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Valentyna Kuzmenko

senior teacher NU «Zaporizhzhia Polytechnic»

EFFECTIVE LISTENING SKILLS IN PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION

For truly effective communication, business people must hone their listening skills to ensure they fully understand the whole message: not just the content, but the motivation behind what's being said, the circumstances around which they're conversing, even what gets left out of the conversation. Colleagues must listen with ears and eyes, picking up on voice tone and physical cues to take in the whole message.

Hearing. Quite literally, you can't listen if you can't receive audible input. To make it easy to hear, find a place with no interruptions or background noise – space that may be difficult to find on an assembly line or sales floor. Reduce background noise, phone calls, pinging email notices or any other stimuli that might tempt you to multi-task. Stop work, look at the colleague and focus on what he is saying.

Attending. With physical distractions minimized, concentrate on the speaker, filtering out extraneous ideas. Wait until the coworker has finished a thought, allowing for pauses between sentences. Even if you agree with what she says, interrupting the thought can distract her or make her

feel too uncomfortable to flesh out the thought further. Important facts or ideas go off-course this way, sometimes permanently.

Understanding. Once you take in the message, follow up to ensure comprehension. Ask questions to clarify parts you feel unsure about, preferably by repeating the particular point that is an issue and asking your colleague to elaborate or even rephrase until you gain clarity.

Responding. Throughout the conversation, but particularly toward the end, provide feedback. Maintain eye contact, with the body squarely facing the speaker, and nod or give encouragement with “yes” or “I see.” Then recap or paraphrase key points, summarizing in your own words what you heard and giving the speaker time to confirm or correct these summaries.

Remembering. The most important way to make the speaker feel confident that he has been heard is to remember the conversation. During the conversation, write down points or phrases to jog your memory later. These notes can include nonverbal cues, like “seemed very agitated” or “was enthusiastic” to help recall the intensity or tone of the message. Look for specifics to act on, then get back to your coworker and show how these actions made a difference. This reinforces confidence and trust that you really do listen, and encourages colleagues to speak up more often.

Repeating the Message. Another listening technique that is very useful is distilling what you just heard and repeating it back to the speaker in short form to clarify your understanding of the message. Preface this with “So, what you are saying is...” and recap what he just told you. This truly shows that you were listening and paying attention. It also signifies that you care about the message the speaker is trying to impart and that you want to make sure you heard them correctly.

Ask questions to ensure you understand the message. Don’t jump to conclusions - allow the speaker to deliver the whole communication before you respond. Reflect the speaker’s message back to him at appropriate points during the conversation by summarizing, clarifying or expanding on a critical piece of the message. Sentences such as “So you’re saying that ...” or “I understand you want to ...” confirm you have heard and processed what the speaker has said. Practice reflecting with a trusted colleague to become more comfortable with the technique and avoid sounding forced and insincere.

Continue listening as the speaker responds to your questions or comments. A conversation with an employee might involve asking questions to get additional information. As you ask careful questions, you gain understanding, which can enable you to offer advice, if appropriate. A conversation with an unhappy customer may include paraphrasing what you think you understand so you can help solve a problem. When you paraphrase what the customer stated, you help the customer feel validated and understood. This often diffuses a situation.