

The Reticular Activating System

Another reason to ask questions of the customer is a physical restriction that each human has placed upon them, and that is called the reticular activating system. Everyone has this switch in the brain, and most of us have very little control over it because we are unaware of it. I believe that awareness creates change and being aware of this system will dramatically improve your listening and communication skills.

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 and time, but most of us did not know why. Anytime you are daydreaming or having “self-talk,” which is affectionately referred to as “telling-tension,” your reticular activating system will shut off like a light switch. When the switch 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. Increase the likelihood by making sure you ask them a lot of questions in order to free up their telling-tension (by getting them to talk). Once again, this is especially true in a sales environment. The customer might have a lot of questions, and if you don't give them the opportunity to ask their questions, they will try to retain them, which is creating telling-tension (they have something to tell you, or ask you). Asking lots of questions increases the likelihood that when you are ready to speak, they will be ready to listen.

However, 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 (they may look up in a questioning manner). 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 (telling-tension), 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. Due to the reticular activating system, and its constant state of activity, we have three levels of listening:

LEVEL ONE LISTENING is how most people communicate because we are only retaining what we hear, or truly listening, about half the time. This happens because as someone else is talking, we are formulating a response or pondering their words. 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 (disinterest). Any self-talk will sabotage your ability to truly hear the person speaking or retain the information.

LEVEL TWO LISTENING is a deeper level of listening with very low self-talk. The reticular activating system is open and you are retaining information because you are focused on the person you are talking to and not trying to formulate a response. This is what I call “being present” in conversation, because you are sincerely listening to each word, and avoiding judgment (which creates self-talk). This is a level that takes lots of practice and is not achieved without significant thought. 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 listening at an intuitive level. You are hearing each word and staying present in the conversation, but you are also listening to the person's voice inflection trying to hear subtle messages. The messages might be anxiety, fear, anger, joy, passion, or many other emotions that the spoken word will 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. The highest performing sales people must communicate at level three, because that is where opportunity exists.

Being a great listener is a learned skill in most cases, and requires lots of practice, but it is well worth the effort. It separates great sales people from good sales people, great parents from good parents, great friends from good friends, great significant others from good significant others, and great leaders from good leaders.