

Listening Is Key to Fundraising

We don't always credit the role of listening in fundraising. Interacting with donors, and particularly top-tier donors that you want as partners, requires careful listening. You need to hear the person's interests, specific motivations to give and preferences for how to be involved — or not, beyond giving — to your organization. Use this self-assessment and strategies to sharpen listening skills in your development office. Though keep in mind that everybody in an organization can benefit from practice in listening.

Better or Worse Listening Styles

It's not hard to figure out which is the best listening style for successful interaction with donors. These listening types are borrowed from Dale Carnegie, the win friends and influence people. For each type, consider whether and how much each describes you as a listener. And be honest: self-reflection is the place to start in becoming a better listener.

Preoccupied: Multitask while others speak

A lot A little Not at all

Out-to-Luncher: Daydream in discussions; physically but not mentally present

A lot A little Not at all

Interrupter: Eager to verbalize the conversation in your own head

A lot A little Not at all

Whatever: Feel and appear uninterested; stay out of the discussion

A lot A little Not at all

Combative: Challenge and dismiss others' words and ideas

A lot A little Not at all

Analyst: Pick apart what's said, whether asked to or not

A lot A little Not at all

Engager: Listen with eyes and ears and focus on speaker's words and body language

A lot A little Not at all

Strategies to Strengthen Listening Skills

So who are you as a listener? How do you need to improve? Consider strategies that can help you become a better listener, not only when engaging with donors by phone or in person, but also in other roles in your organization.

- Make eye contact with the speaker in a person-to-person setting, to help you pay attention and keep your mind from wandering.
- If the speaker talks too fast or too low, say something. It's tempting to tune out when you can't hear or understand.
- Ask questions to help you follow a speaker's logic and stay engaged as a listener.
- Paraphrase a speaker's points to check how well you've listened and understood.
- Be aware of your listening habits — say, the tendency to be combative or to overanalyze — and work to check yourself.
- Forget about multitasking. Research confirms that most people can only do one thing at a time well. If you need to be listening, then just listen.
- Before an in-person discussion or important phone call, think through what you might want to say and questions you have on the topic, and then make notes for yourself. You'll be more ready to listen to others if you're not thinking about your own responses.
- Related strategy: if you're distracted by another problem or issue, before the discussion or call, write down your concerns and then set them aside. Experts say this kind of "brain dump" works to release distractions and improve focus.
- If you're an organizational leader, model engaged listening and set a tone that confirms listening is as important as having something to say.

Sources: Listener labels from "Seven Types of Listeners and Tips for Better Listening Skills," 8/10/2010, www.dalecarnegiewaysf.com; some tips based on suggestions in "Tuning In: Improving Your Listening Skills," *The Wall Street Journal* online, 7/22/2014.