

Communication

Are You Listening?

To be a successful negotiator, you must focus on becoming a better LIAR: Listen, Inquire, Acknowledge, and Respond. In countless negotiations, the parties find themselves talking past each other and hearing only positions, not interests. They become so focused on seeking to be understood versus seeking to understand the perspective of the other party that they fail to listen and communicate in a clear, concise, and efficient manner. This pattern of behavior is likely to yield conflict and a fight at, or flight from, the table.

In many instances, the fight or flight outcome stems from the parties forgetting to check their bias at the door. Bias is defined as a refusal to consider the merits of alternative points of view. Bias occurs when you view your side as better, more legitimate, and more honest while undermining the perspective of the other party. The bias is typically formed during the preparation process with comments such as, "The price they are seeking is not market relevant," or "The terms they are demanding are ridiculous and unacceptable." The bias is reinforced at the negotiating table when one party suggests the other's ideas are extreme or stubborn. Such a suggestion triggers the other party to anchor firmly to their position which will impact the ability to reach an agreement.

The less time you take to understand how the other party perceives the situation, the more likely you are to filter the facts according to your perception, and the more biased you become. Disciplined negotiators listen for interests behind positions and for the standards or legitimacy the other party is using to support their perspective. At a basic level, negotiation is a task of influence. To influence the other party, it is critical to understand the party's interests as deeply as possible so options can be generated that will meet those interests and hopefully lead to an agreement. The key to understanding the other party's interests is listening.

While many individuals claim to be excellent listeners, consider the following statistics:

- **Processing Variances:** The average person speaks at a rate of 125 to 150 words per minute, but the brain can process information at 1,000 to 3,000 words per minute. This disparity yields ample time for being distracted, preoccupied, or forgetful during conversations.
- **Memory Challenges:** Immediately after listening to someone talk, we can recall about 50% of what was said. Just one hour later, that retention drops to less than 20%.
- **Poor training:** Despite its importance, less than 2% of the population has ever received any formal education or training on how to listen.
- **Silence:** Most people are uncomfortable with silence and can only wait less than 10 seconds before having to ask a question or say something to break the silence.

The bottom line is when engaged in a negotiation, or any communication for that matter, it is critical to slow down and listen to the other party. Some individuals are proponents of the 70/30 rule which suggests spending 70% of the time listening and 30% of the time speaking. As it relates to the 70%, you should focus on absorbing information, processing the speaker's perspective, and understanding the underlying emotions behind their words. For the remaining 30%, you should focus on asking strategic and open-ended questions and summarizing what you heard.

Irrespective of the method you choose, becoming a better listener will make you a better negotiator. Doing so will require you to stop listening with the intent of replying. Rather, concentrate hard enough to set your own opinions, needs, and other priorities aside to listen with empathy. When you do so, there will be fewer misunderstandings, misinterpretations, and missed opportunities.

How to Listen with Empathy

Empathy is projecting yourself into another person's experience to appreciate and understand their emotions and feelings. When you listen with empathy to the other party you let them know you understand their problem; that you are interested in what they are saying; and that you are not judging them. You convey these messages through words and non-verbal behaviors, including body language. This encourages the other party to fully express their perspective free of interruption, criticism, or domination. Empathic listening requires concentration, awareness, and periodic commenting. Empathic listening is reflective—the listener tries to mirror the substance of the speaker's thoughts and feelings, without adding or subtracting anything.

Being an effective negotiator requires finding the proper balance between empathy and assertiveness. On the assertiveness side of the equation, it is important to express and advocate for your own interests and perspectives. The empathy component requires seeking to understand the other party's perspective and being able to express it back to them in a non-judgmental (no questions, comments, or solutions) manner. Doing so does not mean you agree with them; you are simply confirming you have clearly understood them and see the issue from their perspective.

Once each party understands the way the other sees the issue, a collaborative discussion can hopefully ensue in which the conversation can shift to one of mutually beneficial options which will meet the interests of the parties.

Conclusion

Disciplined negotiators focus on listening with empathy for signals that uncover the other party's interests. Remember, your goal is to uncover the interests of the other party so you can identify options that might yield an agreement. Listening is a key ingredient in achieving your goal and a skill that should be practiced accordingly. When feeling compelled to be understood, remember to slow down and focus on being a better LIAR: **L**isten, **I**nquire, **A**cknowledge, and **R**espond.