



NAC Executive Insights

Listening

Key Points

- Effective listening is an essential element of effective business and project performance.
- Listening is a skill which all can improve.
- Listening tips are provided.
- An exercise to improve listening skills is suggested.
- Characteristics of good and bad listeners are highlighted.

Introduction

One of the keys to strong client relationships, starting with marketing and selling and continuing throughout the project life cycle, is having a clear understanding of the client's wants and needs. This is not something you guess at or feel in your gut. Rather you need to "ask your clients."

Having asked your client, it's important to **listen** to your client.

Listening takes practice and requires skill and ability (I should point out that after asking and listening, one must still understand and act—promptly.)

Let's look at some tips on "how to listen."

Tip One — Don't Rely on Memory

Maybe it comes from growing older, but increasingly I find it necessary to make notes of what I hear in the course of a conversation with a prospective client. Fortunately, my memory still works reasonably well and I can usually limit these notes to a couple of key words (often written on the back of a business card).

The purpose of many business meetings, however, is to gather information from the client. You should not be afraid to take notes. A corollary is: ask the client whether he or she minds that you take notes. At times, the client may prefer a more informal or "off the record" conversation, which when correctly managed will provide more information and insights than many other meetings.

Tip Two — Truly Listen

This is not the time to be argumentative or to lay out your preconceived notions regarding the project or its performance. If the objective of the current situation is for you to listen, then keep that at the forefront of what you are doing. Don't interrupt the client. Let the client talk...the more the client talks, the more you'll learn.

Remember, you can always call a client up to clarify something you've heard. This provides another opportunity for contact. It shows a concern on your part, and an importance of what you've been told. It also provides an opportunity to test your ideas (now carefully thought out) at a later point in time.

Tip Three — Don't Fall Asleep

I raise this only because I have witnessed it. For that matter, don't sit there stone faced and completely emotionless and lackluster. The client is a person. People respond to facial and body cues coming from those they are in conversation with (often lacking in our current Zoom environment). Show interest. Show you're awake. If capable, you can even show enthusiasm.

Don't fall asleep while listening to the client (I am really tempted to dwell on this point since over the years I have seen managers and salespeople nod off during an excessively long-winded presentation by the client. One particular instance stands out in my mind where a competitor's lead person fell asleep during a preproposal briefing. Needless to say, they did not make the short list.)

Tip Four — Everything You Hear Is Important

Everything you hear is important and so is everything you don't hear. You need to make note of what hasn't been discussed. If appropriate, ask questions in those areas. Don't pre-judge the relative importance of what the client has told you based on your prior biases. The emphasis that a client has placed in the past, or that another client has placed on various items, may not be the emphasis required for the specific opportunity or project circumstance at hand.

More importantly, the client has given up valuable time to impart information to you. The client also has considered this to be an important enough activity to make time in their schedule...you must make time in your schedule as well.

Tip Five — Identify Points of Departure

Triggering comments made by the client should be focused on to determine whether additional information is provided as the conversation unfolds, or whether these points of departure become lines of questioning later in the meeting or after the session.

There is a point at which you have to make a "call." If the point of departure is significant enough to warrant immediate follow-up, then, with discretion, you should interrupt the client and immediately pursue that point for clarification. This needs to be balanced by your objective of extracting the most information voluntarily in the shortest period of time. Open-ended, clarifying-type questions can demonstrate interest on your part, but should not significantly interrupt what the client is telling you.

Tip Six — Ask Questions

This sounds like a bit of a contradiction to listening, but appropriately placed, clarifying, or open-ended questions will help keep the dialogue going and take some of the burden off the speaker. This approach demonstrates interest and allows you to gain a greater level of information than what the client may have been prepared to tell you.

One of the most powerful phrases can be, *“Help me understand...”* This is a great way to invite open-ended information in a discussion. It’s a question that doesn’t sound like a question, so it’s unlikely to make your client feel defensive. It also appeals to most people who like to help and are happy to explain something that isn’t understood.

Exercise to Practice Listening

One or more of your subordinates or peers deals with items that have, in your opinion, minimal impact on your day-to-day activity. You probably have not had a long or in-depth discussion with them on "what they do" and "why it is important." Reach out to these individuals. Sit down with them and ask them open-ended questions such as those described above or others that may be more appropriate.

Now comes the hard part...truly listen...bite your lips, put your watch out of sight, lean forward attentively, ask more open-ended and leading questions, show interest, take notes, and learn. The effects of this exercise will be three-fold:

1. You will develop and improve your listening skills.
2. You will improve your internal network—something that carries a very high value in effective execution of your own job on a day-to-day basis.
3. You may actually learn something.

Along with asking clarifying questions comes the technique of recapping and rephrasing. It can sound like this: *“If I understood you correctly, community acceptance is the CEO’s main concern. Did I get that right?”* This shows that you’ve been listening while inviting clarification and testing if you really understood their stated and implied concerns and needs.

Tip Seven — Be Yourself

You are the person the client will see over and over again. You can't modify your basic personality or basic behavior. Don't try. Rather, use listening techniques such as those described above to help you be you in a more effective way.

Listening takes practice. When you have something to tell the client or you are eager to propose a solution, it's hard to listen. The simple exercise shown in the box above will help you develop your skills. Give it a try and if it works for you, then practice, practice, practice.

About the Author

Bob Prieto was elected to the National Academy of Construction in 2011. He is a senior executive who is effective in shaping and executing business strategy and a recognized leader within the infrastructure, engineering, and construction industries.

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