

ARE YOU LISTENING TO ME?

There's nothing more frustrating than talking to empty air! Fortunately, getting people to listen is something that can be learned. Here are some pointers for getting the other person's attention in a variety of situations.

"Are you listening to me?" How often we find ourselves bidding for more attention from family and friends! This is not surprising given that all genuine communication is predicated on the ability to listen and be heard. Listening attentively without interrupting or presuming what a person will say next or else trivializing his comments shows that we respect and value that person. Alas, listening is a dying art in today's society. "What with the crazy lives we lead, it is becoming harder and harder to stop, be quiet and listen to the other person," comments Mireille-Éliane Pilon, executive director of the Tel-Aide Montréal crisis hotline. "Besieged by our own concerns and always in a rush, we listen halfway; we conjecture what the other person is about to say and prepare our answer before she finishes talking." The result? More often than not, we catch ourselves reacting to our own thoughts, not what was actually said. This causes a great deal of frustration and misunderstanding for both parties. Fortunately, the problem can be fixed!

It's Not Hard Getting People to Listen!

What do people who catch our attention have in common? According to Jean-Guy Leboeuf, adult educator, communicator and president of Collège Jean-Guy Leboeuf, "The people who capture our attention are naturally pleasant and outgoing. They express themselves easily, know how to be interesting and use humour to add sparkle to the conversation. We listen to them because of their calm tone of voice, clear way of putting things, and gestures that match their words."

What about people who lack this natural ability? According to our expert, planting one's feet firmly on the ground, breathing deeply, looking the other person in the eyes and speaking in a pleasant tone of voice can make all the difference. Additionally, making sure the other person understands and is still interested helps the conversation along and keeps us from slipping into a monologue ("*Do you get my drift?*" "*Am I being clear?*" "*I'm not boring you, am I?*"). After all, as Mireille-Éliane Pilon states, "Listening fills a moment of time that one person offers another in order to better know,

understand and value that person.” We would be remiss to deprive ourselves of such valuable currency!

The Four C’s of Effective Communication

Be Clear. Before trying to make ourselves understood, we need to put our ideas in order and clarify our expectations or objectives: *“I want a raise”; “I want to spend the holidays alone with my spouse, not at my in-laws’ cottage”; “I’d like to return this suit: it’s too small.”*

Be Concise. You have a message to get across? Get right to the point: *“When we arrange to meet at a restaurant, I’d like you to be on time. Agreed?”* Note that being concise does not rule out being polite. In addition, being brief improves your chances of holding the other person’s attention.

Be Confident. There’s nothing quite like self-assurance to get people listening to you. Avoid long-drawn-out reservations (*“I don’t know whether you might possibly be interested in . . .”; “I have an idea, but I wouldn’t be surprised if someone has already done this . . .”*). Assert your ideas calmly and with a smile – a winning combination!

Be Consistent. Be wary of changing your mind whenever the other party seems the least bit reluctant to agree with you. Having stated an idea, opinion or emotion, stick to it. Your message will be clearer and taken more seriously.

Problems and Solutions

“She’s always interrupting me!”

Diane’s story — *“My girlfriends and I get together for dinner every Wednesday. We have great fun talking about everything from A to Z. We even get serious sometimes. Last week, while I was telling them about the weekend with George, my new boyfriend, Jill kept interrupting or talking over me. I could barely get a word in edgewise!”*

Solution. When the other person seeks to grab attention instead of taking an interest in what you’re saying, you can lower your voice or stop talking when interrupted in order to catch her attention. Or you can look her straight in the eyes while you’re talking (making her feel less comfortable about interrupting you). Are people always interrupting you, regardless of the circumstances? You would do well to consider whether you are talking too slowly or in a monotone, or else getting bogged down in details. Improving the way you communicate will make you much more interesting!

“He answers the phone while I’m talking.”

“It happens all the time,” Sally laments. “Whenever I want to solve an issue or delve deeper into a matter, my colleague Bill can’t help answering his phone, even if he’d agreed to transfer his calls. So while he’s taking one call after another, I’m stuck twiddling my thumbs in his office and feeling he could care less about wasting my time! Sometimes I even think he enjoys it!”

