

Ace the Interview - The Art of Active Listening

There's listening...and then there's active listening. When people are engaged in conversation, they're often not listening attentively to one another. Active listening is a process and it takes practice, but if you can master it, you'll be steps ahead during your job interview

There are many reasons people don't listen carefully. Here are a few:

Distractions

Ever try to carry on a conversation with someone who's fiddling with his BlackBerry while you're talking? That's an extreme case of distraction. Other things divert our attention, perhaps less obviously. For example, we may have a lot on our minds, which makes it more difficult to switch gears and fully focus on what's being said. Or maybe there's a lot of background noise or activity in the room, making it more difficult to concentrate.

A Tendency to Interrupt

If you have a habit of cutting the other person off mid-sentence, you're not giving her a chance to complete her thoughts. You're also not dialed in to the conversation enough to know that she has more to say...or what she is trying to tell you.

Too Eager to Speak

Something the other person said sparked an idea, and you're anxious to respond immediately - either to rebut their point, or to make sure you comment before you forget your thought. You quit listening and begin mentally to compose your response.

Jumping to Conclusions

Based on the first few words out of a person's mouth, you think you know where they're going with the thought. In your own mind, you skip ahead to begin to formulate your answer. Problem is...the speaker didn't say what you thought he was going to.

Or maybe you don't agree with what the speaker is saying. In your mind, you're making a judgment, which is coloring how (and if) you're hearing what they're saying.

Disregarding What the Other Person Has to Say

Maybe you're interviewing for a position as VP of Sales, and during the course of the day you must speak with each member of the management team. One of those conversations is with the VP of Engineering. Maybe you're thinking this person isn't going to have much of an impact on the hiring decision - so you find yourself listening much less intently as you talk with him.

The fact that we're nervous during job interviews only exacerbates the tendency to race ahead in our minds and listen less carefully than we should. Master the art of active listening; it'll pay dividends during your interview.

Bottom line? The rate at which we think is faster than the rate at which we speak. It's easy, therefore, to "get ahead" of the conversation in your mind.

The fact we tend to be nervous during job interviews only exacerbates the tendency to race ahead and listen less carefully than we should. We can be so worried about formulating our answers that we don't hear what's being said. As a result, we may miss some crucial information...or a nuance - a subtlety that's important to what the speaker is trying to convey.

We also might be afraid we'll forget an important point we want to make. So we interrupt. Or we begin formulating our response too early.

Slow Down.

You'll have a note pad with you; jot down one or two words that will remind you of a point you'd like to make, and then resume giving your full attention to the hiring manager.

Listen to what he has to say. Block out distractions. If there's a television monitor in the background, or something else going on in your line of sight - ignore it.

Other Pointers:

- Pay attention to body language.
- Focus.
- Don't think about how nervous you might be, or who you're going to be meeting with next, or the fact that you're not sure whether the compensation is going to be what you want.
- Don't be afraid to restate what he said to make sure you understand correctly.
- Ask for clarification if you're unsure about something he's said.
- Let the speaker know you're listening (eye contact, appropriate verbal cues).



Not only will active listening pay dividends during your job interview - it'll help you succeed on the job.

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Rebecca Metschke is the author of The Interview Edge, a comprehensive career guide for those who are serious about their careers. Gain a professional advantage using proven tips, tools and strategies that will help ensure you're as marketable as you can be. <http://www.TheInterviewEdge.com>.

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