

# Are You Hearing Me? Listening Skills for Business Leaders

Perspective on People:  
By Karen Friedman

A few years ago, my husband and I bought a kitchen table from a reputable furniture company. Within a week, we noticed a few flaws in the finish. I called the help desk and was instructed to buy an extended warranty policy. They said I would get priority treatment, have a direct dial in line for assistance and would be entitled to additional maintenance past the standard time period. So, we purchased the policy.

A repairman came to our home and touched up the flaws. A few months later, more of the finish started peeling off. I called again. Another repairman fixed the problem.

It happened two or three more times. Each time, someone came to touch up the table. At that point, I should have insisted that the company replace the table, but I didn't. About two years later, the problem re-surfaced. This time, the company said my extended maintenance contract had expired so there was nothing they could do. They advised me to go buy furniture finishing sticks.

Fast forward to today; I use those furniture sticks often, but now the table is warping. I contacted customer service. We exchanged multiple e-mails. A representative called me. She was responsive, apologetic and said she was forwarding her notes to management and would have someone call me. She did, and it went something like this.

"You have a problem with a table?"

"Yes," I said. Did you read the notes from the emails and the person I spoke with?"

She didn't see any notes. I described the saga again.

"Well" she responded, "we sent people to your house and everything was fine."

It wasn't fine I stated. If it was fine, I wouldn't have kept calling back.

"What" she asked?

I repeated myself.

"I'm looking at your file and everything was fine."

Now I was annoyed. Again, I explained the situation. Again, she told me everything was fine.

"Are you listening to me?" I asked.

"Yes, she said. I see that every time we sent someone to your house, everything was fine".

Tired of talking to someone who wasn't paying attention and didn't seem to care, I told her I would never shop at her furniture store again. She said that's unfortunate. I said it was fine and hung up.

I don't blame this company for failing to replace a table that is out of extended warranty. I do blame their management for failure to listen to



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their customers. I blame them for lack of empathy. And I blame them for not making communication a priority.

There are several ways to tell if someone is really listening to you. In person, they will maintain eye con-

tact, so you know they're listening. They often angle their body toward you which signals they are in the conversation. Engaged listeners typically don't fidget, tap their fingers or shift in their seats.

When you can't see someone, there are verbal clues that will signal if they're paying attention. Ask a question or ask for their opinion. If they respond with "what" or ask you to repeat yourself, they probably weren't listening. Then ask them if they're listening. If they're caught off guard or continue to repeat the same thing over and over, that's a good clue that they're not really listening.

At work, poor listening skills translate to poor performance, poor relationships and poor productivity. That's why listening is such an important skill for leaders to master. It actually takes more concentration and focus than speaking. When you listen, you show interest in others and make them feel valued.

We worked with a candy company that manufactures and sells products in more than eighty countries around the globe. Despite the enormity of running this company, several times a month the CEO joins employees for lunch in the cafeteria so he can listen and stay in touch. It's not a complaint session because most of his employees are happy. While they talk shop, much of the conversation focuses on families, current events and what's happening in their lives.

Employees feel that the CEO really cares about them, because he really does. They feel their voices are heard because they are. There is a big difference between leaders saying they want to keep the lines of communication open and leaders who really do.

An article published in the Harvard Business Review lumped listening into three categories:

**1. Internal listening** which is when you are focused on your own thoughts and concerns but pretend to focus on others.

**2. Focused listening** is when you focus on others but are not fully connected to them.

**3. 360 listening** is what they term "the magic". Not only are you listening to what someone else is saying, but you are paying attention to how they say it.

Listening improves productivity in the workplace. If you are truly engaged in a conversation, it is natural to ask probing questions such as "can you elaborate" or "will you share an experience that led to your thought process" or "how can this help our team achieve their objectives?" These are questions that show you are fully present and genuinely interested in understanding and learning more.

Over the past two decades, we have worked with hundreds of executives. Those who are sincere listeners have several traits in common. They come across as caring empathetic individuals. Employees tend to want to work harder for people that seem to care about them. Leaders who listen embrace people's differences and try to understand how those traits can be utilized instead of trying to mold them into someone they want them to be. These leaders also tend to be open to new approaches and ideas, rather than thinking they have all the answers.

Yet, published articles report less than 2% of all professionals have any formal training to help them understand and improve listening techniques.

The furniture company I mentioned is a textbook example. After I hung up with the manager, I e-mailed a note of thanks to the original customer service representative who tried to help me. I said a manager

did call as promised and then briefly recounted the conversation saying she was not helpful.

The service representative e-mailed me back immediately, but to my surprise she wrote: "Thank you Karen. Did the manager resolve your problem?" At first, I thought I read it wrong. Then I realized, she didn't read what I wrote. Chances are, her attention was challenged by multiple tasks other than my problem.

Unfortunately, her failure to read my comments only further cemented my opinion that this company doesn't really care about its customers. Because service representatives are the front line of many companies, they have a unique opportunity to shape reputations and forge relationships.

Empowering employees with ongoing education and training to improve listening and communication skills will surely reap great returns on your investment both inside the company and when dealing with important customers.

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