

Thought for the day – 25

‘Listen!’

We all think we're good at listening, but how often have you seen:

- A group of people in a social gathering. One is talking and another is leaning forward with one finger pointing and his mouth opening and closing like a goldfish? (Is he listening?)
- Two men both talking at the same time? (Can they both be listening?)
- Any group of people, each trying to 'out-do' the last story?
- An interviewer ploughing through a list of standard questions, not letting the interviewee answer any of them adequately?

Quite often, when we think we are listening, what we are actually doing is waiting for someone else to stop talking so that we can have our say. Alternatively, we are busy thinking about what we are going to say next, rather than actively listening. What we often hear is what we expect to hear, or what we want to hear, as opposed to what is actually said. Most people speak at a rate of 150 words per minute, and we think at a rate of 500 words per minute. This means that when listening to someone, our minds have 350 words per minute 'spare capacity'. How often have you found yourself listening to someone and your mind has started to wander on to other topics? This is a common problem. If it happens in a negotiation you will miss opportunities, signals, and insights into how the other party is thinking. In a negotiation, it is important to hear the qualifying words. Examples would include:

- Your price is *a little bit* high.
- I want *about* 5% off the price.
- I can't discuss cost breakdowns *at this point*.

In addition to listening to the words, especially the qualifying words, you need to listen carefully to the way things are said. There is a world of difference between the way something may be said if it has been calculated and considered in advance, or the way it may be said if it has been plucked out of the air. If a negotiator has not heard the difference, they lose an opportunity.

The first step in improving your listening skills is to recognise that there is a difference between speaking, and not listening. A number of techniques exist for improving your listening skills. These include:

- Summarising and frequently 'testing your understanding' during the meeting. Periodically in a negotiation you should stop and test your understanding of what has been said. It is equally effective to summarise what you believe has been said.
- Some people use the technique of instant repetition. This involves repeating to yourself what has been said, a split second after it has been said. This helps you to take in and retain the message.
- Taking detailed notes is another useful approach, which makes sure that you have captured what has been said.

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This thought has been taken from Eric's book 'Mastering Negotiations'. A master negotiator himself, he is our expert trainer on the subject – click [here](#) for details of one of his most popular courses.

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