



Listening to Others in Meetings

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If only hearing aids would make us all better listeners! But alas, the physical functioning of the eardrum is seldom the problem. Instead, the problem lies in our selective filtering of the sensory input. To become a better listener, we have to adjust our own internal filters. One filter, the right/wrong filter, if muted or removed can aid listening tremendously.

Some people exhibit such a need to be right that they can't stand evidence to the contrary. These are the folks who work overtime to prove others wrong and disparage anyone who espouses a different point of view. Their stance makes meetings difficult because it sends discussions rapidly into debating right versus wrong. The downside of such debate is that it is designed to create winners and losers. We debate by taking a stand on a position and refusing to budge. We criticize the other point of view. Often, to strengthen our chances of winning, we criticize the person holding the other point of view! Now, seriously consider whether any listening is going on in such circumstances. Instead, consider that what we call listening is actually what we appear to be doing while re-loading! (Do you know that the word "discussion" has the same root as "percussion" and "concussion?" Bang! Bang!)

Many others, however, listen deeply and respectfully to speakers who represent different views. Why? Because they know that "right" and "wrong" is always relative. What's "right" in your _____ (fill in the blank: department, culture, market, organization, nation, household, etc.) may well be "wrong" in another's. Judgements of right and wrong always emanate from a particular point of view and are rooted in values, beliefs and attitudes, which are always relative. Great listeners don't fear different points of view thus they don't feel a need to shoot them down immediately. They know different points of view offer new opportunities to build and expand, rather than to threaten each other with extinction.

Take for example a meeting between a marketing group and a design group. Marketing and design each operate from very different points of view and, sometimes, have great difficulty working together. But marketing would have nothing to sell without design and design would have no niche for their product without marketing. In fact, each is only part of the bigger picture - to add value -- and requires the other part for completion.

To dramatically improve your listening in meetings:

1. Consider all of your knowledge, ideas and opinions as functions of your unique perspective or point of view. Consider each other person's knowledge, ideas and opinions as functions of their points of view. All are valid and true for the speaker.
2. Pay attention to your own point of view, especially as it relates to others. Doing

this will help you discern your own beliefs and values and be more comfortable with them.

3. Remember that considering an issue from many different points of view is what makes a team smart. Therefore, treasure the opportunity to meet with people who perceive things differently than you do.
4. Practice "playback listening." Listen to others with your internal recorder turned on so that you can play back their words to them exactly. This powerful practice will help you develop the capacity to acknowledge others' points of view. Do this whenever it is critical that someone be heard.
5. Hear others with the intention of integrating your point of view with as many others as you can. To do this, though, you must be willing to hear -- and validate -- all other points of view. And, not just when you agree with them, but all the time.

move "right" and "wrong" from your vocabulary. Replace the words with "works" and "doesn't" -- as in "that works for me" and "that doesn't work from my point of view." Try it for three days and see if you can feel less judgmental and more open to multiple viewpoints.



About the author

Christopher M. Avery, Ph.D. is an internationally recognized speaker on responsible teamwork, leadership and change, and the author of *Teamwork Is An Individual Skill: Getting Your Work Done When Sharing Responsibility* (Berrett-Koehler, 2001). Visit his web site at <http://www.partnerwerks.com>.

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