

Listen Up!

I have recently read a fascinating book called *The Charisma Myth* by Olivia Fox Cabane. I loved it so much I chose it for our management team book study. The charisma myth is the idea that you either have it (Bill Clinton, Oprah, Steve Jobs) or you don't. Cabane shows us that this is simply not true, and that charismatic behaviours can be learned and perfected by anyone. The book begins with the wonderful story of Benjamin Disraeli.

In the torrid London summer of 1886, William Gladstone was up against Benjamin Disraeli for the post of prime minister of the United Kingdom. This was the Victorian era, so whoever won was going to rule half the world. In the very last week before the election, both men happened to take the same young woman out to dinner. Naturally, the press asked her what impressions the rivals had made. She said, "After dining with Mr. Gladstone, I thought he was the cleverest person in England. But after dining with Mr. Disraeli, I thought I was the cleverest person in England."

Guess who won the election? It was the man who made others feel intelligent, impressive, and fascinating: Benjamin Disraeli

When I think of the truly charismatic people I've met in my life there is one quality they all share...every single one is a master listener. After having spent time with them I'm left feeling heard and truly understood. There is a special connection that happens between two people when the interaction is a two-way conversation with questions being asked out of a genuine curiosity about the other person and answers are given time and space to be shared and then absorbed. Sadly, I would have to say our society is lacking in this area. Poor listening skills are often at the heart of problems between colleagues, spouses, friends, and families. The good news is there are specific techniques we can all adapt to become more effective listeners.

Attentive Listening: Some people feel they are listening when they let people talk until it's their turn. Unfortunately, that's not sufficient. If what you're thinking about while the other person is talking is what you want to say next, your lack of presence will be written all over your face. The other person will see that you're not fully present and are just waiting for them to finish so you can jump in. If you feel yourself zoning out you can bring yourself back to the moment by focusing on physical sensations, like the feeling in your toes or your breath flowing in and out of your body. Then get back to the person.

Never, ever, interrupt: Sometimes we get so excited about something the other person has said our impulse is to jump in. Although our impulse comes from a good place, the result will often be that the other person is left frustrated they weren't able to complete their sentence or story. Great listeners all know to let others interrupt them. When someone interrupts you, let them! It's not worth it to make them feel bad for doing it; your job is to make them feel right.

Power of the Pause: This is a trick that sets the master listeners apart. Pausing is a very effective habit that will make people feel truly listened to and understood. When someone has spoken, see if you can let your facial expression react first, showing that you're absorbing what they've just said and giving their statement the consideration it deserves. Only then, after about two seconds, do you answer.

Since reading *The Charisma Myth* and becoming more aware of my listening skills during interactions at home, at work, and with friends I can assure you that these tips work. I do find myself drifting back to old habits at times but then I feel my toes, shut my trap, and take a moment to pause.