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Prescriptions for Effective Listening

Dear Communications Doctor,
I've been accused of being a poor listener, which is a mystery to me. I seem to understand what people are saying, yet just last week, another person asked, "Did you hear me?" Are there any tools you have in your communications toolbox to help me fix this problem?

J.B.R.- San Antonio, Texas

Dear J.B.R. –

To build a positive communication culture, certain behaviors need to occur. One is for an individual to engage in verbal and nonverbal behaviors that let others know we are paying attention to the messages they are sharing.

Over the years as an executive coach I have worked with many individuals who, with the right tools, were able to significantly improve their listening skills. In working with them, one immediately notices that poor listeners have several things in common. Luckily, these behaviors are easily remedied. At your request, here are three quick prescriptions for improving your listening skills.

Prescription #1: Use Encouraging Behaviors. When in conversation with another person, good listeners will face the other person, have an open body stance, make eye contact, nod their head, smile, raise their eyebrows and offer an occasional verbal encourager such as, "uh huh," "right," "I see," or "yeah." All of these encouraging behaviors demonstrate that you are listening and eager to hear more. Without these behaviors, the listener is left feeling like you could care less.

To demonstrate the power of using encouraging behaviors, in my communication workshops I often conduct an experiment where I divide the class in two. Half of the class is asked to share a funny story. Unbeknownst to the storytellers, the other half of the class is instructed to listen to the story but to refrain from giving any non-verbal or verbal encouraging behaviors. The result? The funniest story is not so funny anymore. In fact, in seeing their partner's response to them, many of the storytellers lose many of their details or never complete the story at all. Though cruel, this exercise clearly demonstrates the point. We need these encouraging behaviors for effective communication to take place.

Prescription #2: Use Acknowledging Statements. I once had a workshop attendee who shared that every day her colleague would complain about the same thing. I asked her what was her response when this happened, she replied, "I listen to her." When I asked her how her colleague knew she was listening, she looked a little confused. I asked, "What are you saying to her that lets her know you hear her?" Her reply? "Nothing, I guess." I asked her to consider the possibility that her colleague kept repeating the same thing day after day because she was not getting the necessary feedback— feedback that indicated her message was being received. I suggested that acknowledging statements could easily change this. By using statements such as, "*Gee, it sounds like that is really hard for you,*" "*Wow, I can understand how you feel that way,*" "*What an interesting idea,*" "*I can tell you put a lot of thought into that,*" or "*I see your point,*" we can let another person know that we have heard them. The great thing about acknowledging statements is that they don't require one to take a position on what is being said. Rather, they let the other person know you are listening and making the effort to understand not only what they are thinking, but also how they are feeling. I'm happy to report that a few weeks after our conversation, I received an Email from the attendee. Her message read, "Thanks, it worked!"

Prescription #3: Use Clarifying Statements. Clarifying statements climb one more step up the listening ladder in that by using them you can pull more information from an individual. Clarifying statements include phrases such as: "*So tell me more about the _____, you said that you found it to be _____. In what way?*" "*So basically what you mean is _____.*" or "*So basically how you feel is _____.*" Clarifying statements are designed to probe a little deeper and are a great tool to let others know that they have your attention.

We all have a need to be valued and accepted. We want to feel as our ideas, beliefs, values, opinions and suggestions matter. By using encouraging skills, acknowledging statements and clarifying statements you will be well on your way to improving your listening skills, which are guaranteed to enhance your interpersonal relations.

Susanne Gaddis, PhD, known as the Communications Doctor, is an acknowledged communications expert who has been speaking and teaching the art of effective and positive communication since 1989. Gaddis' workshops, seminars, and keynote presentations are packed with tips and techniques that can be immediately applied for successful results. Gaddis also provides quality training and executive coaching for organizations, corporations, and associations across the United States. For more information, call 919-933-3237 or visit www.CommunicationsDoctor.com.