



Listening – The Long Lost Skill And Its Effect On Networking

“Sometimes one creates as significant an impression by remaining silent.”

- Dalai Lama

We are multitaskers: We read emails while we have a conversation on the phone and our dinner on the stove. The more we get used to multitasking, the more we lose the ability to focus on one thing at a time. And this is especially damaging when it comes to human interactions, and, in the context of our careers, when it comes to networking.

Networking is no different from any other conversations we have. We talk, we listen, we ask questions. At least, that is how it should be. However, many networkers misunderstand their "job" during networking. They forget about the listening part and use up too much time talking about themselves. When they finally do listen, they fail to engage in the kind of focused listening that is essential to effective networking. Even though one aspect of networking is to "promote" oneself, it is often more important to listen to what the other one has to tell us. Why is that so?

Why Listen

First of all, information is power. When we network, one of our goals is to get as much information as possible. Naturally, this can only be achieved through listening. By letting the other one talk we make sure that we get crucial information about our conversation partner, his position and role, his connections, his interests, his needs, etc.

Another reason why listening is often more important may seem a bit counterintuitive. Psychologists have discovered that by letting the other one talk we are much more likely to be liked. Yes, by letting someone talk we are liked. Logically it should be the other way around. Whether we like someone should depend on what we hear the other talking about. But it actually seems to be the reverse. In an experiment conducted by psychologist James Pennebaker, participants were divided into groups. They were instructed to talk about anything they wanted to for 15 minutes. After the group broke up, Pennebaker would ask them to estimate how much talking each person did in the group, how much they enjoyed their group, and how much they learned from others in the group. The results were very interesting: Those who did most of the talking claimed to have learned the most and liked their peers the most. It seemed that the more they talked, the happier they were about the people around them. The fact that they didn't actually learn anything didn't seem to matter. Human relationships are less about facts and more about emotions and perceptions. The truth is, the more we talk, the more we *think* we learned about the other and the more we like him.

If we would observe networking beginners in an informational interview we would notice this phenomenon. The advice seeker might talk way too much, and in the end be under the assumption that the informational interview went really great and he or she received a lot of valuable information, when in fact neither is objectively true. Were he or she instead to let the other one talk, he or she would not only be more liked, but he or she also would receive the advice and information that he actually needs.

Another reason why listening is so important is because we often have the tendency to overestimate our possession of information and knowledge in relation to our networking partner. We subconsciously reverse the roles of advice seeker and advice giver and get caught up in a water flow of "I did this

and I know him and her and I recently met him...." We can never be sure what the other one knows and it might only be one sentence in a 20-minute conversation that contains the crucial information. But we want to make sure we hear that one crucial sentence. It can make all the difference.

And finally, by listening, -- equally important -- by following up with questions, we show genuine interest in the other. We show that we respect what he has to tell us and that we value his advice. Without exception, everyone wants to feel valued and respected, and this is as true for the most powerful law firm partner as for a student.

Why we Fail at Listening

So, why do we have so much trouble with listening? In some circumstances, and networking is often one of them, we prefer to talk to avoid awkward silences. Silence is incredibly uncomfortable and in networking situations, where everything is a little clumsy, it can seem unbearable. So we fill the void with empty blabber. What's more, all humans like to be understood and "heard" and we like to receive sympathy for the situation we are in. We hope to achieve this by getting our story and point across. We like to influence and control and we know of only one way to do so -- and that is by talking.

Finally, and this might be the biggest reason why we fail at listening, is something Stephen Covey pointed out in the *7 Habits of Highly Successful People*. We listen with the intent to reply rather than with the intent to understand. While we are listening we are already preparing the answer in our head without going through the process of absorbing and processing what has been said. Making it a habit to listen with the intent to understand can make a huge difference in our networking success.

How to Listen

So, what does this all mean? Should we just sit silently in front of the other hoping the he starts talking at some point? Of course not. As with everything, the right balance is the key and finding that balance is one of the things that makes networking so challenging. The key is to provide as much information about ourselves as needed but not more, to ask genuine and engaged questions to encourage an information flow and to follow up with educated questions that show comprehension and genuine interest in what was said and what's to follow. In sum, a good networker asks thoughtful questions and listens with remarkable focus.

Here is a great exercise if you would like to see for yourself how much we have lost the skill of listening and how uncomfortable we really are with being silent. The exercise is from Dorothea Brande's book *Wake up and Live*: Next time you meet with friends spend one hour without saying anything except in answer to direct questions. Simple instruction, tremendously hard to execute. When you answer a question, do so without adding unnecessary detail and without continuing with voluntary remarks. This feels incredibly uncomfortable because we are accustomed to showing friendliness and interest by making remarks and engaging in chatter, even though it doesn't contribute anything of substance. We don't want to be rude, so we talk.

This is an excellent exercise that will help us to become aware of our tendency to talk for the sake of talking instead of waiting for the moment when we can add something of value. By filling the air with chatter we are constantly distracted from listening with the intent to understand. The art of listening can become our most powerful tool.

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