

# BECOME A BETTER COMMUNICATOR

## The Ten Rules of Listening During Interviews

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Ralph, a senior corporate facilities manager, had no problem securing interviews with several companies he had carefully targeted in his job search campaign. His excellent management experience opened many doors for him and he was confident that his interviewing skills would result in several offers. Imagine his disappointment when no one called him back and no offers were forthcoming.

Unfortunately, Ralph was a little too self-confident. Based on his worldwide experience and years of senior management, he assumed he was smarter and more perceptive than his interviewers. As a result, instead of listening to what the hiring decision maker was saying, Ralph often jumped to conclusions and began answering questions before they were completely asked. His aggressive style made it difficult, if not impossible, for him to develop a rapport with the interviewers. It's not surprising that Ralph didn't get any job offers.

As a result of his negative experiences in interviewing, Ralph was convinced that he had made a grievous error in leaving his previous position because it was obvious "nobody wanted to hire an older guy." I met Ralph after he became convinced that there was no opportunity for another executive position. As we talked about his recent experience with rejection it was obvious that he had no idea that the reason for zero offers was the poor chemistry he developed during the interviews. He didn't understand that hiring decision makers need to feel confident in their selections and comfortable with a job candidate before they will extend an offer.

George Goodson, senior career marketing consultant with Career Beginnings, Inc. says, "You have to have the patience to listen and believe that you can always learn something new in an interview. If you listen carefully, you'll be able to ask good questions, build positive chemistry with the interviewer, and develop the information you need to make the right decision concerning which offer to accept."

Ralph was open to our advice and began to improve his listening skills. With a more relaxed, responsive demeanor, his interpersonal skills improved quickly and he subsequently received several attractive offers.

Most interviewers determine a candidate's viability in the first two or three minutes of an interview. First impressions count. That quick decision is based more on personality traits than on qualifications or experience. George Goodson says, "Those first few minutes are critical to your success. It's your only chance to create a positive rapport with the interviewer. Chemistry is the unwritten part of all job specifications."

When you and the interviewer develop good chemistry, you'll immediately share a sense of mutual respect, admiration and understanding. The positive chemistry is easy to detect and recognize. Both of you feel comfortable with each other and the situation. This leads to a sense that both you and the interviewer begin viewing each other as solutions to your common problems.

Ralph is, unfortunately, the rule rather than the exception. We are not born excellent listeners. Cultivating

this skill is no easy task. Nevertheless, if you adhere to the following nine rules of good listening you'll boost your odds of achieving interview success:

### **1. DON'T BE THE PRIMARY SPEAKER!**

An overly aggressive approach will kill any chance of a healthy give and take conversation. Better to listen to what the interviewer has to say about the company, including long- and short-term plans and what they are looking for in a job candidate, etc. before launching into a selling tirade. We like to be in control of our conversations and, believe it or not, careful listening will give us the control we feel comfortable with. No matter how eager you are to show the interviewer you are the perfect candidate for the position, try and let them do most of the talking and LISTEN. B. T. Heinenman, a very successful salesman and National Sales Manager, once remarked that his success in sales was, "do to his ability to not say too much...less is more."

### **2. PROVIDE THE INTERVIEWER YOUR COMPLETE ATTENTION**

Maintain eye contact and concentrate on the speaker's every word; you will seem more interested in the job and stand out from the competition. Develop the ability to listen, not only to the words, but also for the intent by paying close attention to body language. If you are unsure of the message being sent, ask specific questions to stay on track.

### **3. LEAVE YOUR PREJUDICES AT HOME**

Your sensitivities and biases are perhaps the biggest barrier to good communication. Don't risk missing out on important information just because you don't want to listen to different perspectives. In the early stages of a company's interview process you may be interviewed by someone significantly younger than you. Before you start interviewing, you may want to make a real effort to recognize your biases and prepare to deal with people of all different backgrounds and ages during your interviewing. By recognizing the filters through which each of us sees the real world, you'll be more objective and make better decisions.

