The ability to listen is one of the most important talents you can bring to business conversations. Psychologists describe the three essential pieces of what they call active (as opposed to passive) listening. These apply to telephone conversations as well as face-to-face meetings:

Be There

If a session where valuable information will be exchanged is scheduled, attend it; even if it's at an inconvenient time, don't enlist a surrogate. You don't want to count on someone else to tell you about what was discussed. And when you do show up, be present mentally and emotionally as well; if your attention wanders, you're not really there.

Listen Carefully

Listen to every word, every tone, every pause. Take notes if the situation permits it. (Taking notes isn't usually a problem during telephone conversations- so keep pencil and paper near the phone.) If you're not sure about the propriety of notes (at lunch, for instance), the simplest thing to do is ask: "Mind if I jot down a couple of your points?"

Hear

Once you've grasped the first two pieces, this one is the easiest. It really is an elevated form of hearing- fully mulling over and absorbing what the speaker is saying, why he is saying it, and what it means for your future association. With this step you become an active participant in an exchange of information, even though you may not have uttered a word for half an hour.

The Good Listener

In the corporate world, it's not only discourteous by also unprofessional to be an indifferent listener. Supervisors claim they can easily tell whether a subordinate has been listening by the quality of the questions asked at the end of a discussion, along with the accuracy of his or her summation. Score high as a listener by doing the following:

Concentrate

Pay close attention to what the other person is saying, no matter how tempted you are to let your mind wander. Also try your best to be patient with someone who's speaking too slowly or faltering in getting their message across.

Reconfirm

To show you understand, occasionally paraphrase what the speaker is saying. Once you've picked up the rhythm of the other person's speech, you should be able to do this without seeming to interrupt.

Wait

In conversation, patience is a virtue and interrupting is a sin. Remember that there's a fine line between the occasional interruption made to confirm or question a particular point and one that's made because the speaker is bursting to throw in his two cents' worth.

Question

If you don't understand something, ask for an explanation. A likely time: when talk turns to computers or tother technical subjects.

Respond

Use positive body language to show you're paying attention. Lean slightly toward the speaker, and react to what he says with the occasional nod, smile, or cocked eyebrow.

Keep still

If you're at your desk, don't shuffle papers or make a halfhearted effort to continue whatever you're working on. When standing, refrain from any distracting gestures, such as rattling the change in your pocket.

For more information on Emily Post Business Etiquette Programs contact Director of Sales and Relationships, Dawn Stanyon at This e-mail address is being protected from spambots. You need JavaScript enabled to view it .