

Becoming a Better Listener in Four Steps

When interacting with customers, colleagues and co-workers, listening remains a paramount skill in the workplace, yet several professionals do not listen to the best of their abilities. While a creditor may hear what a customer says, it's likely the creditor does not actually listen. Paying attention to the details in how something is communicated can mean the difference between effective and ineffective relationships, be it between a creditor's customers, superiors or even in personal relationships.

During the session, "Active Listening: The Business of Communicating," author and speaker with Kruse Development Kit Welchlin explored what it means to be an effective listener, beyond just surface-level hearing and communication.

"Listening is the No. 1 most admired quality of a co-worker, and the No. 1 most admired quality of a leader," Welchlin said during the session. "In almost every area of listening, we can be a little bit better. Minor adjustments in listening can have a major impact."

Welchlin began by explaining the difference between listening and hearing. According to his research, on average, only about 6.25% of information shared verbally is retained by the person on the receiving end of the conversation. Many people assume understanding comes with paying attention, but Welchlin said this is generally not the case.

Welchlin broke down four major methods to practice what he calls "active listening," a more in-depth, thoughtful way of communicating and working with others. They include: (1) getting prepared, (2) staying involved, (3) keeping an open mind, and (4) reviewing and evaluating. When communicating with someone, these steps can take a person from being a listener to being an active listener.

"A distinction can be made between adequate listening and active effective listening," Welchlin said. "A person can listen adequately, get through the day, follow directions fairly well, take sufficient notes, perform decently and get along with associates. But we can improve in nearly every area and gain the respect of our superiors and peers."

When thinking of the four major steps to being an active listener, taking pride out of communicating is a common thread in the ideas. When entering into a conversation, the communicator should be prepared to engage appropriately with the opposite party. Remaining engaged with the other individual or individuals in the conversation—such as asking relevant questions, inviting more chances for talking points, etc.—can help each person feel valued in the discussion, making for better listeners.

The first two steps lead into the last two steps of keeping an open mind and evaluating and reviewing. Keeping an open mind involves being open to any ideas, regardless of what the ideas may be or whose they are. While one person in the conversation may value one approach to problem solving, should that person not be open to any other form of problem solving, it could mean stagnation in the office, leading to frustration and time wasted. This, then, filters into evaluations and reviews, which involves giving feedback to others in the conversation, either immediately or following a specific, relevant event. Complimenting co-workers when the idea they proposed last week works or being honest when an idea does not sound effective is a good way to start.

Learning to be an active listener does take practice, Welchlin said. But keeping the four steps in mind when communicating with others can lead to healthier communication habits both in the workplace and at home.

“We spend more time with the people we work with than the people we live with,” Welchlin said. “Communication is relatively easy, once you take the ego out of it.”

—Christie Citranglo, NACM editorial associate