



## How to Really Listen to Your Clients

Listening is a critical skill for all adults to have. It is one of the most important skills for you to use as you learn about your clients, their organization and their problems. Also, it is one of the most important activities for you to use to establish a strong rapport with clients.

There have been numerous books written about effective listening skills. The following guidelines can help you accomplish effective listening in the vast majority of situations.

1. **Be sure you can hear the speaker.**  
It is surprising how often people do not really listen to other people. It is just as surprising how often people do not realize that they cannot even hear other people. So always make this your first guideline in any situation for effective listening.
2. **Overall, attempt to listen 75% of time – speak 25% of time.**  
This is one of the most powerful guidelines. Use of the guideline depends on your situation. For example, if you are making a presentation, you will speak more. Otherwise, ensure that your client speaks more than you do – and listen to them.
3. **Adopt a culturally compatible physical posture to show you are interested.**  
This can be powerful means to show your client that you are interested in hearing them. For example, you might lean forward and maintain eye contact. Whatever physical gestures you make, be sure they are compatible to the culture of the speaker.
4. **Do not think about what to say while you are also trying to listen to the speaker.**  
Your brain goes four times faster than a speaker's voice. Thus, your brain can easily leave the speaker behind. Instead, trust that you will know how to respond to the speaker when the speaker is done.
5. **Notice the client's speaking style.**  
Different people have different speaking styles. Do they speak loud or soft? Slow or fast? Are there disconnects between what they say versus what their body language conveys? Some people convey the central idea first and then support it with additional information. Other people provide information to lead the listener to the same conclusion as the speaker.
6. **Listen for central ideas, not for all the facts.**  
Experienced consultants develop a sense for noticing the most important information conveyed by their client. They hear the main themes and ideas from their client. If you notice the major ideas, then often the facts "come along" with those ideas.
7. **Let the speaker finish each major point that they want to make.**  
Do not interrupt – offer your response when the speaker is done. If you do have to interrupt, do so to ensure you are hearing your client. Interrupt tactfully. For example, put up your hand and say, "Might I interrupt to ask you to clarify something?"
8. **Reflect back and ask if you are hearing their point accurately.**  
This is also one of the most powerful guidelines. Start by asking if you can reflect back, or summarize, to your client after they have spoken. Then progress to where you can ask your client to summarize back to you what you have just said to them.



9. **Regularly share indications that you are listening to them.**  
Those indications can be, for example, nodding your head, saying “Yes” to short points that you agree with.
10. **Learn the art of supportive questioning.**  
Coaching involves the use of powerful questions to understand your client’s perceptions, assumptions and conclusions. The coach must practice effective questioning skills to really understand the client.
11. **Ask others to provide you feedback about your communication skills.**  
Often, people do not know what they do not know about themselves. An example is the consultant who prides themselves on their strong listening skills, yet regularly interrupts others when they are speaking. Another example is the consultant who speaks only in conclusions, but does not share how they came to those conclusions. Thus, others do not understand the consultant’s rationale.