

Reflective listening -- a critical business development skill

Outstanding business developers listen superbly. Reflective listening is a particular style of listening that enables them to understand their potential client and to build trust with them. Unfortunately, good reflective listening doesn't come naturally to most. Fortunately, it can be learned.

What is reflective listening?

Reflective listeners pay attention to both the content of a conversation and the relationship dynamics that are exhibited in that conversation. Reflective listeners reflect in two ways:

- They think deeply about what they are observing
- They “reflect back” what they have heard to verify they have heard correctly and to ask for correction or adjustment

Content of the conversation is important

When you listen to the content of the conversation, you are of course listening for what the other person is saying. But you also listen for:

- What you are surprised to hear. If you have thought of your questions and their likely answers ahead of time, you increase your chances of noting when you should be surprised. You can then probe more deeply – “I'd have thought you would say 'A' here, but you said 'B.' Can you tell me more about your thinking?”
- What you don't fully understand. These are also important areas to probe fully.
- What they are not saying. What subjects don't they bring up, that you expect or might have expected to hear about? What opportunities to say something do they pass up?

This deeper listening will help you understand better what the person is trying to communicate. You can go farther though, by listening to understand what the other person is meaning, and the implications of that meaning for that person. You are trying to see the world through their eyes (this is what is commonly called empathy).

At that point, if you are a very committed and capable listener, you can try to simultaneously see the world through their eyes and your own eyes. You know what you know and see what the other person sees, so you can help them. (This goes beyond empathy and requires you to see the world from two perspectives at the same time – and is the kind of listening reflective listeners strive for).

Relationship dynamics are assessed too

You also listen for and observe the relationship dynamics in each interaction.

- Observe their body language. Are there arms crossed? Are they in open positions towards you, or closed? Are they mirroring your movements, a sign of agreement?

- What is the pattern of their interactions – how do they interact with you, what brings them closer, or makes them retreat? What opens them up, or shuts them down?

You reflect back what you hear

As you listen, try to reflect back, in a paraphrase, what they said. Even more, try to express the implications of what you have heard. They then have a chance to correct what you heard, so they can let you know what they meant. If you get their statements and the implications right, then you have truly understood their perspective.

The benefits are great

The benefits of reflective listening are great.

- First, you learn a lot about the situation the other person faces and their attitude about it. This can only be helpful as you try to help them.
- Second, you learn what the other person is actually trying to communicate – you discover that it's not what they first say, but what they accept as correct when you reflect it back to them.
- Third, trust is built. The other person senses that you can truly hear his or her issues. They have an experience that conveys that you are interested in knowing them and what matters to them.

Something to try this week

Consciously try to reflectively listen to someone. You should probably start with someone relatively easy -- a colleague, a friend, or your spouse. Try to focus on your goal, which is understanding how they see the world, while at the same time keeping your own view of it. That may feel like juggling more balls than you are used to. When you've got the hang of that, try to also watch what is happening to the relationship dynamics as well as to the content of the conversation. If you'd like to, let us know how it goes.

What are these tips?

These monthly tips are intended to help professionals create more business and enjoy their work more. We focus on how to start relationships, how to build relationships, and how to convert those relationships into sales.

Can you answer my questions about business development?

We'd be delighted. Please send any questions you have to questions@bridgewellpartners.com and we'll do our best to help you out. Or call us at 312-863-3489. Or visit www.bridgewellpartners.com to learn more about how we coach and train professionals to be better at business development and to enjoy it more.