



By Tom L. Willis, PCAM

Tom is the Owner of Association Bridge, LLC, dedicated to creating spaces where community association leaders and the professionals who serve them can successfully navigate the challenges they face, reach the goals they choose, find satisfaction and joy in their service, and make raving fans of association members.

SO, YOU THINK YOU ARE A GOOD LISTENER?

AND, OTHER DELUSIONS...



In his outstanding book *The Excellence Dividend*, Tom Peters states that listening is, among other things, “the heart and soul of engagement and thoughtfulness,”...“the basis for collaboration and partnership and community,”...“the linchpin of memorable service,” and “the bedrock that underpins a commitment to EXCELLENCE.”

We know listening is important. Yet, studies show that we are not as good at it as we think we are. Fortunately, it is a learnable skill. It is an area in which we can always improve. There are lots of resources available to help us focus on the art of “active listening.” Strategies include:

- **Pay Attention:** Use your eyes along with

your ears. Look at someone intently enough long enough to determine eye color. What do their body language and facial expressions tell you? What are they NOT saying?

- **Acknowledge:** People with problems typically want two things, and in this order: (1) To be heard; (2) To get a solution. Until someone is confident you hear them,

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you have zero basis for dialogue. Give them all the cues you can to show you are engaged. Open your stance, nod, and smile. Use verbal cues like my favorite, "Oh, wow!" Let them talk. Empathize.

- **Clarify:** Ask questions. Ask more questions. Get the whole picture. Repeat statements back and summarize. I am partial to the phrase, "I think what I heard was..." because this gives the other person permission to correct you if your understanding requires adjustment.
- **Ignore Your Biases:** We are all biased. We all make assumptions. We all listen through the filters of our experience. You might think you are completely objective, but you're not. Nobody is. Recognize your biases and assumptions and do your best to get past them.
- **Suspend Judgment:** It's easy to impute motives, especially if you have a history with someone. But even if you are correct, there is no value in thinking about them. Acknowledging others' emotions does not mean judging the validity or even the appropriateness of those emotions. Do your best to focus on facts.
- **Take Notes:** Careful note taking keeps you tuned in. It dignifies the other person. It's a great tool for the open forum part of Board meetings.

Why We Stink at Listening

You might think you are a good listener. More than likely you are deluded. Even if you ARE right, you'll still need to work on it. There are many obstacles to being a good listener. Be aware of them and work to overcome them.

- Did I mention we are all biased and make assumptions? Imperfect humans are subjective by nature.
- We focus on us, not the other person. Instead of fully listening, we are formulating our brilliant response, thinking about how wrong or annoying the other person is, or feeling rushed or stressed.
- We may be "18 second interrupters". Peters cites research that indicates an average doctor will interrupt the patient presenting her symptoms after 18 seconds. The habit is not unique to doctors. Yikes.
- Distractions...oooooh, look - a squirrel!
- Electronics. A disproportionate number of the problems people have asked me to fix in recent years originated with electronic communication issues. Some conversations need to be offline. Listening with only your eyes has its limitations. If a conversation starts to go sideways, pick up the phone. Or better, go face to face. If you've grown up communicating mostly through an electronic device, you'll need to learn to use the full range of human abilities to be a good listener.
- The big one...missing the bigger picture. Employing active listening strategies does not guarantee success.

It's More Than Listening

Listening is part of something bigger. You can employ all the active listening strategies and still be ineffective. Your IQ can help you to learn the techniques, but your EQ, or emotional intelligence, will be the key to being a good listener and effective communicator.

If you are not genuinely interested in other people, in solving problems, and in making a difference; you are likely not listening well and people can smell it. It really does start with you.

And, people don't always make it easy! It takes a high EQ to maintain the perspective necessary to respect the humanity of others when their words and actions may not necessarily be worthy of respect.

Final Words

"The best way to persuade someone is with your ears, by listening to them." – Dean Rusk

More gems from *The Excellence Dividend* (Buy the book. Seriously!):

- A good listener does not EVER take a call, even from her or his boss.
- A good listener takes EXTENSIVE notes.
- A good listener CALLS (better than e-mails d%n it) a couple of hours later to thank the other for his or her time.
- A good listener does NOT pontificate! 🗨️

"Never miss a good chance to shut up." – Will Rogers



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