations:

“What I hear you saying is....”

“Let’s see if I’m following you....”

“May I summarize....”

“Please tell me more about....”

Here are some types of questions to ask to stimulate conversations:

“Could you clarify concept A?”

“I don’t understand that last point, could you please review it?”

“I’m curious about something you said; could you tell me more about?”

Ask questions to challenge the speaker

Where can you get more information?

Effective Listening, Lyman K. Steil, Larry L. Barker, Kittie W. Watson, Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc., Reading, Massachusetts, 1983.

Listening Made Easy, Robert Montgomery, American Management Associations, New York, 1981.

Skills for Working Together: Listening. The Pennsylvania State University, College of Agriculture, Cooperative Extension Service, Fact Sheet 12, 1986.

The Art of Listening, Dominick A. Barbara, M.D., F.A.P.A., Charles C. Thomas, Springfield, Illinois, 1974.