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Listening Between the Lines

by **Patrick B. Ropella** on December 4, 2008, 7:30 am

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Was it a multi-million dollar mistake? Maybe it was more. And sadly, as the head of an executive search firm, I see it all too often. What I'm referring to is when employers hire a resume rather than a person. They bring in a candidate with exceptional credentials, get mesmerized by the individual's accomplishments or skills, and then simply fail to pay attention during the hiring process.

An Illustration

Consider this scenario. An interview is underway for the VP of Sales position at ABC Surfactants. Elise Watson, the COO, is conducting the interview, but mentally she's still fine-tuning the annual budget and thinking about her presentation to the CEO. During the interview, the candidate casually mentions he hates being bossed around "probably why he has gone through four wives. Distracted by other thoughts, Elise misses the implication.

This job works for a demanding boss and the sales force are mostly very experienced long-term employees. This is not the right candidate, even though the companies he's worked

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for are impressive heâ€™s rarely stayed with a company more than a few years. And Elise is about to give her stamp of approval to whatâ€™s likely to be a disastrous hire.

While this story is merely an illustration, Iâ€™ve witnessed similar situations many times in the real world. Poor decisions are made simply because people fail to process what they are hearing. And these decisions are expensive! HR experts estimate that the cost of a bad hire is 2 to 7 times the individualâ€™s annual salary.

But when youâ€™re hiring a C-level executive or a technologist to drive your R&D, the costs of a hiring mistake can be catastrophic with lasting and sometimes irreparable damage to productivity, morale, client relationships, and market position. The hard and soft costs of a bad executive hire can easily run into the millions.

So how do you avoid a disastrous hiring mistake? All you have to do is listen.

Do you know how to listen? I mean really listen? Hearing is one thing â€“ the physical vibration of sound waves on an eardrum. Listening is another â€“ the acquisition of information. What Iâ€™m really referring to goes a step further than that. It is called active listening. Active listening occurs when you hear beyond the speakerâ€™s words and listen for the meaning; and even more so when you search for the context, intent, and feelings behind the message.

When it comes to evaluating potential candidates, especially senior-level talent, no skill is more critical than active listening. Yet according to some studies, we actively listen only about 30% of the time. In other words, we are missing out on as much as 70% of the information people are conveying during the interview process. And when we miss this data, we fail to spot warning signs.

As journalist Diane Sawyer once said, *“I think one lesson I have learned is that there is no substitute for paying attention.”*

So how do you become an active listener? Make no mistake; active listening takes work. It requires focus, concentration, and practice. You have to consciously remove distractions and learn to process content and evaluate implications more efficiently.

Actively listening will very likely require some physical changes to the environment and a little reprogramming of your brain. But the effort will prove to be extremely worthwhileâ€“not just in

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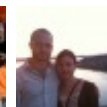
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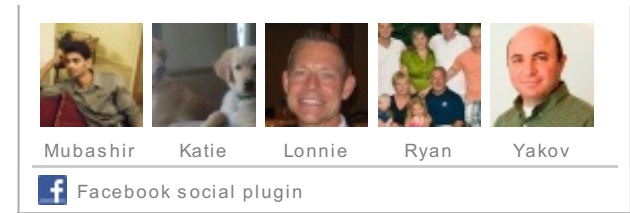


Larry

the hiring process, but in all your efforts to manage people.

Here are some tips to help you become an active listener:

- **Remove external distractions.** Turn off your cell phone, PDA, and any other electronic devices that can interrupt your conversation. You may need to get out of your office. You may need to get out of the building! The first step to active listening is to create a physical environment that is free of distraction, so you will be able to dedicate 100% of your attention to the other person's words and, more importantly, their meaning.
- **Get control over internal distractions.** The speed at which our brain can work is both a blessing and a curse. When our mind is not fully engaged in an activity, it tends to wander—and active listening stops. The challenge is to find ways to put distracting thoughts on hold. If you find yourself distracted by other work or personal issues, you may want to simply make a list of these topics before the interview, so you can get back to them once the meeting is done. If you're distracted by relevant questions that pop into your mind during the conversation, ask the other person to pause for a moment, so you can write down your thoughts. Once you've cleared your mind, you can mentally re-engage in the dialog.
- **Plan ahead.** Before beginning a discussion, ask yourself one important question: "What do I need to learn from this conversation?" In interview situations, you should also develop a list of questions that will help you elicit the information you need to learn. By consciously thinking about content beforehand, you open your mind to listen for critical information.
- **Clarify, clarify, clarify.** To stay mentally engaged in the conversation, and to ensure you validate the information you are hearing, ask frequent clarification questions. Try paraphrasing the key points that have been discussed, and ask for confirmation that this information is accurate. Summarizing out loud will also help you recall key points if you need to come back to them later in the conversation.



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you need to come back to them later in the conversation.

- **Write down important information.** Taking notes is essential to active listening. You cannot turn off your brain, so when those distracting thoughts or questions arise, use a note pad to capture whatâ€™s going through your mind. Taking notes actually helps you stay more focused, and it frees your brain to listen.

Here are some more tips for you, your candidates, and your hiring managers to ensure better listening satisfies everyone involved in the hiring process:

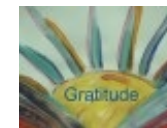
1. **Listen to verify that the candidate has done his homework.** If the hiring manager doesn't hear clear evidence that the individual understands the company's role and issues, you've likely sent the wrong candidate.
2. **Listen for examples and experience.** As an active listener, the hiring manager wants to hear clear evidence that the candidate has the behavioral traits they seek. Candidates should avoid management theory when answering questions (not supported by specific examples); this could be a candidate who is not truly qualified.
3. **Listen to verify *interest* in the position.** The most successful executives are passionate about their work. As an active listener, youâ€™re looking for evidence that the candidate is excited about the company, the industry, and the type of work he will be doing. Listen for excitement in the candidateâ€™s voice, information about trends in the industry, and/or the candidateâ€™s field of expertise. If all you hear is someone who sounds monotone or bored, odds are you have a candidate who is not truly interested in the job.
4. **Listen for qualities that may bring *negativity* to the job or the team.** Such instances include gossiping, overconfidence, a lack of assertiveness, a tendency to procrastinate, scoffing the past employer, bragging, etc. Odds are that a person who exhibits this kind of negativity is not a team player.
5. **Listen for attributes that would benefit the company.** In most executive searches, two or three finalists will emerge. The challenge for hiring managers becomes differentiating among these talented people. How can you help them pick?
6. **Most important, listen for what is important to the candidate.** What are the



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candidate's career goals? What motivates him or her? Is this an employee who is willing to contribute every waking hour to the job, or an individual who is very involved with outside responsibilities? Find the answers to questions like these to make sure the candidate's priorities match the realities of the job. If you neglect to ensure a good fit between the individual's interests and what the position offers, you are very unlikely to have a successful hire.

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Good stuff...and totally on target...but is it really our concern whether or not a hiring authority pays attention to a candidate? We screen, present, and close, and those functions are our only true duties. We want to make good placements, but we also do not want to give hiring authorities reasons to take a "pass". Anything which causes hiring authorities to analyze candidates gives them the baseball bat to beat us up with.

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Tallis

I'm waiting for a Ph.D. to come and post that this is all 1980's stuff and that in order not to hire bad, just put the VP through the ringer with a pasta maker and let her fill out a 500 question psych test. Quantitative data is what you need, not some subjective "listening"....

Calling all Ph.D's!

Alright, I'll stop with the sarcasm. Thanks for the piece, and a good pre-holiday to everyone.

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