

# Attending

"I am too listening!"

If you've heard yourself say these words, then it doesn't really matter if you were or weren't. From the other person's perspective you weren't attending.

Attending is a specific way of paying attention to another person. When you attend well, you tell the speaker, "What you're saying is important. I want to understand it, and I will not judge you or what you say." You say all that without having to say a word. In fact, if you have ever had to say anything like that, you probably weren't listening well enough. Just as good jokes don't need to be explained, good listening speaks for itself.

Attending, however, isn't just what you do to look like you're listening. It actually raises the quality of both people's attention—it improves the other person's speaking, the accuracy and depth of your listening, and the relationship between the two of you. To get the benefits of attending you'll want to know

- what attending is
- why it matters
- how to attend
- and the intention behind attending.

## What Is Attending?

In common usage, attending literally means to be present. When you are listening to people, your job is to be present both literally and metaphorically. Attending is about your "being there" for people when they need to talk.

The word attend comes from the Latin, meaning, "to stretch," as a tendon stretches. It has the connotation of stretching the mind, in this case, toward the speaker. Attending also implies expectant waiting. That is exactly how you want speakers to experience you—expectantly waiting for them to tell you more.

## Why Attending Matters

You can also think about attending as "paying attention." Those two words are important. First, what is the importance of attention? And what are we paying when we give that attention?

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Human beings crave attention and thrive when we get positive attention. (Fortunately, we don't gain weight when we get it!) However, in a cell-phone culture where multitasking is revered, people don't have any attention to give. Our lives are a collage of distractions; our attention constantly fragmented. The only thing

we can concentrate on is keeping all our plates in the air.

Sure, we can all attest to our listening prowess as we're multitasking. You may be able to repeat verbatim what the other person just said, even as you look through some papers, do something on the computer, or watch television. But even if you heard exactly what was said, the other person didn't feel that you were really listening. You weren't paying attention.

And this is where "paying" comes in. Giving your attention costs you something: your time, your energy, the completion of your other tasks. You stop multitasking when you start attending. You pull over in your car; you turn away from your computer; you turn off the television. You gather in all the plates you have had in the air. Your attention is this gift of focus.

Your attending, your being present for the speaker, has a powerful effect on what is said. As you begin to listen, the person talking is constantly assessing your listening and judging how much to tell you. The more distracted you are, the more cursory or "partial" the story becomes.

Sometimes you'll miss only details; at other times you'll miss part of the "truth." The more speakers trust listeners in the conversation, the more open they will be. Conversations become shorter and more productive when the speaker trusts the listener because the real issues are discussed and resolved.

This trust can be assumed at the beginning of a conversation, but can also be quickly eroded depending on the listener's behavior. You have to build trust each time, and you build it with

- your body language,
- the environment around you, and
- your intentions.

### Your Body Language

You can't fool the speaker when you attend. The speaker believes the truth of your body: when your body says you're listening, you are. When your body says you're checking your e-mail, or wanting to follow up with the person who just walked by, or wondering when this conversation is going to be over, the speaker believes it. The speaker does not believe you when you say, "No, go on, I'm listening." The speaker knows your attention is elsewhere.

The body says, "I'm listening," through

- the eyes,
- the face,
- the posture, and
- movement, the way the body as a whole responds to the listener.

### The Eyes

When you're listening, your eyes do three things: show your intent to listen, give the speaker a feeling of acceptance, and read the speaker's body and face for information.

Proverbial windows of the soul, the eyes

communicate your intent as a listener. The speaker can "read" your eyes for their interest and openness, or their blankness, masking your intent. If your eyes are looking elsewhere, the speaker will know that your attention is elsewhere as well.

When you're in sync with the speaker, your eyes communicate a feeling of support and encouragement without your having to say anything. However, if you tend to have strong, intense eye contact, it might feel intimidating to a less assertive person. Try softening your eye contact by leaning back in your chair and making sure that your facial expression shows kindness and not judgment.

Finally, your eyes give you clues to the dynamics of the conversation. You can see how the speaker responds to you, what his/her body does when talking about the issue. Your eyes may also see signs in the speaker's body language that there's more going on than you initially thought. That's when your attending really counts.

### The Face

Your face communicates a world of information that speakers use to gauge their ability to trust you with their story. First, the face communicates interest, or lack of it. As speakers look at you, they are getting feedback from your face regarding whether or not you care about what's being said.

