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How Your Listening Affects Your Conversations

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*RE-PRINT ARTICLE***How Your Listening Affects Your Conversations**

This article was originally published on the Leadership Network Lucerne Blog of the University of Applied Sciences Lucerne in German language.

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"Listening is important." Although this statement has been circulating in management and leadership for a long time, very few know what really happens when they listen. Or do you know how you influence what is said in a conversation with your listening?

Statements such as "I didn't do anything, I just listened" or "My employees only tell me about problems" make it clear that very few managers see the connection between listening and what is being said. And this despite the fact that listening, and its effects have been scientifically researched.

Listening Is an Interactive Activity

Listening is often understood as something passive. As something that has no bearing on the story being told. However, research of Microanalysis of Face-to-Face Dialogue (Bavelas & Gerwing, 2011), which uses video analysis to investigate what happens in conversations moment by moment, shows that listening is something that we do visibly, audibly and interactively.

As listeners, we do a lot in conversations:

- **We confirm what is being said**, for example, by nodding. We blink our eyes. We smile. We confirm with «Mhmm». We look the other person in the eye at this moment. We say « ok». We reinforce with "yes, exactly" or "ah, yes", etc.
- **When something is unclear**, we may frown. We widen our eyes. We keep our eyes open without blinking. We tilt our heads. We raise our finger, etc.
- **When we are amazed**, we for example open our mouths and keep our eyes wide open. We may confirm with «Wow», etc.

In Microanalysis of Face-to-Face Dialogue we call these visible and sometimes also audible signs that display that we are listening, generic and specific listener responses. **Generic listener responses** are behaviors such as nodding, "Mhmm" or smiling, that we also use in other conversations. They show the other person that we are listening. **Specific listener responses** relate specifically to the content of what is being said. A specific listener response, for example, is repeating a specific word or part of a sentence.

What we do while listening is interactional:

- **Listener responses are visible and partly audible:** They show the other person that we are listening and signal the extent to which we can follow what has been said. Our conversation partners see and hear them and they often react to them.
- **Listener responses influence the conversation:** Our listener responses have a significant impact on how our counterparts continue with what they are telling. For example, if you are telling something and the other person nods in confirmation, then you will likely continue the story that you are telling. If, on the other hand, the other person is frowning and is looking at you with open eyes, then this may irritate you. You might then, for example, ask a question, justify what you just said, try to convince the other person, etc.

Listening Carefully Enhances the Storytelling of Others

Not only existing listener responses influence the conversation. If they are missing or appear in the wrong place, it can be quite irritating, too.

You have experienced this for sure: You are telling something and the other person, who may be busy on the smartphone or computer, does not react to what you say - no eye contact, no nodding, no listener response - or they react in strange moments - e.g. with a "Mhmm, Mhmm" after a question that you asked. You will likely wonder whether the other person hears or understands you. You might even ask. And it is very likely that the lack of listener responses will affect the quality of the story you are telling.

Bavelas et al. (2000) showed exactly this in their study. They divided narrators into two groups. The narrators in one group were listened to attentively. In the other group, the listeners had to count the words that begin with the letter "T". The stories told were recorded on video. The recordings were then shown to an audience who had to evaluate who the better storytellers are.

The result is not surprising: the attentive listeners showed normal listener responses that encouraged the storytellers to continue telling the story. The distracted listeners, on the other hand, reacted less to what was said. As a result, the narrators who were not listened to carefully were rated as the significantly worse storytellers.

As listeners, we collaborate constantly with our conversation partner. The quality of the storytelling is directly related to our attentive listening. If you want to hear good stories then you need to listen attentively.

Deliberate Listening Influences the Content

But what should you focus your attention on? On what you want to hear more. Listening is something we learn from an early age and we do it naturally. "We can do that. We don't have to learn that separately.", You may now object. On the one hand, that's true. On the other hand, you can influence the content of the conversation through your listening.

We cannot listen neutrally. Microanalysis research shows that what we listen to makes a difference. We often hear from managers that their employees only talk about problems (Jordan et al., 2013). If we then analyze their leadership conversations with them, it becomes clear that they are making a significant contribution to what is being said by listening. They confirm, for example with a nod or an "aha", when problems are discussed and not when employees talk about exceptions or goals. This encourages the employees to go on with the problem description. Or the managers mainly include negative aspects of what has been said in their statements instead of the words that are already going in a wished for direction.

Example 1 from a management interview analysis:

Employee: "It's not going so well at the moment."

Supervisor confirming: "Mhmm"

The employee continues to describe the problem: "It's not that easy because ..."

Variation:

Employee: "It's not going so well **at the moment**."

Supervisor listens to exceptions: «**At the moment?** That means it was better before? "

Employee explains: "Yes, it was better two months ago ..."

Example 2 from a management interview analysis:

Employee: "I don't want that anymore."

Supervisor confirming: "Ah, ok."

Employee continues to describe the problem: "Yes, you know, because ..."

Variation:

Employee: "I **don't want that anymore.**"

Supervisor listens to exceptions: "Ah, you you **don't want that anymore.** What do you want instead?"

Employee explains: "I would rather ..."

Focus on what you want to hear more about. It is worth it! If you want to hear more about exceptions, more about what is already working, more about the goals of the employees or their hopes and wishes, more about their successes, etc., then train your listening skills.

Listen specifically for these elements. Confirm these elements in the statements of your conversation partner with general and specific listener responses. You will see how your conversations will gradually develop in this direction.

Further training on the topic

Join our Microanalysis online course and get to know what really happens in dialogue:

- English: www.sfontour.com/microanalysis
- German: www.sfontour.com/mikroanalyse

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