



by Brad Worthley

## The Most Powerful Communication Tip You Will Ever Get

When there is a communication breakdown, whether it is at work or home, you will sometimes hear the words, “They don’t listen to me.” The reality is, most people are not good listeners, and there is actually a reason why. Everyone is born with something called a Reticular Activating System, which acts like a filter in the brain. It filters in things that are important to you and filters out things that are unimportant to you.

Have you ever been car shopping and you wanted something really unique – a car that no one else has? You find a really cool white car and you are sure there is none other like it in your town. Have you ever noticed that once you buy the car, you will see that same white model multiple times per day?

Let’s say you live near a busy highway and you hear incessant road noise all day and night. At some point, your brain will consider it a nuisance and your Reticular Activating System will take over and filter the noise out, so it does not bother you anymore. You will have friends come over to your house and say, “Boy, it is really noisy in your house,” but you don’t hear it any longer.

Have you ever been driving down a freeway at 70 miles an hour, and you wake up to realize you have been daydreaming for the last 10 minutes and you don’t remember your drive? That should terrify you; you are a 3,000-pound missile flying down the freeway at 70 miles an hour, and you do not remember cars passing you, you passing cars, the speed you were going, song on the radio or anything else about your drive. You were navigating life beautifully, however, you don’t remember the details of your drive, because the Reticular Activating System filtered it out. That is because a lack of attention causes a lack of retention.

Do you remember sitting in a classroom in high school or college for an hour? You knew the teacher was in the room because you could see them walking around and you could also hear them talking, but you walked out of that class after an hour and had no idea what you learned? It has happened to all of us at some point, but most of us did not know why. Anytime you are daydreaming or having “self-talk,” which is affectionately referred to as “mind-chatter,” your Reticular Activating System will filter out whatever is going on around you. When the filter is open, you can retain the information that you are hearing, but if it is closed, you will hear the words, but you will not retain the information.

So, if you are in a conversation, you need to be aware of your Reticular Activating System, and make sure you keep it open, otherwise you are robbing yourself of information and doing the person you are talking to a tremendous disservice by not listening to them.

It is very hard to tell if the person you are talking to has their Reticular Activating System open. You can increase the likelihood by making sure you ask them a lot of questions in order to free up their mind-chatter (by getting them to talk).

Also, as you are speaking, make sure to watch the person’s body language, and especially their eyes. If you are speaking and say something that confuses the person, or creates a question in their mind, they may roll their eyes upwards. When you see their eyes roll up, or turn away from you, it would be a good time to stop talking and ask the person if they have any questions. If they have a question, they have probably stopped listening to you, because the Reticular Activating System is closed, so you might as well be talking to a brick wall. The Reticular Activating System is normally in a constant state of activity, so it is important to know about the three levels of listening:

**Level One Listening** is incredibly ineffective because as soon as someone starts talking to us, we stop listening and start formulating our response back to them, or we are judging them. It can also occur because we are not interested in what they are saying, so we are thinking about how to get out of the conversation, or what else we should be doing instead (disinterest). Any self-talk or mind-chatter will sabotage your ability to truly hear the person speaking and it will keep you from retaining it. This is the level that most people communicate at.

**Level Two Listening** is a deeper level of listening because we are focused on minimizing the mind-chatter and truly listening to their every word. At this level, the Reticular Activating System is open and you are retaining what they are saying because you are focused on the person you are talking to and not trying to formulate a response. This is what is called “being present” in conversation, because you are sincerely listening to each word, and avoiding judgment (which creates mind-chatter). This is a level that takes lots of practice and is not achieved without significant awareness and practice. Very few people will ever achieve

level two listening skills, because it is too hard to break our old listening habits.

**Level Three Listening** is the same as level two, but you are also now listening at an intuitive level. In order to help you stay in level three, you might minimize distractions, such as close your office door when meeting with someone, close your laptop lid so your attention is not diverted from messages popping up on the screen and you might also put your mobile phone on airplane mode so the notifications and alerts do not draw your attention away from the person you are talking with. Listening at an intuitive level has you tuned in to the person's voice inflection, where you are trying to hear subtle messages by the tone of their voice. The messages might be anxiety, fear, anger, joy, passion, enthusiasm, friendliness or many other emotions that the spoken word alone may not tell you about. If the person is in front of you (and not on the phone), then you would also watch their body language in order to pick up additional messages that are not in the spoken word. As an example, if you disagree with someone and they fold their arms on their chest, sometimes closed arms means a closed mind, and that person has stopped listening to you. If their eyes look up, it normally means they are processing what you said, but that could be mind-chatter, and they are filtering your words out.

Being a great listener is a learned skill in most cases, and requires a lot of practice and awareness, but is well worth the effort. The greatest listeners are normally also the greatest significant others, parents, leaders, salespeople, service people, co-workers and friends. Awareness brings change, so the more aware you are of the Reticular Activating System and how it works, the better you can control it. ♣

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