



Power Up Your Perception

By Mark Zust, M.A.

(excerpted from his book, ESP For Everybody)

According to numerous human resource surveys, the number one skill that companies and managers look for in their employees is the ability to listen.

Sir Francis Bacon said “Knowledge is power.” Yet our ability to collect critical information is often impaired by poor listening skills. Is it any wonder that decisions made based on spotty information often result in hurt feelings and lost revenue?

The secret to improving our powers of perception is not only in listening more but in how we listen. The goal is to practice what I call “full contact listening,” which engages all the senses and begins with two magic words: Keep Quiet! It is easy for our mind to wander when we should be listening fully. Buddhist monks refer to our chattering subconscious as “monkey mind,” always flitting about, mentally preparing answers, shuffling “to do” lists, or thinking about the next meal. The first thing to do is prepare for listening by quieting the mind. This isn’t as tough as it sounds, but it does require attention and sincere effort. Take a few moments before a meeting to close your eyes and imagine your mind as a blackboard filled with words and notations. As you breathe deeply, envision erasing the board, leaving a blank surface. Breathe and wipe clean. Breathe and wipe clean. Stay in this moment as long as practical. Slowly open your eyes. The entire process should take 2-3 minutes. You are now prepared to receive your surroundings with refreshed senses.

Start your listening with your eyes. What is the room telling you? If you’re in someone’s office, there are charts, lists, family pictures, decorative objects, etc., that can tell you a great deal. What kind of screen saver is on the computer? A nature scene or an abstract graphic? Is the “in box” overflowing? Is everything tidy or are there project folders and to do notes scattered everywhere? Make a mental note and consider how what you’ve observed prior to the meeting reinforces or contradicts what you are hearing.

When listening, hear with your ears, not your mind. This may sound strange, but we are so often distracted by our own internal chatter that we miss important nuances in others’ tonality, vocal inflection, pauses and vocal volume. We need to train our minds to remain quiet as our ears open during live conversation. For instance, listen for when another person’s voice trails off and try to detect a pattern. Does their voice change every time they talk about a pet project, the company, or their boss? What can you infer from this? A good way to confirm your observations is by asking a follow-up question about the same topic and note if the person’s volume level or inflection changes again. With practice, this ability to “read” another person’s mood, attachment to a project, or anxiety toward a particular issue can be invaluable in determining how receptive they will be to your ideas.

The mantra “Keep Quiet!” also refers to making comments while listening. In Sweden, it is customary to wait for the other person to finish their thought, then pause for reflection before making a comment. In the US, we rarely even wait for the person to begin their comment before we jump in! Often, our comment doesn’t clarify or add to the other person’s comment, but rather is a way to forward our own agenda. If you keep jumping in this way, the other person will either become more aggressive in order to finish their thought and protect their point of view, or they will surrender quietly and not offer much new information. Either way, the conversation has broken down. Instead, resolve to ask no more than six questions in the course of the entire conversation. This will encourage you to consider those questions carefully and interject them only when necessary. The questions should be specific, but also open-ended enough to allow the person to elaborate fully. Even if this gets the conversation a bit off track, allow it to happen. More often than not, the new pathways that open are more interesting and the person typically provides much more information than she would normally. Providing the interviewee with “plenty of rope” is a favored technique of reporters. In terms of building trust and encouraging open dialogue, nothing

is more powerful than patient, non-judgmental listening. Let's face it, we all love to talk, but it usually requires a great deal of energy and dogged determination just to get a point across. Contrast this with a calm environment, plenty of time, and a sympathetic listener. In this instance, people find it hard to stop talking!

If a lull in the conversation should develop, try asking another open-ended question to get the ball rolling again. The active listener knows how to keep the information coming with a smile, direct but softened eye contact and the occasional nod, which says, "I'm with you." Combine these techniques while saying words like "interesting" or "really?" and you have the makings of a master interviewer.

This may seem simplistic, but professional facilitators agree that the best way to keep a person or small group buzzing is to get out of the way and gently prod, but only when absolutely necessary. This approach frees you up to observe the environment, body language, vocal cues, and even to take in the aromas and tastes of peoples' perfumes, coffee, magic markers, etc. If that sounds a bit crazy, it's because most of us only listen with our ears, when in fact behavioral studies suggest that we are fully engaged only when all our senses are activated. By using all our senses we become more alert, perceptive, and intellectually acute. Resolve to start listening more actively for the next five days and you will be pleasantly surprised at the results.

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