



Building the Best Organizations in the Insurance Industry

LISTEN YOUR WAY UP THE LADDER

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In Our Rush to Speak Over One Another, Listening Has Become a Lost Art

We all want to be heard, but a surprising number of people only half-listen. If you spend more time listening than talking, use your listening skills to your advantage in [job interviews](#), [negotiations](#), [networking](#), business meetings, and when [selling](#) anything to anyone. If not, improve your listening skills.

"I remember an interview I had for a job," says [Doug Fidoten](#), president of [Dentsu America](#), a full-service advertising and marketing-communications company. He shares this in my book, [Self-Promotion for Introverts®](#): "I had already met with a number of other executives, and this was the last one. The executive I met with looked at my résumé and initially didn't say anything. Many people would have nervously tried to fill the space. Maybe it was my introverted character, but I didn't. Eventually, the executive asked me questions, and we started a dialogue. The next day I was told that I got the job and that I had done particularly well with this executive. Maybe it was a stroke of luck. But maybe also it was the first bit of insight into what it meant to be an active listener."

How common is it to actually listen? "According to the [International Listening Association](#), research studies indicate that we spend about 45 percent of our time listening, but we are distracted, preoccupied, or forgetful about 75 percent of that time," says [Kay Lindahl](#) in [The Sacred Art of Listening](#). She says that the average attention space for adults is 22 seconds. And that immediately after listening to someone talk, we usually recall only about half of what we heard. "As a manager of a large business said once, 'I have always prepared myself to speak. But I have never prepared myself to listen,'" she adds.

"We think we listen, but we don't," says [Nancy Kline](#) in her book [Time to Think](#). "We finish each other's sentences, we interrupt each other, we moan together, we fill in the pauses with our own stories, we look at our watches, we sigh, frown, tap our finger, read the newspaper or walk away. We give advice, give advice, give advice." Been there? She adds, "Corporate leaders can be the worst. I even knew one chief executive who worked a puzzle when someone came in to see him. It was not uncommon for him to interrupt the person with a loud 'There!' when he found the missing piece."

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In using the analogy of driving up a steep hill, [Mark Goulston, M.D.](#), says in his book *Just Listen*, "Most people upshift when they want to get through to other people. They persuade. They encourage. They argue. They push. And in the process, they create resistance." Janet Fiorenzo, a Denver based listening coach, adds, "We miss so much by not really listening—to others and ourselves. Yet by really listening, we can access so much information that can make us more successful." If you're not already a gold medalist in the listening department, she offers these tips to help you listen more attentively:

1. Take a deep breath to get centered.
2. Clear your mind and totally give your full attention to the other individual.
3. Be aware of any self-talk, distractions, and assumptions you may have—and try to let go of them, at least temporarily.
4. Listen with all your senses—paying close attention to the other person's tone and nonverbal communication.
5. Be silent until the person is finished speaking.

Kline recommends keeping your eyes on the other party when listening. "Don't look away unless there is a fire or you have a seriously unsavory personal emergency," she says.

In some situations and with some people, you might be wondering how to get in a word edgewise. While it might seem ironic to suggest that you interrupt right after underscoring the importance of listening, sometimes it is appropriate, and even necessary.

[Michele Wucker](#), president of the [World Policy Institute](#), whom I interviewed for my book, tells how she handles her live appearances on national TV as an introvert: "The hardest thing was to learn to interrupt. You're expected to do it, and it's entertainment. I just decided that I was going to do it. I kept trying, and then all of a sudden it happened. I really started to enjoy my debates with Pat Buchanan when I could say, 'Wow! I got the last word in today.'"

If interrupting sounds repugnant to you because you hate to be interrupted, reframe the activity as interjecting when you need to be heard at boisterous meetings, at networking events, and in exchanges with nonstop talkers. Here are a few tips to make it easier. The more subtle cues will only work with more attentive folks, so adjust your verbal and nonverbal cues to match your audience.



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- Lean forward
- Raise a finger
- Clear your throat
- Tap someone—on the shoulder or elbow
- Gather your belongs as if you have to get going
- Make eye contact with someone who is speaking, say her or his name, smile, and just jump in.