

# The Human Side of Teaching: Effective Listening

**Teachers and administrators are so busy today that this important concept can sometimes be overlooked.**

By Stephen D. Boyd



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**One of the  
best ways of  
incorporating the  
human side of  
teaching is to  
concentrate on  
becoming a  
better listener.**

**W**hether you are engaged in teaching, counseling students, or working with store managers or supervisors in companies, a most important people skill is effective listening. We spend about half of our communication time in listening, yet our listening efficiency is about 25 percent. Students are not motivated if they feel the teacher is not listening. A class's morale is low when they feel teachers and administrators do not listen. A business might decide not to place students in training positions if they feel they are not being heard. We miss key feedback from students and business connections if we don't pay attention.

Many times we don't listen because we are too busy talking. Lyndon Johnson had a plaque on the wall when he was a U.S. Senator that said, "You ain't learning nothing when you are talking."

In this article, I want to look at winning strategies for the human side of teaching: effective listening skills.

Realize that listening is hard work; it is active, not passive. To listen well, you have to mentally prepare yourself. Get ready to listen. Make yourself shut out other challenges facing you and simply listen. Don't allow yourself to do other things as you listen, such as answering the phone, doing paperwork, or checking your e-mail. Effective listening is difficult and requires all of your attention and all of your effort.

Make good use of the thought/speech ratio. We can think about four times faster than a person can talk. As a result, we may have trouble concentrating on what another person is saying. We let our minds wander, or we may start thinking about something else. We may begin to formulate our answer to what

we think a student is saying. A word or phrase a person uses triggers our mind to an emotional reaction that has nothing to do with what the person is saying. For instance, the word "vacation" might make you think about your own vacation.

One of the worst things we can do is to interrupt someone speaking to us because he or she is speaking too slowly; sometimes we get so impatient that we just blurt out what we are thinking in the middle of the other person's thought. Our goal should be to concentrate on what that person is saying. As we listen, we must use that extra thinking time to make ourselves pay attention. Seek to summarize what he or she is saying. Ask yourself, "What is the point?" Seek to listen in more than one medium; listen with your eyes as well as with your ears. Look for the nonverbal to see if it reinforces or contradicts what the person is saying. Does the person look at you when he or she speaks? Does the person cross his or her arms or legs while speaking?

If you really can't concentrate, you might be able to say, "This is not a good time for me. Could we continue this conversation later today or in the morning?"

Another effective listening skill is to put yourself in situations where you have to prove you are listening. In a faculty meeting, sit close to where the speaker or facilitator is. In a meeting, if you sit where the speaker will easily make eye contact with you, it will put more pressure on you to listen. For example, sitting down front and in the middle of a meeting room puts you on the spot as a listener. The speaker might call on you and will certainly look to you for feedback.

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