

## Rediscovering Your Listening Skills

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Listening may be the most critical part of your job, both for acquiring new clients and for maintaining current relationships.

Everyone's listening abilities are unique, and it would be presumptuous of me to say that I could teach you better listening skills, but many common fears and anxieties can interfere with your innate listening skills. What follows are a few common problems and suggestions for how to work around them.



### 1. A conversation isn't a competition

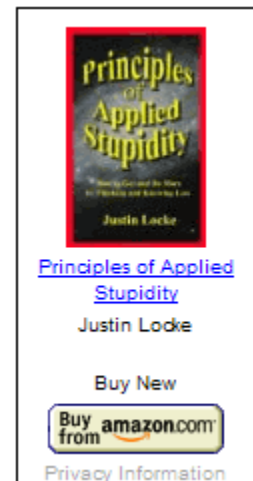
If you had a typical education, then you are used to everyone constantly being graded and compared. The more knowledge you displayed in school, the higher the ranking you achieved. You may also have memories of feeling demeaned or put down if you did not "win" arguments or debates. Added to that is the common experience of people in authority demanding that you listen obediently while they talk.

The act of listening to someone else is something that we often associate with the feeling of "losing."

So, when listening to clients or anyone else, it is easy to automatically assume that the conversation is yet another competition to see who can come up with the "winning" argument. Don't let yourself fall into this trap. There does not have to be a "winner and loser" in every discussion.

In any interaction or conversation, there are all sorts of subtle social and status implications, but you are not powerless just because you are not doing the talking. There is no real danger to your status or well-being if someone seems to know more than you do about a given topic or if they are more focused on themselves than on you.

If you feel some flush of an old anxiety from past put-downs creeping up, it's easier said than done, but try to keep that old memory separate from the here and now. If you can't escape competition mode, another easy workaround is just to sit back and "let them win."





Remember, “being the listener” is not a lower social status. On the contrary, listening often signifies higher status. For clients who are shy and non-confrontational, letting them “have the floor” and the safety and permission to talk without fear of being challenged can be a great and rare experience for them. They will never forget it, and they won’t forget you either.

## **2. The content is not always what is being communicated**

Another item that can feel like a challenge to your overall social and intellectual status (not to mention a waste of your time) is when someone tells you something you already know. It can be annoying or boring when someone starts to tell you an old joke, or a story that starts “Remember when we ...” It can be even worse if they told you that exact same joke or story just last week.

Yes, it’s annoying, but instead of making them feel bad by saying “I know that,” sometimes it’s best to just let them tell it to you again.

Doing so will cost you nothing. Besides, the information is not the most important thing here; their goal is maintaining a connection by telling you something that they think you will like, hence they believe it will make you like them. You want to show that it does. Once they have tested the waters of your reactions with something neutral, if they start to feel safe, they will then hopefully start to transcend the “small talk” and go on to more meaningful content.

## **3. A conversation is not an exam**

Throughout our education, we were constantly rewarded for “solving the problem,” and it is easy to superimpose that habit into conversations. That is not always the best thing to do.

If someone starts confiding in you about something that is troubling them, and you respond by coming up with a “quick and easy solution,” you may think you are doing something good by “looking ever-so-clever.” In reality, however, you have essentially dismissed the importance or complexity of the issue, at least in the mind of the person who is presenting the problem.

Very often, the “content” of what they are saying is secondary to how they are relating to you. Some people just need to feel connected, so they will ramble about what is troubling them today. Other times they already have a solution, and they are just repeating the problem to you to bolster their courage and dissipate anxiety.

Unless it’s specifically requested, very often there is no expectation of a “fix;” they just want sympathy and connection, so just relax and let them chat.



#### **4. Don't be afraid of "looking stupid"**

All art requires honesty, and the art of listening is no different.