Second, the face communicates what you think about what the speaker is saying. The smallest movement with your mouth speaks of your disagreement or disapproval (either with what happened or what was said). The smallest nod, shows your approval. When you're listening, it's important that your face tells the speaker that you are not judging what's said. If your face shows judgment, the speaker

will either stop talking, or stop talking about what really happened.

Unfortunately, sometimes your face communicates something you don't mean. For example, if your natural tendency is toward showing little facial expression, the speaker may interpret this as disinterested even when you are very interested. If this is true of you, soften your features as you listen. Tilt your head, raise your eyebrows slightly, almost smile (so as not to be frowning unintentionally). Think about expressing your openness and curiosity on your face. Doing this might feel strange to you, but it will help the speaker relax and be more open—as long as you do it with the intent to help communication.

### Posture

The eyes and face say so much without you having to say anything. The rest of your body also does its part to communicate interest and acceptance. In many different ways your posture can tell the speaker, "I'm with you and open to what you say."

- Face the speaker straight on—not turned away or to the side.
- Lean forward.
- Come closer. This makes talking and listening easier, and creates a bubble of privacy. Most people in the U.S. are comfortable when their listener is within arm's reach, or approximately three feet away. People from other parts of the world have a different comfort zone, so watch for their reaction as you interact with them. Be sensitive to people who want a little more space, and back off.
- Relax your arms and legs. Unfolding crossed arms and legs shows your

openness to what's said (and crossing your arms usually shows your judgment).

## Movement

Body movement has the potential to be either distracting or encouraging to the speaker. As you've no doubt experienced, a listener that is fiddling with pencils or paper clips, jangling pocket change, doodling, etc., probably has other things on his or her mind. These small behaviors communicate their inattention.

One of the most interesting findings in the research on listening is that when a speaker and listener are communicating well, they unconsciously make similar movements. When speakers lean forward, listeners lean forward. When speakers uncross their ankles, listeners uncross their ankles. Some people advocate intentionally "mirroring" the speaker's movements to get in sync with the person. Our bias is that your body will do it automatically if you're really listening. To do it intentionally could distract you from what's being said. Instead, to achieve this affect, really focus on listening. When your mind is following the speaker, your body will too.

## On the Phone

You may be wondering, "Do I need to attend when I'm on the phone? After all, the speaker can't see me." Being on the phone may be your one chance to take care of some business and catch up on your paperwork. We've all done it, and we all know what can happen. Sure, you can "get away" with not attending—for a while. But as you clean off your desk or fill out paperwork, your mind will drift. Suddenly there's a pause on the other end of the phone. Or, the person asks you a question, and you don't know how to answer it. It's more than embarrassing. While you're scrambling to get back in the conversation, the other person has

decided that you really don't care.

The laws of attending don't change when you get on the phone. The physical practice of attending quiets your mind and focuses it so that you become a better listener. When listening matters, your whole body must listen, not just your ears, even if no one can see you doing it.

## The Environment

Few people have the luxury of a private office at work, which leaves many of us in a less-than-ideal environment for listening. Distractions disrupt the speaker's train of thought and the listener's focus. A perceived lack of privacy can limit what the speaker feels he/she could freely discuss. Interruptions may derail the conversation, or at the least communicate disrespect.

So think about how important conversations could happen in a pleasant, quiet environment without the interruptions of people or phone calls. For example:

- Turn off your cell phone or BlackBerry.
- Hold your calls.
- Head to the cafeteria for a cup of coffee.
- Go to a conference room.
- Go for a walk.
- Let others know that you're unavailable but will seek them out when you're finished.

Also think about how the seating affects the conversation. Come out from behind your desk. Stand or sit so that you're at the same eye level. Notice if there are any physical barriers. They can symbolize

power dynamics or at the very least get literally in between you and the speaker. Sitting at the corner of a table, for example, can create more connection than sitting across the table from the speaker.

## Your Attention Intention

Your intentions as a listener are as important as your behaviors. In fact, your intentions shape your listening behaviors. Speakers are tuned in to your intentions as well as your attending behaviors. If you do all the right things but are vacant in your heart as a listener, the speaker will eventually catch on and will feel all the more distanced and untrusting of you. However, your intentions are not enough. If you have the best intentions, but you don't stop what you're doing long enough to listen, the speaker won't know that your intentions are good.

Because good intentions are not enough, pay attention to your attending. Remember to think about what you're doing with your eyes, your face, your posture, and body movement. Create an environment that is comfortable for both you and the speaker. This will help you pay attention. People will believe what they see.