Hello, co-worker, are you there? It's me, and I'm talking to you!

How to use active listening to build relationships

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When you have an intense or challenging conversation with a colleague, do you start off intently listening but then…

- Mentally drift off and think about what you're going to have for dinner;
- Jump on top of what they are saying so that you get your thoughts out there;
- Grab on to one idea that you disagree with and tear in?

We all grapple with communication limitations. In a survey by Fierce, Inc. (May 2011), 86% of respondents blamed the lack of collaboration or ineffective communication for workplace failures.

The good news is that most of us can increase our potential for success at work by strengthening our communication skills. Let's start with the active listening technique.

Active listening is simple to understand and often hard to do. The focus of active listening is to let go of your initial perceptions of the situation and be open to actually hearing what your colleague is saying.

To actively listen, do the following:

- Listen without jumping in, wondering about what you will say next or assuming it's all about you.
- Use positive body language to show that you are listening: nod your head, lean forward, strong eye contact and sounds of agreement, "Mmm-hmm."
- After he or she has finished speaking or pauses, recreate what was said in the form of a question to clarify his or her message: "Did you say that you feel I don't give you enough positive feedback?"
- Continue listening until she or he has come to a natural stopping point.

Just like most learned skills, active listening takes practice. Active listening is an accountable, thoughtful and professional way to improve personal relationships, reduce misunderstandings and conflicts, and build a collaborative workplace.

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