Tom was about to retire from lease administration after 22 years of service and asked us to assist him in his preparation for a second career. He told us "he didn't want to work with people who had no prior facility management experience and couldn't work for someone who had not attained a salary greater than his." He had developed these biases during his long years of work in lease administration and did not see them as a real barrier to a successful job search campaign. He believed that some people had no sense of mission accomplishment and anyone who had not traveled Tom's career path would never be able to teach him anything. Lucky for Tom, we proved him wrong on both counts before he had the opportunity to show his misconceptions to a potential employer.

### **4. DON'T JUMP TO CONCLUSIONS**

When little is known about a job opportunity, It's easy to be discouraged by the slightest hint of a problem. Such hasty assessments typically lead to emotional, subjective decisions. It would be better to reserve judgment until you've heard the whole story and had time to analyze the facts. By continuing to listen carefully, you will learn more about the opportunity, and possibly uncover others. Furthermore, it will be in your best interest to pursue the offer, even if you are convinced the opportunity is not for you. At least you can use that offer as leverage against the one you do want.

### **5. DETERMINE YOUR OWN NEEDS AND VALUES**

It helps to know as much as possible about yourself and what you are looking for. Self knowledge will allow you to better target information you need during interviews. Researching the company and the specific job before the interview will make you more knowledgeable about what to listen for and to ask

about during the interview. Doing your homework before the interview is critically important to your success and a better listener.

## **6. LISTEN TO EVERYONE IN THE ORGANIZATION**

Good listening starts with your initial contact with the secretary or receptionist and continues with everyone you may be introduced to during your interview. Others may offer tidbits of information about a potential employer. Pay attention to any comments from employees, customers, and suppliers. Sometimes the best information about a company comes from these people. But these people may not know you and would possibly be reluctant to share information with you. To overcome their reluctance, learn as much as you can about the company before you talk with them. The more you know, the more likely it is that people will consider you someone worth spending time with. Furthermore, listen carefully to how the receptionist greets strangers. This can be very illuminating. Organizations convey something about themselves in their selection of frontline staff. Companies with strong corporate cultures stand out from the moment you set foot on the property-if you listen. You never know what important intelligence about the company that you may develop from casual comments made by 3<sup>rd</sup> parties.

## **7. FOCUS ON THE INTERVIEWER'S NEEDS**

Discard your personal problems, the horrible traffic that made you late for the interview and the internal pressure you are feeling over your job search. It is time to concentrate on the interview and the interviewer. Your concerns about compensation, vacations, health insurance, and paid holidays, as well as upward mobility are secondary to the real issues of the job opening. These other concerns should not be mentioned (by you) in the first interview – it's premature. Instead, focus on what information the interviewer needs to make a good decision. Listen carefully to the questions asked and respond precisely to the question asked.

## **8. PREPARE YOUR OWN QUESTIONS**

As the interview progresses and your excellent listening abilities allow you to answer the interviewer's questions and concerns it will become apparent that positive chemistry has developed. Don't stop listening now! What you are now listening for are "buying signals" such as "when can you start?" or the interviewer starts to "sell" you on the benefits of working for the company. Many job candidates, not listening carefully, miss buying signals and continue selling until the interviewer finally closes the interview with the too common "We will be in touch." When you hear a buying signal - STOP SELLING! It is now time to determine the next step in the selection and hiring process.

## **9. LOOK FOR HEROES, LISTEN FOR STORIES**

Every organization has heroes, people who embody the core values and have done great things. Employees know the "stories" – anecdotes that are shared with outsiders. Get them to tell you the stories and listen carefully to learn what they are really about. Big wins? Great service? Political battles? New breakthroughs in R&D? The stories that people inside the organization share with you will disclose a lot about the corporate culture and what is considered important to the company.

## **10. LISTENING IS A BONA FIDE SKILL AND IT CAN BE DEVELOPED TO GIVE YOU AN EDGE**

Be prepared to ask thoughtful questions. This indicates you have listened well. Listening is a trait in high demand by many employers. Ralph told us, "I used my newly-developed listening skills to determine that the firm had another opening that had not yet been announced. I determined I would be better suited in the unannounced position and turned the interview in that direction. After I was hired, the Director told me that the deciding factor in my selection was my strong communication abilities." It really does pay to strengthen your "ear abilities!"



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