

## The Importance of Listening

Good mentors listen actively and make others feel valued as a result.

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We typically display our most ideal self when communicating with a child. Stripped of agenda, we unleash a reciprocal innocence that triggers confidence and courage.

The result can nurture self-esteem and bolster pride. Think of a child the next time you're in any important conversation. To paraphrase a well-known truism — listen to others with the best that you have and the best will come back to you.

Still, knowing that listening is important and being a good listener are different. Ask employees about their bosses' listening skills and most will give them an average grade.

Why do employees continue to ding their bosses on listening?

In my experience, most leaders can be great listeners. Let their 8-year-old come home crying about a neighborhood conflict and you'll see great listening.

Yet mix the normal pace of work and the traditional orientation that "employees don't need to be babied" and you have the prescription for "just get to the punch line" leader listening.

How do mentors evade the demands of daily distractions to listen well? Effective listeners don't start doing anything special. Great mentors get focused and stay focused. When listening is their goal, they make it the priority.

Try this the next time you need to listen to someone: Imagine that you're a newspaper reporter from another culture sent on assignment to report a story. Your readers cannot see, hear or feel this story except through your words.

Your first interviewee is sitting before you. It's your protégé. In your role as a reporter, describe every subtlety in the protégé's tone, gesture or expression. Is there a deeper meaning behind the sentences?

If you ask a question, how quick is the protégé's response? What might be implied by his or her silence? Is his or her laughter polite or hearty? If the protégé's words and tone could be a song, what style of music is it — a country song or a gospel hymn? What color is the tone? Listening is complete and sincere absorption. The mission of listening is to be so tuned into the other person's message that understanding becomes a copy-and-paste function from one mind to another.

Dramatic listening is not just a rendezvous of brains; it's a uniting, a linkage, a partnership. Like all human connections, it requires constant effort and commitment.

One of the biggest challenges for anyone with children striving to be a good parent is to listen without an agenda. Whenever a child begins to catalog his or her concerns, it's natural for a parent to feel the need to make a point or offer some caution.

But when a parent finally gives up trying to be smart and simply works at being a mirror, a child will begin to open up, trust and feel heard.

Being a poor listener is habit forming. Focusing takes effort; mirroring takes patience. Meanwhile, the clock is ticking on getting that order out, two calls are on hold, three people are pacing the waiting room and you're finishing up a meeting with your protégé. Who could be a great listener under these circumstances?

You need assistance from the only person who can help you — your protégé.

Here's how you ask for it: "I know there are times when I'm not the listener I want to be. When you think you're not getting my undivided attention, I'd appreciate your letting me know."

Protégés will hear the words of your request, but they'll be skeptical until they see you act. You may have to ask several times before your protégé takes you at your word. And unless you express your gratitude, your protégé may decide not to risk your displeasure and withdraw.

Good mentors do not listen passively; they listen dramatically. When people feel heard, they feel valued. Feeling valued, they are more likely to take risks.

If your goal is to be a great mentor, start by using your noise-management skills to help you fully use your talents as a great listener.

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