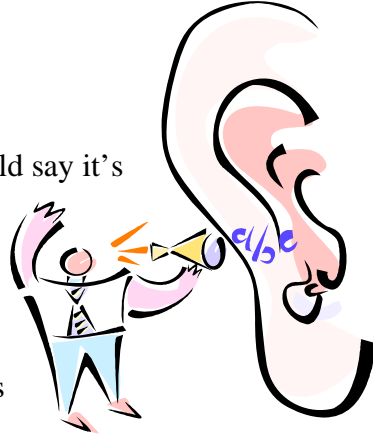


# Listen Up!

Talking is only one aspect of communication, and some would say it's the least important. *Listening* is key to the exchange of information and messages. During the time we should be listening in a conversation, we're usually thinking about what we just said, what we're going to say next, or what we should have said—or we're distracted by things in our environment. Listening is not the same as hearing. Hearing is easy; listening takes work. To become a better listener:



- Avoid distractions. During important conversations, do what is necessary to minimize extraneous noise and interruptions.
- Be aware of body language—yours and theirs. When listening in person, you should be in a relaxed position, leaning slightly toward the speaker. Avoid crossing your arms or engaging in nervous habits, such as tapping your finger on the desk or glancing at the door or your watch.
- Learn to listen with your eyes, as well as your ears. A speaker may say that something is not a problem, but clench his fists as he says it, indicating that something else is at work. Facial expressions, yours and the speaker's, can also speak volumes. Try to keep your face as neutral as possible while listening. You'll avoid sending signals that could be misinterpreted.
- Ask clarifying questions. Get the information you need to understand the speaker's message. And save your questions for the end, if possible, rather than interrupting.
- Paraphrase or repeat concepts and statements. This is a good way to be sure you understood what the speaker was saying.
- Stop talking, both out loud and in your mind. Many of us tend to continuously interrupt or try to defend or clarify our own position while it's the other person's turn to talk. Quiet, attentive listening will yield more information, thereby facilitating better communication.
- Summarize at the end of a conversation. Go over the points discussed, any conclusions drawn, and review any agreed-upon actions for either party. This will help everyone remember what was discussed and what follow-up, if any, is expected.

Good listening, like good speaking, comes with practice. When in doubt, talk less and listen more.

