

7 Tips for Effective Listening

Productive listening does not occur naturally. It requires hard work and practice.

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TO BE SUCCESSFUL AT THEIR job, internal auditors must be able to write, speak, and listen effectively. Of these three skills, effective listening may be the most crucial because auditors are required to do it so often. Unfortunately, listening also may be the most difficult skill to master.

Effective listening is challenging, in part, because people often are more focused on what they're saying than on what they're hearing in return. According to a recent study by the *Harvard Business Review*, people think the voice mail they send is more important than the voice mail they receive. Generally, senders think that their message is more helpful and urgent than do the people who receive it.

Additionally, listening is difficult because people don't work as hard at it as they should. Listening seems to occur so naturally that putting a lot of effort into it doesn't seem necessary. However, hard work and effort is exactly what effective listening requires.

Internal auditors must listen to explanations, rationales, and defenses of financial practices and procedures. They are constantly communicating with fellow employees whose backgrounds range from accounting to finance to marketing to information systems. In addition, explanations by fellow employees of any "unusual" practices often pose a significant challenge to an internal auditor's listening skills. Auditors can use the following techniques to improve these skills.

1. CONCENTRATE ON WHAT OTHERS ARE SAYING. When listening to someone, do you often find yourself thinking about a job or task that is nearing deadline or an

important family matter? In the middle of a conversation, do you sometimes realize that you haven't heard a word the other person has said? Most individuals speak at the rate of 175 to 200 words per minute. However, research suggests that we are very capable of listening and processing words at the rate of 600 to 1,000 words per minute. An internal auditor's job today is very fast and complex, and because the brain does not use all of its capacity when listening, an auditor's mind may drift to thinking of further questions or explanations rather than listening to the message at hand. This unused brainpower can be a barrier to effective listening, causing the auditor to miss or misinterpret what others are saying. It is important for internal auditors to actively concentrate on what others are saying so that effective communication can occur.

2. SEND THE NONVERBAL MESSAGE THAT YOU ARE LISTENING. When someone is talking to you, do you maintain eye contact with that person? Do you show the speaker you are listening by nodding your head? Does your body language transmit the message that you are listening? Are you leaning forward and not using your hands to play with things? Most communication experts agree that nonverbal messages can be three times as powerful as verbal messages. Effective communication becomes difficult anytime you send a nonverbal message that you're not really listening.

3. AVOID EARLY EVALUATIONS. When listening, do you often make immediate judgments about what the speaker is saying? Do you assume or guess what the speaker is going to say next? Do you sometimes discover later that you failed to interpret

BACK TO BASICS

correctly what the speaker was telling you? Because a listener can listen at a faster rate than most speakers talk, there is a tendency to evaluate too quickly. That tendency is perhaps the greatest barrier to effective listening. It is especially important to avoid early evaluations when listening to a person with whom you disagree. When listeners begin to disagree with a sender's message, they tend to misinterpret the remaining information and distort its intended meaning so that it is consistent with their own beliefs.

4. AVOID GETTING DEFENSIVE. Do you ever take what another person says personally when what her or she is saying is not meant to be personal? Do you ever become angry at what another person says? Careful listening does not mean that you will always agree with the other party's point of view, but it does mean that you will try to listen to what the other person is saying without becoming overly defensive. Too much time spent explaining, elaborating, and

defending your decision or position is a sure sign that you are not listening. This is because your role has changed from one of listening to a role of convincing others they are wrong. After listening to a position or suggestion with which you disagree, simply respond with something like, "I understand your point. We just disagree on this one." Effective listeners can listen calmly to another person even when that person is offering unjust criticism.

