

The Art of Listening

By Andrew Jacobs

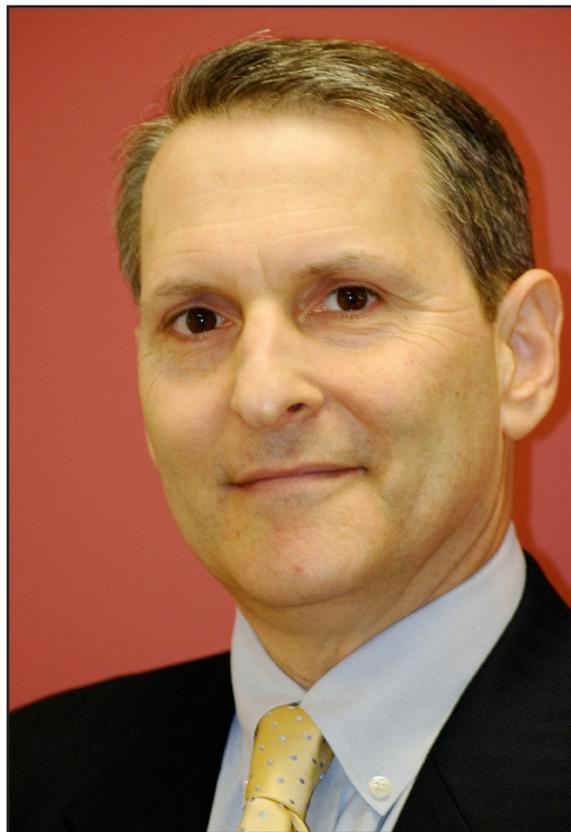
We live in a time of constant chatter, whether it be from personal electronics, movies, television, radio, the internet even just general noise all around us, there is a virtual absence of silence. Why is that? The answer is simple- silence scares us. We feel we have to fill it in because there is nothing more uncomfortable or revealing in any interaction than silence. However, silence if used correctly and positively, can be an extraordinarily successful tool in interpersonal communication. But in order to achieve this one needs to be able to listen (not just hear). This is not an easy task but once mastered it will serve you well in every aspect of your life. You may say to yourself that this is ridiculous, listening is easy, all I have to do is not talk, that, however, is where the vast majority of people get it wrong.

When I first came into our family printing business almost 35 years ago my father set out to teach me certain fundamentals he had learned over his many years in the industry. It was his belief and now mine that there are laws of communication that people violate at their peril. Whether it be for dating, job interviews, sales or family interactions the rules are the same; the actions and reactions identical and the outcomes totally predictable on a percentage basis.

My knowledge is based on my 55 years of study, success, untold amount of failures and the continuing refinement of a system that has worked incredibly well for me. Use all if you wish or take some as you see fit or ignore all-the option is yours. Know, however, if someone uses this system against you the odds are you will be successfully manipulated without ever knowing how or what happened.

Let's start with a concrete example. You want a job, not just any job; you have the chance at the position of your dreams. You think you are qualified, you have enough experience, you believe you are the right person but so are another 200 applicants who have gone before you and another 100 who will follow. What makes you stand out?

Before a big interview, what are you thinking about? Your qualifications, your appearance, making a good impression-you have all of this whirling around in your head so that when you finally have your chance with the interviewer you want to get it all out right away so you don't



forget anything. You are woefully conscious that this is your one opportunity and if you forget to say something it will cost you the job. Let me be clear, however, that is not why you weren't offered the job because the reality is you already lost your chance.

The time to nail an interview or any other interaction is in the preparation before you go into battle and it is not for the reason you think. If you are smart you have done all the research on the company, the position and even the interviewer if you know who that is. But what you are missing is that your first impression needs to be of someone who is present, in the moment, and interested in what the person speaking to you is saying -and not what is on your mind. You need to get to the point where you are so prepared that you can stop, focus, and listen to the other person to see what they are actually saying to you.

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In most cases, the person on the other side of the table will tell you almost anything you need to know about what is about to happen by their body movements, voice inflections, lack or look of interest. What is happening with them personally will tell you if you have stand a chance or whether they have already chosen someone, or hate their job or if they even care about their company. How can you do this? Just intensely listening and looking will tell you almost everything. In fact, the mere fact you are actually listening and treating the interviewer as a person will separate you from most of the other applicants. How do I know? Because over the last 35 years I have been in thousands of sales related meetings and I am a keen observer and know this to be true. If you can cut across the normal chatter of most interactions and temporarily dive into the psyche of the other person you have the chance to not only reach a different level than everyone else but also get what you want.

Fact: The only way to get the chance at what you want is to give the other person the chance to say or figure out what they want and then try and help them get it. It might be as simple as letting them talk about themselves for awhile.

Fact: There is no perfect job and if you think there is you are mistaken and it will only get in your way of finding one.

Fact: If you don't allow for multiple options and possibilities to whatever it is you want then your chance of success is greatly diminished.

Fact: Recognize that the most important thing to a person besides their family is their job. If you can help them keep their job or get a better one then they will try and help you.

Fact: No one will ever hire anyone that is a threat to their job unless they are extremely confident you can help them get a better one.

Fact: Listening is not just the absence of talking, It is the passion to hear, understand and utilize what the other person is saying. Often the words used are codes for something else; you have moments to figure it out and use them for your benefit.

Fact: Most people are not good communicators no matter how much they think they are. The cues people pick-up are either wrong or prejudiced by their own views.

Fact: Saying it doesn't make it true. You need a lot of practice and self scrutiny to be able to read people and figure out what really is being said.

True listening is an art form. Stop talking so much. Try periods of time with no noise, take walks outside without music, listen to the birds, try and focus on your surroundings. It is not an easy task but the rewards are amazing. You will start to decode what people are really saying and this ability will open many doors for you.

Caution: This system is based on percentages, the more you try the better you will get over time. It also means you will make mistakes, as I still do, because people are very difficult to read. If you can't accept the possibility of failing you will not be able to listen. Your focus will not be on the task at hand--simply listening.

We are interacting all the time. Try listening. Do not worry about what you will say next, looking dumb or think of what you are doing for lunch next week. Focus on the moment; the person in front of you.

The best examples of great listeners are those who are most successful. Look at the people you idolize, figure out what it is about them that makes your want to be like them. If they are famous and successful the odds are good that they are excellent communicators. Listen and learn from them. As you improve your ability to listen you will improve your ability to communicate and find yourself rewarded in all areas of your life.

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