

# Listening Between the Lines

**W**as 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 com-



panies he's worked for are impressive he's rarely stayed with a company more than a few years. – and Elise is about to give her stamp of approval to what's likely to be a disastrous hire.

While this story is merely an illustration, I'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 individual's annual salary. But when you'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 – the physical vibration of sound waves on an eardrum. Listening is another – the acquisition of information. But, what I'm really referring to goes a step further than that. It is called active listening. Active listening occurs when you hear beyond the speaker'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 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?

## A GUIDE TO ACTIVE LISTENING

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. Active 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 worthwhile – not just in 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



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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.

#### **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 what's going through your mind. Taking notes actually helps you stay more focused, and it frees your brain to listen.

#### **ACTIVE LISTENING FOR HIRING MANAGERS**

During a typical interview, most hiring managers will spend almost 80% of the time talking. Yet an active listener spends 80% of the time listening. If you want to get better information about the candidates you are evaluating, put these active listening tips into your interview routine:

#### **Listen to Verify That the Candidate Has Done His Homework**

You want to hire people who are motivated by the prospect of working for your firm. The best candidates do their homework. Listen closely for comments that demonstrate the candidate has done fairly thorough due diligence on your company and your industry. If you don't hear clear evidence that the individual understands what you do and the challenges and issues you face, you are talking to the wrong candidate.

#### **Listen for Examples and Experience**

Pay careful attention to how candidates respond to your questions. As an active listener, you want to hear clear evidence that the candidate has the behavioral traits you seek. In other words, listen for specific examples of when the candidate demonstrated the kinds of behaviors you want to hire. For example, if you're looking for a visionary leader, you want to hear clear examples of times when the person exhibited visionary leadership. If you ask a question, and only get management theory in response (not supported by specific examples), you may have a candidate who is not truly qualified.

#### **Listen to Verify Interest in the Position**

The most successful executives are passionate about their work. As an active listener, you're looking for evidence that the candidate is excited about your company, your industry, and the type of work he will be doing. Throughout the interview, you should hear excitement in the candidate's voice. You should hear information about trends in your industry and/or the candidate's field of expertise. And you should probably hear a suggestion or two for improving your firm or dealing with challenges you face. 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.

#### **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 and could become a destructive force to your company culture.

#### **Listen for Attributes That Would Benefit the Company**

In most executive searches, two or three finalists will emerge. The challenge becomes differentiating among these talented people. As you interview, listen for (and make a list of) behavioral traits or other relevant experiences that would help the individual succeed in your organization.

#### **And Most Importantly, Listen for What Is Important to the Candidate**

What are the 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 a family and 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.

#### **COUNSEL FOR THE CANDIDATE**

Of course, active listening isn't just for employers. If you're in the job market, active listening is critical to your career success. As a job seeker, you want to learn about the company's expectations, the freedom and opportunities you will have, and the team you'll be joining. You want to make sure that working for this employer will be the right step in your career.

#### *Here are a few active listening tips for job seekers:*

#### **Focus on Learning Rather Than Just Selling Yourself**

This advice may sound flawed; however, when you're worried about "looking good," you tend to be more nervous, ask fewer questions, and miss important information about the job. Go into the interview well prepared. Become as much of an expert as you can about the company and its industry. Go to the interview ready to ask questions about the organization, the work environment, their perspective on industry trends, and the measures of success they have for the candidates they seek. As an active listener, you are looking to validate that this is really the best opportunity for you.

### **Listen for What It's Really Like to Work for the Company**

You want to make sure the position is a good fit for your work style and your lifestyle. First and foremost, you want to verify that your management style meshes with the company's philosophy. As you enter the negotiation process, you want to ensure that the company's employment policies and benefits package provide an equitable balance for you.

### **Show That You Are Actively Listening**

Maintain eye contact and exhibit good posture. Provide visual cues that you are listening and interested by nodding in agreement and taking notes while the interviewer is speaking. Consciously doing these things will keep you mentally engaged and enhance your active listening skills.

### **Listen for What Is Not Said**

When evaluating an employment decision, what is not told to you can be as, or even more, important than what is actually said. As you ask questions of the interviewer, listen carefully for potential issues in regard to the duties, expectations, or other aspects of the job. Ask probing follow-up questions to validate information that was previously provided, and make certain that this opportunity is right for you.

### **Listen for Important Names and Other Key Details**

During the interview process, you may learn new information about people in the firm, industry challenges, or competitive issues. If you are offered the job, you may want to refer to this information to help you evaluate your acceptance decision.