5. PRACTICE PARAPHRASING. Paraphrasing is the art of putting into your own words what you thought you heard and saying it back to the sender. For example, a subordinate might say: "You have been unfair to rate me so low on my performance appraisal. You have rated me lower than Jim. I can do the job better than him, and I've been here longer." A paraphrased response might be: "I can see that you are upset about your rating. You think it was unfair for me to rate you as I did." Paraphrasing is a great technique for improving your listening and

problem-solving skills. First, you have to listen very carefully if you are going to accurately paraphrase what you heard. Second, the paraphrasing response will clarify for the sender that his or her message was correctly received and encourage the sender to expand on what he or she is trying to communicate.

6. LISTEN (AND OBSERVE) FOR FEELINGS. When listening, do you concentrate just on the words that are being said, or do you also concentrate on the way they are being said? The way a speaker is standing, the tone of voice and inflection he or she is using, and what the speaker is doing with his or her hands are all part of the message that is being sent. A person who raises his or her voice is probably either angry or frustrated. A person looking down while speaking is probably either embarrassed or shy. Interruptions may suggest fear or lack of confidence. Persons who make eye contact and lean forward are likely exhibiting confidence. Arguments may reflect worry. Inappropriate silence may be a

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The Listening Quiz

Are you an effective listener? Ask a peer that you communicate with regularly and who you know will answer honestly to respond "yes" or "no" to these 10 questions. Do not answer the questions yourself. We often view ourselves as great listeners when, in fact, others know that we are not.

1. During the past two weeks, can you recall an incident where you thought I was not listening to you?
2. When you are talking to me, do you feel relaxed at least 90 percent of the time?
3. When you are talking to me, do I maintain eye contact with you most of the time?
4. Do I get defensive when you tell me things with which I disagree?
5. When talking to me, do I often ask questions to clarify what you are saying?
6. In a conversation, do I sometimes overreact to information?
7. Do I ever jump in and finish what you are saying?
8. Do I often change my opinion after talking something over with you?
9. When you are trying to communicate something to me, do I often do too much of the talking?
10. When you are talking to me, do I often play with a pen, pencil, my keys, or something else on my desk?

Use your peer's answers to grade your listening skills. If you received nine or 10 correct answers, you are an excellent listener; seven or eight correct answers indicates a good listener; five or six correct answers means you possess average listening skills; and less than five correct answers is reflective of a poor listener.

The answers most often given for effective listeners are: 1. no, 2. yes, 3. yes, 4. no, 5. yes, 6. no, 7. no, 8. yes, 9. no, 10. no.

sign of aggression and be intended as punishment.

7. ASK QUESTIONS. Do you usually ask questions when listening to a message? Do you try to clarify what a person has said to you? Effective listeners make certain they have correctly heard the message that is being sent. Ask questions to clarify points or to obtain additional information. Open-ended questions are the best. They require the speaker to convey more information. Form your questions in a way that makes it clear you have not yet drawn any conclusions. This will assure the message sender that you are only interested in obtaining more and better information. And the more information that you as a listener have, the better you can respond to the sender's communication.

LISTEN ACTIVELY

Not everyone has to possess the same style of listening, but internal auditors who use "active" listening will likely become much

better listeners. Active listening demands that the receiver of a message put aside the belief that listening is easy and that it happens naturally and realize that effective listening is hard work. The result of active listening is more efficient and effective communication.

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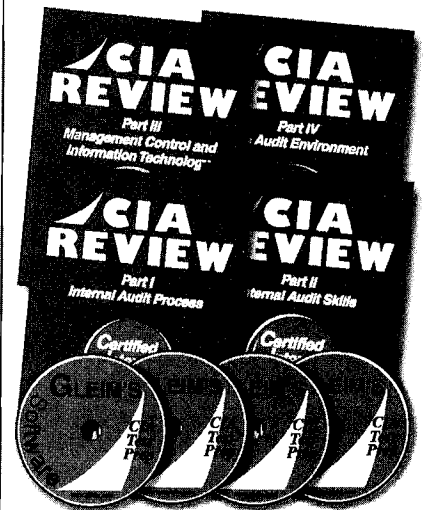
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