

A Plan, An Attempt, A Resolution

Since meetings consume most of my time at work, listening should be my biggest priority. However, meetings and listening do not always go hand-in-hand. Prior to a meeting last week I decided to put more effort into listening. My efforts had mixed results, which made me realize that listening requires ongoing practice.

The Best Laid Plan

My plans for listening in this meeting required me to be aware of my efforts at all times. I even made sure to get my coffee in before the meeting. Being aware of my need to listen, I found myself spending a great deal of energy on concentration. I was trying very hard to listen to every single word. My eye contact was constant and I remained quiet most of the time. I was conscious about keeping my mouth shut and giving subtle signs of interest like nodding my head. My plan seemed to be on the right track until the halfway point of the meeting.

I don't know if I'm really that bored in meetings or if I just have attention deficit disorder, but the window lit up from a passing car and my concentration went out that window--literally. For the next several minutes, I took turns making eye contact and looking at the environment outside. Again, I had to use quite a bit of energy to refocus and restart listening. After several more minutes of good listening, the woman I was meeting with decided to grab marketing material out of her bag and off (or should I say down) went my eye contact. Obviously, I caught myself right away and that's when my listening efforts were over. Now I was uncomfortable, and instead of listening I had a voice in my head saying; "Don't look down, don't look down." Eventually this stopped, thank god, and I reverted back to my typical meeting woes.



That voice in my head started again: "Why am I here? Blah, blah, blah." I couldn't help but start to think that this woman and her product were so typical and she was just like of every other wholesaler. The voice in my head continued: "Please make it stop!" I've heard this speech so many times that I could probably give it".

I've also been through the same sales training that she has so I was very aware of every technique she was using. I even began rattling the techniques off in my head, or reminiscing about my training days at Morgan Stanley. My grandmother used to say: "Don't bullshit a bull-shitter," and now I fully understand what she meant.



Finally, I looked down at my notepad and realized that I didn't write a whole heck of a lot. This caused me to "wake up" and reprogram myself back to listening mode. At this point, I'm making a huge effort because I know that my supervisors are going to ask me what I think of this product. If the product is worth marketing, I will promise marketing help in exchange for conference money. It's very important that I stay focused for the next fifteen minutes.

It's a very busy time at work. The NASD is all over us because we haven't sent them our breakpoint-eligible trades list. I have to remember to get my list over to compliance later. "Did I finish the Kensington funds held at Pershing?" I start writing reminder notes to myself on my notepad. I should really have been concentrating on listening to this wholesaler, but we have to have our final results back to the NASD by the end of May. Suddenly, I'm paranoid that I may have forgotten to do the math on several of the Kensington trades. At this point, my legs start moving back and forth. I'm now very anxious and cannot wait to get out of this meeting.

Finally it's over. I smile and shake her hand. While walking to the elevator we exchange small talk and preliminary strategies. I tell her to call at any time and that I'd really like to "get this thing rolling." As soon as the elevator door closes I shake my head and take a deep breath. Now I have to go make sense of my notes.

Gee, That Went Well

I went to the International Listening Association website, www.listen.org, and found some pretty scary statistics:

- 85% of what we know was learned by listening
- 75% of the time we are distracted, preoccupied or forgetful
- 50% is how much we usually recall immediately after listening to someone
- 45% is the amount of time we actually spend listening
- 20% is how much we remember of what we hear
- 2% of us have had formal educational listening experience

Although I'm now in the above-mentioned 2%, I still have a long way to go. I'm fully aware of the fact that listening requires effort. However, listening should not require the amount of effort I have to put in to make it through half of a meeting. The only way for me to get beyond this is through practice.

To Do: Find a Balance

Finding a balance between my conscious effort to listen and actually listening is the most important thing I have to work on. Sometimes I find myself thinking about listening instead of paying attention to what's being said. This transition is probably going to require the most work.



I have to remind myself to listen, but I also have to be more attentive. My typical listening is either too passive or too interactive. In the meeting I wrote about, I was way too passive. I lost interest and got side tracked into other thoughts. It's the same type of listening I do as when I'm studying during Monday Night Football. In other meetings I'm too interactive although it's for the same reasons. Sometimes I'll dominate the conversation and make the meeting more about me without listening to the wholesalers. I think interactive is an appropriate way to go, but not to the extent that I do. There has to be a nice dose of attentive listening involved in work-related meetings.

In order to be more attentive, I really need to apply more listening strategies. According to Bell and Smith (1999), some strategies for listening are:

①	Listen to the whole message
②	Listen for factual information
③	Listen for feelings
④	Give speaker signs of interest

These are part of the actual listening process. Listening to the whole message and listening for feelings are where I need help. I do have to listen to what the speaker is saying and realize why they're saying it. I also have to pay more attention to the way the speaker moves and how certain words are stressed.

To Do: Fix the Drift, Give Signs, Improve the Tude

Apparent in my narrative of last week's meeting, I have quite a bit of work to do to fix my mind-drifting problems. I constantly struggle with internal mental competition. Coming up with a better time-management schedule may help with internal mental competition, but I still have to work on keeping myself from getting distracted.

Giving the speaker signs is another area I should improve on. I use "uh-huh" and "yep" often, but I know that I should repeat some of what the speaker says and ask questions about what they're saying. This will show that I am listening.

While my listening process requires work and practice, so does my preparation for listening. One large area for improvement is my attitude toward many of the people I meet with. Oddly enough, I don't typically have a poor or negative attitude toward people. Most would say that I'm easy-going and funny. However, when I'm busy at work my attitude toward wholesalers is unfair. I know that most of them are good people, and that they're working just as hard as I am. Sometimes I convince myself that the wholesalers will show up with the same exact pitch as the last, or that they want an "in" with our company and aren't willing to pay for it. On several occasions I've been surprised by a very good product that I should've been aware of. I see this great product or idea and realize that it was brought out by one of the companies I met with, but didn't pay full attention to.



The Journey Begins

Overall, the quality of my listening seems to depend on how busy I am. I'm sure this is typical for most people, yet I'm also sure that this isn't fair to the people meeting with me. Listening is essential for me to do my job effectively. For this reason, resolving my listening concerns will be high on my new priority list.



References:

International Listening Association (n.d.)

Listening Factoids

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<http://www.listen.org/pages/factoids.html>

Bell, A. and Smith, D. (1999). *Management Communication*. New York: Wiley