



BACK TALK

BY SANDER A. FLAUM

Eyes up, I'm talking to you!

Your mother had it right. Eye contact is critical to effective listening.

Early in my career I prided myself on being a good listener. In the army I learned to focus on briefings and made sure I understood my assignments. When I began to climb the career ladder at Lederle Laboratories (merged with Wyeth, now Pfizer), first in PR and later as a manager, I fancied that I got along great with my peers and my team.

Then one day our marketing VP called me aside. He began by telling me my work was great, but ... "Thanks," I said, not only interrupting him but also overlooking the implications of that "but." Without going into the painful details, he told me that the real purpose of our meeting was to let me know my listening skills left something to be desired. I was going to be enrolled in a class where, among other things, I would learn not to step on other people's sentences.

That was a long time ago. Along the way I've become a more attentive and patient listener. This has helped me immeasurably—in business. However, like many of us, I didn't always take the skills I learned in the workplace home. Sound familiar?

Ruth Bernstein's "How 'Active Listening' Makes Both Participants in a Conversation Feel Better" (a recent article in *The Wall Street Journal*) describes a psychotherapist who discovered that she was completely tuning out her husband whenever he tried to talk to her about his day at work. It hurt his feelings and it wasn't helping their marriage. The psychotherapist began researching effective listening techniques.

Ms. Bernstein summarizes the research and shows how applying the study conclusions may help us all become better listeners. I can't list all her tips, but I'd like to pass

along a few. They're intended to improve communications with your loved ones.

• Be alert for signs that a person wants to talk. "It was freezing this morning" doesn't necessarily mean that it's time to perk up your ears. On the other hand, "My boss is driving me crazy" is a clear signal that someone important to you needs to talk. Let him or her disclose the problem. Avoid making judgments or minimizing the topic. Your move? "Tell me about it."

• Once you begin to listen, become an active listener. Put down the newspaper and fold it. Turn off the TV. Turn off your phone. Lean in and make eye contact. These nonverbal signs show that you want to hear what the other person has to say.

• Instead of leaping in with comments or suggestions, let the person finish his or her thoughts. Keep the conversation going with verbal encouragements, like "yep" or "of course." From time to time, rephrase what you've heard to make sure you've got it right.

"So your boss keeps changing directions but not the deadline." If appropriate, offer to discuss possible solutions. In many cases, you won't have to solve the problem. Simply listening—and letting your partner know you're listening—will untangle thoughts.

Since reading Bernstein's article, I've tried some of these tips at home and at the office. It's amazing what a difference they make. Best of all, the research shows that after a session of effective listening, not only will your partner and peers feel better, but you'll feel better, too. Give it a shot!

Sander A. Flaum, MBA, is principal, Flaum Navigators, and executive-in-residence and chairman, Fordham Leadership Forum, Fordham University Graduate School of Business Administration.

**Your move?
Lean in and
make eye
contact.
Show that
you care**

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