

Listening to Understand

*“Most people do not listen with the intent to understand,
they listen with the intent to reply.” Stephen Covey*

Listening is not just hearing; it is about understanding. Our ability to listen to what is being said and what is not being said is a skill we can develop.

It involves heightening our sensory acuity and focusing 100% of our attention on the other person. It is about being totally present with the other person and using all of ourselves, not just our ears, to listen – I like to call it full-body listening. It is very easy in today’s busy world to be focusing on what just happened or thinking about what we are about to do next, rather than on the here and now.

In simple terms, hearing is a physiological process, an awareness of sound, whereas listening is an intellectual process, an understanding of the message we are receiving.

Hearing is a natural ability that you either have or you don’t. The ability to listen is acquired – it is a skill which can be learnt, practiced and perfected to enable you to understand more of what is going on for the other person.

We can all become distracted by things going on around us (external), or our own thoughts (internal) when listening. These become barriers to effective listening.

It is easy to be distracted by other people’s conversations, office noise such as phones and machinery, or our own brain thinking about the next job to do, the meeting we have just come from, or that next great question we could ask. All of this ‘noise’ can stop us from truly focusing on what the other person is actually saying.

Tips for Effective Listening:

- Phrase your question clearly, then be quiet and let the person respond. Give them time to elaborate on their response
- Repeat back what you’ve heard them say, using their language to check for understanding
- Asks supplementary questions to gather more information
- Let people finish their sentences even if they speak slowly and you think you know what they are going to say
- If you must interrupt, do it using the person’s name for example “David, can I ask you to tell me a little bit more about boxes, before we go into the detail of the incident?”
- Take notes (if appropriate and you have permission) and let the person know non-verbally you are listening (by nodding, making eye contact, saying umm, yes, ahh)
- Maintain an attitude of curiosity rather than judgement. You may be surprised at what they say and what you learn.