



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

You're Not Listening!

Has that phrase ever been used on you? Or, have you ever used on someone else? If you have managed to avoid both conditions you are a rare human being indeed. The fact is that we are surrounded by conversation, dialogue, input and other forms of audio communications to the point where true communication often disintegrates.

My favorite story on this began in the firehouse. We had an individual in the fire station that liked to do woodcraft work in the firehouse. The Chief hated it. The person who did the woodcraft work also hated the couch that we had in the living room of the fire station. These two individuals were at each other's throat almost constantly. The Chief wanted the woodworking out of the firehouse and the firefighter wanted the couch out of the living room.

One day, and it was bound to happen, it was raining cats and dogs. The Chief came through the door and observed that there was a great deal of wooden material conveniently stacked on the couch. Growing redder in the face he pointed towards the couch and began to spit and sputter - and out came the phrase "get rid of it and get rid of it now!" The firefighter stood up and walked towards the Chief who exited the room tossing over his shoulder the final comment, "this is the last time we are ever going to talk about this - get rid of it right now!"

Imagine the Chiefs chagrin when he came back in the living room a couple of hours later and found all of the woodwork neatly piled on all of the chairs in the room and the suspect couch had disappeared. Bolting to the back door and looking out into the back of the fire station he was outraged to see the couch by this time a sodden mess sitting in the parking lot.

This was a classic example of the line out of the old Paul Newman movie, "what we have here is a failure to communicate".

Now this particular event has some humorous aspects of it. But the consequences of not listening are not always humorous. As a matter of fact, the lack of active listening skills has cost people careers, jobs, opportunities and even relationships.

Perhaps some of you have experienced some of the challenge to your listening skills when you are dealing with a spouse or a child. What many of you might not realize is that the same inactive listening skills exercised in the fire station can result in a wide variety of negative impacts. The purpose of this article is to focus a little bit on what an active listener actually does and to suggest that it may be a skill and an ability that can improve upon your interaction with others very quickly.



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Let's talk first about the whole concept of being a listener versus a talker. First ground rule; if you are talking you are not listening. Second ground rule, if you are just listening without talking you are not communicating.

Let me see if I can clarify what I mean by these two phenomena. Active listening means focusing in on what the other person has to say. However, in the event that you are absorbing signals from another person and not giving them feedback of what it means to you or to how it is being interpreted by you is a highly possibility that your version may not be the same as theirs when it is all over with.

When I was preparing this article I wanted to put it into context of the fire station but – it also fits the context of an overall fire organization. Developing active listening skills is a very important part of setting up the potential success of interaction between small groups as well as large groups in an organizational setting. In short, being able to be an active listener is very important for a fire captain who is only supervising one to three or more people but is equally important to a Chief Officer who is running an entire shift or for that matter a Fire Chief who is running an entire fire department.

It is also critical that we talk about under what environment critical listening skills are actually vital. We all know there is a lot of sound that goes on in our organizations – one might also consider much of the communications that goes on in the firehouse as being like “static”. Active listening is not something you can do 24-hours a day, 365 days a year. It is something you must be prepared to do when there are consequences of not doing it.

For example, when you are solving problems; the use of active listening skills allows a much more effective use of information whenever you are attempting to resolve a conflict.

In others we are coping with conflict. It could be conflict above you. It could be conflict below you. It could be conflict between individuals. What needs to occur in conflict resolution is that both sides have to see and feel the signals of the other side in order to reach a level of trust. That is a role of active listening.

My last scenario may sound like problem solving but it has a slightly different connotation to it. Active listening is very important in conflict management. While it may seem like problem solving as stated earlier crisis management has an emotional aspect to it that is one notch up from having to solve a problem. Active listening is a technique to get beyond tears and fears to probe for specifics rather than generalities.

So how do you do this wonderful thing? It might be helpful if we use an acronym here to remind you of these techniques. The acronym is FAIR. This stands for focus, accountability, involvement and repetition.



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Let's spend a few seconds and examine what we mean by these four letters. Focus means just exactly that. Whenever you are involved in a set of circumstances in which there is an exchange of information it can't be multi-tasked. It is important that you position yourself in a way in which you maintain eye contact and visibly watch for signs of body language and other non-verbal forms of communications. Focus literally means that the only way that you can be an active listener is to block out all of the other signals that are coming into your mind. You need to pay attention to what the other person is saying. Nuances such as the choice of words, the manner in which the person expresses themselves and other factors is often based on whether they think you are literally paying attention or you tuned them out.

Focus also means not providing your own distractions. Sometimes it is better not to try and become to direct when you are trying to get the other person to tell you the truth.

Accountability speaks to the issue of taking responsibility for what you say and holding the other person responsible for what they say. In active listening there are no throw away lines. When you are engaged with another person in active listening environment everything they say must mean something. You have to take personal accountability as you formulate every thought based upon what you are hearing.

The "I" stands for involvement. What this literally means is that anytime a person is doing all of the talking and none of the listening there is not communication going on. It is a monologue. Involvement means that there needs to be an assessment early on in a discussion of how to bring out the other persons perspective. Instead of making judgment in active listening good communicators generally ask questions because the other person can form conclusions before they give feedback.

And our last letter stands for repeat. Active listening requires that you tell the other person what you think they heard. This type of dialogue often starts of with "what I think you said to me was," ... if you go back to the previous test of involvement, repetition means constantly using new information to update what you actually know about what you are talking about.

Individuals who are good at active listening often give the impression of being very empathetic and yet at the same time not overwhelmed by what they are receiving. Active listeners tend to be individuals who can convert what is being said into what is really being meant. The concept of active listening also includes the idea that judgment is always pending at some time in the future rather than being cut off in the middle of the conversations. The use of any language that gives the person the indication that they have already been judged and the jury is out almost automatically eliminates the opportunity for active communications.

Unfortunately for many sets of circumstances in our field, active listening is not a common practice. If Dilbert had been a Captain in a firehouse he probably would have drawn some of the same conclusions about the breakdown in communications in a firehouse that occur in almost every business around the



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country. As a person who is leading or supervising others we can often expand our influence over their role and relationship in achieving the goals of our organizational setting by being a better listener. When individuals seek to understand they must have both patience and curiosity.