If someone uses a word you don't understand, don't be afraid to ask what it means. Far from looking stupid, you are letting them share their knowledge with you, and that always makes people feel good, and that good feeling can cause them to look more favorably on you. Be open and honest about your ignorance or mistakes, which generally make you seem more honest and trustworthy. Showing a flaw makes you less intimidating, and yes, believe it or not, there are people who find you intimidating.

Asking for clarification, saying things like "let me get this straight," etc., can be very helpful in expediting communication. When you look puzzled, or you say "wow, that's a tough one," or when you ask someone to restate their problem to help you understand it, very often they will stop being afraid of looking stupid themselves, and the needed fix becomes obvious.

#### **5. Patience, patience**

We live in a hurry-up world, epitomized by the phrase "time is money," and we're surrounded by a constant attempt to mechanize everything, including the human mind and spirit. Instead of rushing around, perhaps the more time you spend on something, the more money and value you will get back. Again, it's easier said than done, but as much as possible, don't let fear or anxiety mess with your internal "clock."

It takes a certain amount of time to establish trust and connection, just as it takes a certain amount of time for crops to grow. Even the fastest hard drive has a limit on how much data it can transfer within a given time. You can make communications slightly more efficient here and there, but beyond a certain point, to make them go faster they must become increasingly artificial. It just takes a certain amount of time for people to get to know you and feel safe around you. If you try to rush things, you risk making people feel like they are not very important to you.

Patience with others starts with patience with yourself. Calm command of conversational pace is a big part of management and leadership, and it is seldom taught anywhere.

And finally ...



## 6. **Be mindful of the overwhelming importance, power, and depth of your perceptions**

With so much emphasis placed on information flowing *out* of you, and with so many demands placed upon you to produce and perform, it's easy to lose sight of just how powerful and valuable your perceptions can be.

Remember, in selling your services, it is the perception (read: recognition) of others that you are working so hard to achieve. So instead of always seeking recognition of yourself, why not offer that golden realization to others now and then? Besides, granting recognition will, more often than not, get you recognized. (Just one example: in the realm of social media, commenting on other people's blogs or re-Tweeting other people's Tweets will make ten times the impression of publishing your own original content, no matter how good it is.)

We have a tremendous need to be acknowledged. When I worked in fund raising, most of my life was spent in coming up with ceremonies of recognition for the major donors. These people were terribly rich and successful, and yet they still had a need to be noticed by their fellow creatures. All we did was tell these people, "Yes, we see you. You exist." They could have bought anything with their money, but recognition was what they wanted most.

Recognition is important to everyone, even the high-and-mighty. When I played the bass with the Boston Pops, I once went up to the orchestra's world-famous set-drummer and said, "Fred, I always love hearing you play your solos, but I have to say, last night, you were particularly inspired." And then I quickly added, "Of course, you know how fab you are, and who am I to even comment on your playing?" At the time I was just a young kid from Ohio, and he was one of the greatest set drummers in the world. I'll never forget his response: "It's always nice to hear."

Your perceptions, by the way, are unique; you can see things that other people can't, and vice versa. This makes it ever more important that you apply them and bring out rare elements of people that they may feel are useless or unwanted.

Another great by-product of letting your listening skills "do their thing" is that you will start to listen to yourself more as well.

One of the marks of a real professional is making things as easy and as efficient as you possibly can, so instead of adding to your workload by giving you a "to do" list, I've tried to give you a "to don't" list. If you spend less energy on resisting imaginary threats and you become less eager to "get on with it," wonderful things will flow into the low-pressure zone you have created. Once you remove all these fear-driven learned limitations and complications from your conversations, listening becomes incredibly easy. And listening well is a wonderful thing to do for others — and for yourself.



*[Justin Locke](#) is the author of “Principles of Applied Stupidity,” an amusing look at how to depart from the conventional wisdom. He played the double bass with the Boston Symphony and the Boston Pops, and he managed the Bose Philharmonic. As a speaker and seminar leader, he shares unusual “artistic” approaches to common management and leadership issues.*

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