

Think about a conversation with someone who gives you his full attention, is genuinely interested in what you say, and doesn't talk about himself all the time. These conversations leave you energized and willing to do your best to help that person.

Compare that to a conversation with someone who is all about his own agenda and knows you need his wisdom and stories. Your energy and commitment to help him succeed is diminished.

It's been said that people don't care what you know until they know that you care. Listening well demonstrates care. If this sounds too mushy for your professional context, remember that you're leading *people*, and they, not you, choose how committed they are to your cause. If you want your followers to have a high sense of being valued and be committed to your success, start by becoming a good listener. So how do you develop that skill?

First, what's going on inside your head while you're "listening" to someone? Here are some things I catch myself doing:

- Trying to "fix" your problem
- Figuring out what I'm going to say next
- Thinking about what I'm doing later today
- Reflecting on things that happened earlier
- Internally "rolling my eyes" as you repeat things you've said before
- Letting my mind wander off into space



Sound familiar? Maybe you think that's just normal listening. I suggest they are evidences of sloppy listening. Unfortunately, sloppy listening has become an acceptable norm.

Here are four tips I'm using to improve my listening:

1. **Recognize it's not my job to "fix" you.** Unasked for advice is called "criticism". Don't assume my advice is wanted just because you mention a problem. This takes humility, since my ego is stroked when I get to offer my solutions. Is my goal really to help you, or to make me look wise? Wait for advice to be asked for.
2. **Listen for emotional cues.** Important things trigger emotions. Knowing what's important to you gives me the chance to connect with you at a stronger level. Recognizing my own emotional responses to what you say helps me identify common ground. When I respond, I can reflect our shared connections. That's much more relational than giving unsolicited advice.
3. **Encourage you with the strengths I observe in your story.** When I was in sixth grade, a classmate read a paper I wrote and commented that I was a good writer. I hadn't thought of myself as a writer before, but I've remembered that comment thousands of times over the past 40+ years, and it always spurs me to keep writing. Sometimes we don't recognize our own abilities until someone points them out.
4. **Don't turn the spotlight on myself.** My tendency is to try to top your story with my own, or tell how I would handle your situation. But I need to learn to let the spotlight stay on you. Another test of humility!

Listen well and others will hear more when you speak.

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