Solution. This type of situation frequently denotes lack of respect by the other person. Or else he is simply disorganized or trying to do ten things at once. Be that as it may, you can avoid the problem by telling Bill at the outset how long you figure the meeting will take and asking him not to answer the telephone during that time. If he still takes calls? After the first one, you might comment that he doesn’t seem to be available and suggest meeting when he is free. Better yet, arrange to meet in your office, where it will be easier for you to take charge.

“He’s always telling me what to do.”

Sylvia’s story – “I was upset when I left work the other evening and really looked forward to seeing my significant other to talk and be comforted. Once the children were in bed, I started telling him about the big blow-up with my boss. Before I got the first sentence out, he jumped in to play down the incident and tell me what to do. He does that a lot! Far from helping, his attitude made me feel even more incompetent when all I wanted was for him to listen.”

Solution. Spouses usually have good intentions when they give advice. They really want to help us out of a fix. But Sylvia did not need advice; she wanted only a sympathetic ear. In such cases, it is best to make your needs clear, saying for example, “What you’re suggesting is good for you, no doubt. But right now I’d just like you to listen. Things will become clearer in my mind, and I’ll be able to find a solution or make a decision.” Surprisingly enough, your spouse could be relieved. Listening without having to try and solve your problem means less stress and responsibility. And you receive the consolation you need!

“He doesn’t look at me when I’m talking to him.”

Ann’s story – “ ‘David, look at me when I’m talking to you!’ I can’t count how many times a week I say this to my teenage son! It never fails: whenever I need to talk to him,

he barely looks at me. He keeps his eyes riveted on the computer screen. Or even worse: he looks up at the ceiling as soon as I open my mouth.”

Solution. Many parents believe they can talk to their teenagers whenever they like and don’t stop to ask whether the young people are available. But getting their attention becomes a real feat when they’re in their own world – and goodness knows they spend a lot of time there. If you feel the need for a talk with your adolescent, you can improve communication by first asking whether you are disturbing him. Tell him what you want to talk about and how long it will take, adding that he will be free right after that. It’s also important to get away from distractions, such as the TV set or computer, by going into another room if necessary, looking him in the eyes when you talk to him and asking him to look back at you.

“It’s all about her.”

Doris exclaims, “Whenever I tell my friend Karen something, the one-upmanship inevitably kicks in! If I talk to her about my vacation in Mexico, she talks about her vacation in the Dominican Republic, where the weather was so much better! If I get a \$70 traffic ticket, she once got a \$150 ticket. It’s like she’s the only person in the world. It drives me crazy!”

Solution. This kind of one-way conversation certainly doesn’t encourage you to confide in this neighbour or make her your best friend. But if you have to associate with her, you can say in no uncertain terms: “I’d like to talk about my health. I know you’ve had worse health problems. But I’d like you to listen to me. Are you available?” If the situation continues, you can use the broken-record technique, repeating the same thing over and over until she hears you. Mission impossible? It’s better to avoid this kind of relationship in which the other person competes with you and is incapable of lending a sympathetic ear.

Ask and you will be heard!

Have you ever been annoyed or hurt when a friend or relative failed to listen to you? Psychologist H  l  ne Par   describes three key steps for restoring communication.

1. Be specific. "You never took your eyes off the TV the other day when I talking about my worry over going back to school."
2. Describe your feelings. "When you don't pay attention, I get the feeling you aren't interested in my concerns."
3. Ask clearly. "When I'm confiding in you about something important, I'd like you to stop doing whatever you're doing and pay attention. Is that clear?"

Additional reading

Comment lui dire?, by Dr. Charles Foster, Marabout, 2000, 312 p. \$8.95.

Le Couple et la Communication, by Patrice and Catherine Cudicio,   ditions Osman Eyrolles, 2000, 260 p. \$34.95.

Comment mener les conversations difficiles, by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton and Sheila Heen, Seuil, 2000, 270 p. \$29.95.

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Chevalier, M. (2001). "M'  coutes-tu?", *Coup de pouce*, July 47-50.