

ACTIVE LISTENING CAN MAKE YOU A BETTER SPEAKER: PART 2



Marie-Claude Stockl

Have you ever heard that “God gave us one mouth and two ears for a reason, so we ought to listen twice as much as we speak”? The old Irish proverb holds true and is now backed up by science. [In Part 1 of this blog series](#), we talked about how effective speakers set up their presentation to help foster active listening. In this blog, we will discuss how speakers can make sure that THEY are actively listening.

Using both ears is just the beginning.

- 1. Listen with your eyes as well as your ears.** While we advise writing your presentation for the ear, not for the eye (i.e., using short sentences and active tenses), great speakers need to use their eyes to listen as well. That means watching your audience to make sure everyone is engaged. Tip: Use eye contact to read your audience. Good eye contact means speaking to one person, finishing a full thought or sentence before looking at the next person, and repeating. If the person is checking his or her e-mail, take a pause, which will prompt everyone to look up and pay attention.
- 2. Beware of mirror neurons.** The data suggest that your audience mirrors your behavior. Yes, monkeys do it ([Kohler, 2002](#)), and we do it too. You yawn, I yawn. I smile, you smile. I nod approvingly, you nod. I look worried, you frown. Tip: Prepare before a speech by practicing the right way, out loud, in front of a mirror or – better yet – a camera. Once you are comfortable and know your content, you will be able to focus on your audience and the facial and body language signals you are sending. The camera will also show you what those signals look like so you can improve them.
- 3. Identify the question behind the question.** To get your listening skills to the next level, ask yourself: why is this person asking the question? What did I not explain well enough? What is their concern? Data dumping is not the answer. Tip: Give a short answer, back it up with a couple of facts, and bridge to the broader context that addresses the concern behind the question, using a connective phrase such as, “You raise an important point because...”
- 4. Be still, my heart.** There is always one in a crowd – someone who takes so long to ask a question that you don’t know where they are going. Tip: Wait for them to make some kind of point – any point – and interrupt. “So – it sounds like you are asking xxx?” This signals to the audience and importantly, the person, that you are in charge and won’t let someone take over and digress.

5. **Watch out for the filibuster.** If the same person keeps interrupting and is generally disruptive, what do you do? Watch your audience. When they start fidgeting and rolling their eyes, they want you to take control. Active listening with a larger audience means everyone needs to be heard. Tip: When the questioner takes a breath, step in and paraphrase his/her last sentence, i.e., “Bill, what you are saying about xxx brings up an important topic. Has anyone else xxx”? Move your eye contact to someone else. The audience will be relieved that you took charge, and they will help you out.

6. **Suspend judgment.** If someone makes a point that goes against conventional wisdom or is news to you, check in with the audience. How do they react to the idea? Is there merit to it? Trust that your audience knows a lot, and you can learn from them, just as they learn from you. Tip: Use open-ended questions, such as: “Let me turn to others in the audience, what has your experience been with xxx?” or “What do you know about the point Sally raised about xxx?” Open-ended questions are a useful tool to help the conversation go deeper.

Active listening helps you keep the audience engaged and makes you a better speaker. It does not have to be complicated. The next time you make a presentation, try one of the tips we shared here. Add to your repertoire. Once you master a tip, add another one. Soon, you’ll be modeling active listening and your audience, in kind, will be listening to you.

Contact:
Marie-Claude Stockl
Executive Director
The Horse Institute
518-929-7202
mc@thehorseinstitute.com