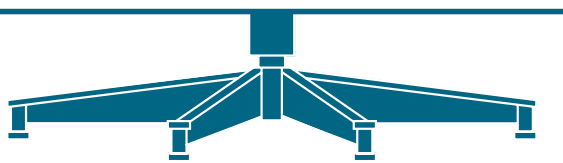


# the big chair



## Take it all in and learn

Listening can improve your workplace communication, writes **Ann-Maree Moodie**.

**W**e've all been guilty of not listening. Life is busy and full of distractions and sometimes we prefer to talk about ourselves. But active listening skills are essential for understanding others better and this helps to motivate, direct and develop staff.

"When employees are listened to they are likely to feel respected and good about themselves, their job and their employer," says Mandy Kotzman, co-author of *Listen To Me, Listen To You* (Penguin Australia). "Employees perform better, costly mistakes are avoided and differences can be identified and addressed."

This is especially powerful in a world where feeling you have been listened to is a rare experience. The success of the "listening tours" conducted recently by Prime

Minister Kevin Rudd and new federal sex discrimination commissioner Elizabeth Broderick are good examples.

As the old saying goes, if you listen 60 per cent of the time and speak 40 per cent of the time, you'll be regarded as a great conversationalist.

"In cultures that focus on the individual there is more emphasis on what I want or what I think, rather than reaching out to understand those around us in open and non-judgmental ways," Kotzman says.

Active listeners typically apply common techniques: eye contact, affirmative body language, asking questions during conversations and regularly paraphrasing what the speaker has said. They avoid interrupting the speaker and resist talking over them or indulging in distracting actions or gestures.

### active listeners

Think about themselves in a way that enables them to be genuine, respectful, accepting and interested in others in non-judgmental ways.

Pay attention to establish rapport. May include facing the speaker, making eye contact, matching the speaker's posture, speed, style, facial expression, voice quality and appearance.

Respond in ways that promote mutual understanding and encourage the speaker.  
Source: Mandy Kotzman



**Clues ... coach Bob Hughes emphasises the need for close attention to details.**

They make a smooth transition between the roles of speaker and listener.

"The goal of active listening is to establish and communicate understanding and respect," Kotzman says.

"It may sometimes require being clear and honest about those times when you are not able to offer this, rather than pretending to listen when you are not really present."

Active listening is sometimes called "listening for meaning" or "reflective listening" because the listener reflects on what has been communicated.

Communications coach Bob Hughes says close attention to another person's facial expressions, body language and

**'Employees perform better, costly mistakes are avoided.'**

Mandy Kotzman, author

tone of voice will provide clues on the gap between the words they're saying and the true meaning of their message.

"Active and deep listeners use their eyes," Hughes says. "They watch people's bodies and calibrate the expressions with what's being said."

"I had a boss once who had a special look on his face when he was about to lie to you. Other people I know will cough before they have to give bad news."

When next you're having a conversation, ask yourself: how does what this person is saying compare to their behaviour?

"Very few people do as they say and we should expect and forgive that," Hughes says.

"But it's worth considering

where the discrepancy is and to feel the texture of their hypocrisy." Listening closely to how the person uses language can take a manager into a deeper, more satisfying and much more illuminating level of understanding and is likely to save him or her from making damaging assumptions about the other person.

"It's useful to consider what larger patterns are operating behind the other person's language," Hughes says. "Does the speaker move towards or away from the topic? Are they moved by their head or their heart? Are they into detail or do they talk about the 'big picture'?"

"Some people I work with can seem very picky but in fact they're just detail people who don't want things to be wrong. That's not my style so it's very useful for me to hear. We often get lost in what we think are implied criticisms in other people's speech and stop hearing what they're saying."

"I know one man who speaks quite differently when he's self-conscious; he almost sounds like he's speaking through his teeth. Sometimes when he sounds that way he can be very smarmy."

It's easy to remember the person who made us feel special. Even at the likes of a networking event, the people we will say make a difference are those who took the time to hear what we were saying and responded by showing they empathised.

"Most of us have not been taught about the incredible value of effective listening, nor about the attitudes and skills it requires," Kotzman says.

"When we encounter someone who conveys genuine interest and takes the time and effort to truly connect with and understand us, we feel really special and validated."

"Being listened to in this way empowers us to be and to do our best – and that's a magical, intoxicating elixir."

*Ann-Maree Moodie is a management educator and managing director of the Boardroom Consulting Group.*

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