

Meeting Management

(Last in a series)

In this last article, I want to review the communication aspect of effective meetings. Unfortunately, I have learned that listening as a meeting skill is the one most often missing!

Many of us might find it a little embarrassing to admit we have some deficiencies in listening. And yet, on closer examination, we may have a good reason. Who ever taught us to listen effectively? In our formal education, we were taught to read, write and speak, but most of us had no course offered in listening.

Listening for understanding is difficult, it requires conscious attention and focus on the speaker's meaning. Not only have we not been taught formally, but there are numerous barriers that make it even harder to listen. How often have you attempted to listen to someone and been distracted by the following?

Barriers

- Other sounds and noises
- The speaker's appearance
- Feelings about the subject
- Your own response or rebuttal

Keep in mind that the speaker is always evaluating the listener. An effective listener must let the speaker know that he is listening and doing his best to understand. When receiving information, you are likely to be perceived as not listening whenever you respond by:

Signals of "Not Listening"

- Starting with "yes, but..."
- Denying what the person is saying
- Rationalizing
- Defending yourself or others
- Making philosophical statements

When another perceives that you are not listening, that may be interpreted it as a lack of respect or a put down. In a meeting, not listening can lead to people repeating themselves, meeting discussions getting loud, interrupting others, or people just withdrawing from the discussion. Meetings might drag on and sometimes never reach closure on an agenda item. Perhaps you've seen these signs in your meetings. If yes, then try to improve your listening skills.

Listening Checks for Effective Communication

An effective tool for trying to grasp facts as well as strong feelings is the listening check – a short summary or restatement of the other’s message or point of view. You put the speaker’s message into your own words and repeat it. By sharing your understanding of the message, misunderstandings may be remedied before there is a negative impact or consequence.

An example of a listening check:

“So you are going to give me the report before we begin planning and I can expect it by the end of the week.” Think how this technique can be helpful. With a listening check, you can verify the message and the feelings, if needed. You can correct any misunderstanding immediately, not after long hours on the wrong problem, in the wrong direction, with the wrong specifications, etc.

Additionally, listening checks demonstrate to the other person your efforts to listen and your understanding. Sincere inquiry also helps promote understanding and demonstrate caring and respect. It is behavior designed to solicit more information about the other person’s message. Listening DOES NOT mean you agree with the speaker!

Now that you’ve read about the meeting management tools in this series: mechanics of getting prepared, roles, ground rules, as well as effective listening, you are ready to learn how to continually improve your meetings through on-going feedback.

Meeting Evaluation for continuous improvement

Set aside the last 3 minutes of each agenda for the following discussion: meeting participants can make a statement or pass to any and all of these quality questions.

- What parts of the meeting worked well?
- What improvements were implemented in this meeting?
How well did they work?
- What improvements could we make in our next meeting?
- What could I (each participant) have done to be more effective in the meeting?

Happy Meetings!

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