



## STOP & LISTEN

It is estimated that we spend anywhere from 50-60% of our time listening, and yet we retain very little. In one study, listeners only remembered half of what they had heard immediately after someone finished speaking. Another study found that when asked to self-assess their listening skills, the majority of adults rated themselves to be above average listeners.

Successful leaders often excel in their careers because they are the “movers and shakers” who take the initiative to make things happen quickly. Listening requires slowing down and exerting patience to focus on someone else’s agenda. The intricacies of the human brain make this challenging. Americans have an average rate of speech of 125 words per minute. This is an extremely slow pace compared to the human brain’s capabilities as a neuron can fire about 200 times a second. As a result, we often allow our minds to wander and drift, negatively impacting our ability to retain new information. To stay engaged, the best listeners know when to ask the *right* questions so that the other person feels heard. In other words, good listening is a two-way dialog rather than the passive reception of another’s message.

Research suggests that active listening combined with empathy is the most effective form of listening. As you become a better listener you will likely find that others are more willing to share things with you. Good listeners create an environment that make others feel safe to share information, open up or even disagree. During these times, it is important to take note of your emotional reactions (both positive and negative) as they can greatly impact the ability to objectively listen. When receiving negative feedback or information, the body releases cortisol into the brain often causing a “fight or flight reaction”. In the workplace, this can cause someone to begin withdrawing from the conversation (flight) or planning a rebuttal (fight). In other words, we become focused on our reactions rather than staying present and listening. When receiving positive feedback or information, the body releases oxytocin which elicits a positive, feel-good feeling. When this occurs, we tend to let our guard down and can overlook the need to question the validity of the message.

Listening is a skill that can be cultivated. Educators have recently begun focusing on improving students’ listening skills and building it into the curriculum. For example, Nashville public schools have started teaching listening to elementary and high school students. Organizations, too, are recognizing the criticality of listening. For example, General Electric includes “humble listening” among the most desirable traits for potential leaders. In order to become better leaders, we must first become better listeners.