



## *Successes & Strategies - December, 2010*

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### **One Step to Communicating Better**

The essence of life is communication. We make literally thousands of communications during a single day. When we have a conversation with someone, we are having the most obvious of communications. We also communicate with a facial expression when we pass someone in the hall. We communicate by not having a facial expression or by not having eye contact with someone. Our verbal and non-verbal cues allow others to form opinions about us. I think the phrase "perception is reality" says that we need to be careful about how our communications, verbal and non-verbal, are perceived. If we aren't we may be "saying" something to someone that has negative implications when in fact we hadn't said anything at all. Ever get a bad "vibe" from someone? That's what I am talking about.

There is one thing, that you can easily control, that can single-handedly improve your communication skills. If you work on this one thing, you can be admired as an awesome communicator. But you will have to work at it because it won't come naturally. No, I am not talking about becoming an excellent public speaker or developing great small-talk skills. The quickest way to communication superstardom is by becoming an excellent *listener*.

There are several books on the subject of listening. One I like is *Learn to Listen* by Jim Dugger. You'll find a term in these books that describes a technique that really works. It's called active listening.

Active listening is actually a multi-step process. By making listening a process, it's strength is that it raises your consciousness and awareness to understand that simply listening to someone speak involves actions on your part. You must engage as a listener to really get the most out of a communication.

The key steps to active listening are:

- Demonstrating empathy for the speaker. When it is clear to the speaker that you are really valuing what they are saying, you are showing empathy.
- Being non-judgmental of the speaker. You may not agree with what the speaker is saying, but if you avoid being critical or disputing their ideas in a negative fashion, you are truly being non-judgmental.
- Understanding your nonverbal communications and how they may affect the speaker. The messages you send via your eye contact, hand gestures and other cues affects communication.
- Understanding the emotional filters that affects how you understand what is said. Often, your emotions attached to the conversation's subject matter, or the speaker, creates mental blocks. By understanding and recognizing this, you can

remove those blocks in order to better listen.

- Being motivated to listen. If you aren't motivated to hear what is being said, you'll retain little of it. Assume that every conversation will have at least one very valuable nugget of information, so valuable that you don't want to miss it.
- Striving for accuracy. If you set your mind to being sure that you accurately understand what was said to you in a given conversation, you will impress those you speak with.

If you think about a good listener you know, don't they always seem to have good eye contact? Don't they always seem to have the appearance that they are hanging on your very word? Don't they always ask good, clarifying questions about what it is you said?

Listening is a skill. Some are naturally great at it, but because it is a skill, it can be learned. The best way to learn this skill in my opinion is to practice it. Keep the steps I gave you above to active listening somewhere handy. When you are about to engage in a conversation, pick a step and consciously decide you are going to work on it for that conversation. Soon you won't need the list and you'll improve your listening greatly, and not surprisingly, you'll find that people you talk with like you more.

In reality, active listening is having consciousness of your responsibility to the conversation when you aren't speaking. New Year's Resolutions are right around the corner. I'm putting "become a better listener" near the top of mine.

**Happy Holidays!**



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