

Listening as a Gateway to Influence

The presentation you thought you nailed didn't get the buy-in you anticipated.

You didn't understand why your boss wasn't thrilled with your results on the project because you thought you did it just the way he asked.

The meeting you had with your direct report left you feeling frustrated...he just didn't listen. Did you?

Influencing others requires many things to come together: a logical presentation of information, credibility, and conviction in your message for starters. We often forget the impact listening has on whether we are successful when influencing. Effective listening leads to greater understanding and credibility providing us with a gateway to influence.

While most people would agree that listening is a critical skill to develop, few understand the nuances of listening that can make or break the ability to influence. There are five approaches to listening. The most effective influencers go beyond active listening and learn to use each of the five approaches effectively.

The five approaches to listening:

1. **Appreciative** listeners simply enjoy the interaction and listen for enjoyment, humor, and to connect with others.
2. **Empathic** listeners listen to understand others better. They try to understand both the speaker's perspective and emotions.
3. **Comprehensive** listeners focus on the main ideas. They are naturally good at identifying problems and opportunities even when people are disorganized.
4. **Discerning** listeners pay attention to details others miss. They minimize distractions and listen for specific, detailed information.
5. **Evaluative** listeners listen for information that will help them evaluate or judge the accuracy of the speaker or the content. They verify facts and don't tolerate exaggerations or inconsistencies.

Understanding to what degree you naturally use each of the five approaches will help you be more influential in all settings. Using the wrong approach to listening in a given situation may lead to missed information, damaged credibility, and lack of buy-in among other things. Consider the following examples:

Jennifer is an IT Director presenting a change to her team of 20. Jennifer's natural listening style is a combination of comprehensive and evaluative listening. We tend to present information the same way we like to hear it. For Jennifer, that means a clear concise message with proven facts to back it up. That is exactly how she presented this change, so why didn't her team get on board with the change?

The primary style of many of the engineers in the room was a combination of discerning and evaluative approaches. That meant that they wanted much more detail about how the change was going to be implemented, their role in the change, and how it would ultimately impact them. While they appreciated the facts Jennifer provided, they found her argument too high level and vague to be influenced by it. Jennifer would have had a much better chance at influencing this group if she had adapted her approach to their listening style and provided them the details they needed to get on board.

Tom is a customer service representative who fielded a call from an angry customer. He listened to the customer until he thought he understood the problem and checked with the customer to make sure he got it right. Tom was relieved when the customer confirmed that he got it and proceeded to move forward with the solution. While the customer's frustration diminished, it didn't dissipate altogether. Why would a customer still be frustrated after Tom solved his problem?

Tom's comprehensive listening approach enabled him to quickly determine and solve the problem. That wasn't the only thing the customer needed, however. When people are experiencing strong emotions like this customer was, they also want empathic listening – someone to just listen to them vent and hear how difficult the problem made their lives. The ideal response to this customer would have been if Tom would have listened empathically first and heard the customer out and then moved on to comprehensive listening to solve the problem. Had Tom adapted his listening style with this customer, he would have been more likely to have a promoter at the end of the call.

At what point in a meeting should the appreciative approach be used? Which of the approaches do the most successful sales people use? How is the listening style of a leader different from a manager? These are just some of the questions that can be answered by better understanding the five approaches to listening and how to adapt your style to your audience for more effective influence.

If you'd like to develop your ability to influence or your teams', you can either take a listening assessment by itself or in the context of one of the courses offered by the Klassen Performance Group.

Simply contact Dr. Heather Johnson at heather@klassenperformancegroup.com or call 651-322-7043 for more information.