



# THE FIVE TRAPS TO EFFECTIVE LISTENING & HOW TO AVOID THEM

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**L**istening is one of the most important things that humans do. It has been estimated that listening takes up more of our waking hours than any other activity.

The problem, however, is that most of us are not very good at listening. Researchers have claimed, in fact, that 75% of oral communication is either ignored, misunderstood or quickly forgotten. So, we might tell each other things, but we do not necessarily listen.

Why is it that we are not naturally good at listening? It is because there are five common traps that we tend to fall into when we listen. How do we overcome these? By making sure we develop effective listening skills.

So, what are the five traps and what are the listening skills to avoid them?

## Trap 1: Giving a Mixed Message

Giving a mixed message involves saying that you are listening when quite obviously you are not. You might be looking at the other person, or continuing to do a task that you are involved with, maybe you are distracted or looking away. All these body language signs show that you are not listening. And by then saying that you are listening, you are giving a mixed message.

The way to avoid this trap is the first listening skills - show interest.

Showing interest means doing all those things that let the person you are listening to know that you are interested in, and paying attention to, what they are saying. It includes making eye contact, facing the person, stopping the task you are doing, nodding your head and saying things like, "m-mm", "ah-hah", "go on", "tell me more".

## Trap 2: Going Down the Wrong Path

Very often a major trap that we fall into when we listen is to hear the wrong message. We focus on a minor point or an irrelevancy, and then go down a wrong path by responding to it, rather than picking up on the main issue.

The skill necessary here is to focus on the key issue.

The way to do that is to listen carefully and be prepared to wait rather than jump in at the first point that is understood. It involves looking at the person, listening to them and really sensing and clarifying what the main issue is.

## Trap 3: Misunderstanding

A common trap when listening is misunderstanding the other person or getting the message wrong.

The listening skill to avoid this trap is to summarise and check.

Some people call this skill "active listening". When you summarise and check, you listen carefully to what a person has said, you then summarise or paraphrase what they have said, say it back to them and then add, "Have I got that right?" If you have understood correctly, you then proceed to the next part of the conversation.

A benefit of summarising and checking is that the other person knows that you are listening carefully.

If, on the other hand, you have got the message wrong, this is a perfect opportunity for the other person to correct you.

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### Trap 4: Overload

Very often when we are listening we can get overloaded with a lot of information. The talker may be discussing a number of different issues and we may get swamped with too much information and detail.

The listening skill here is to establish the pattern or listen for the common thread of what is being said.

The way to do this is to be patient, to listen carefully and see or hear if you can identify some common issue or common pattern running through what is being said.

### Trap 5: Discomfort with Feelings

Very frequently we will be talking with somebody who will be in an emotional state. They may be a customer or colleague, boss or employee. Their emotions may range from

anger or frustration to jealousy or stress. It is very common for us to avoid dealing with feelings because we feel uncomfortable or unsure about how to respond.

We feel unsure about what to do and so ignore the person's emotions. However, very often a person's feelings are the most direct route to the key issue that is on their mind.

The listening skill necessary here is to be open and willing to explore feelings.

Exploring feelings requires you to acknowledge when another person is angry or annoyed, sad or frustrated, and then be prepared to explore those feelings and the reasons behind them. Being willing to explore the feelings means that you are much more likely to identify the really important issue, the important problem, and then move to solving it.

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### REFERENCE

***Effective Listening***, a video training package produced by Ash.Quarry Productions and distributed by Seven Dimensions Pty Ltd, ph: +61 3 9686 9677.

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