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## **How to Listen and Not Interrupt**

A reader emailed me with a question: "You give points on being a good listener. I try, but I find myself at times interrupting because I'm so afraid I'm going to forget what I have to say. I've been told to keep a pen and paper handy to jot down what I want to say once the speaker has finished. However, for simple one on one conversations or small group discussions, this isn't always practical. Any other suggestions??" This is a common issue that many of us face. Here are my suggestions:

First, let it be all about the other person. What is more important - what you have to say or what the other person is saying? I'm tempted to answer, "what I have to say is more important (of course)." But is it really?

What if each of us focused on truly understanding what other people are saying without worrying about having to respond? What if we tuned into their words and non-verbal communications and the feelings behind them? I think we would have a communication revolution.

I can hear the skeptics now – "if I just listen and don't interrupt, then people will go on and on." Yes, that may be true for some people, but for many others, just the respect of being listened to will cause them to talk less. If they know people are really paying attention, they will be more careful about the quality of what they are saying. And remember, listening does not necessarily mean that you agree.

Now there may be times when just listening is not enough; for example, during a job interview or a meeting at work, where you are expected to say something intelligent. In those situations, jotting down quick notes to yourself can be helpful, but that may not be practical because you're standing up, you have your hands full (at a social event, for example) or for some other reason.

In those situations, preparation is important. Think about what topics likely will come up and which questions you'll be asked. Then practice delivering a response. Actually say the words out loud, so you get comfortable saying them in different ways. For example, at a job interview, you know you will most likely be asked, "Tell me about yourself." At a project status meeting, you will have to explain any delays or cost overruns. At a meeting with a potential vendor, you will need to respond to their capabilities presentation. At a social event, the economy and politics are likely topics.

This preparation will help you with 90-95% of the situations you'll find yourself in. Yes, there will always be a random question, statement or topic that you'd like to respond to and in those cases, you'll have to improvise, but that will be the exception rather than the rule. The more you prepare and practice, the less you have to worry about forgetting what you want to say and the more you can focus on listening and not interrupting.

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