

I'm John Sturtevant, and this is Say What?! A weekly podcast with quick tips to help you communicate clearly at work, at home, and everywhere else you go.

Welcome to Say What?! Episode 15

This week's quick tip is: Just Listen

Now that most of us are communicating with our colleagues remotely using technology like Zoom, rather than face-to-face, it's surprisingly evident to many people how important it is to really listen.

And listening is different from hearing. Listening is active. It requires intention. Hearing is more passive.

Many conversations are simply one person waiting for the other to finish, so he or she can start talking.

Learning to listen requires patience, and awareness, and intention. And it takes practice.

I acted in a few plays in college. I remember opening night of my first play. I was standing backstage, waiting for my cue to open the door and enter the scene. Suddenly my heart started racing and my mind went blank. I had no idea what I was supposed to say when I stepped onto stage in a few minutes.

Just then, my professor Sam Havens appeared at my side. He looked at me and smiled.

“Professor Havens,” I whimpered. “I have no idea what my lines are. I can’t go on stage!”

“Just listen,” he said. And then he disappeared into the dark behind the curtains.

I had no time to think about what he meant. I heard my cue. I opened the door, stepped onto the stage, and listened.

I was actively aware of the other characters. I let go of my need to say something, and instead, paid attention to what was going on around me.

In an instant, I was in the scene speaking my lines, and listening to the other actors. My lines became a conversation, rather than me reciting words.

That was a great lesson for me. And I’ve use that experience throughout my career as a business writer, and as an educator.

As a writer, I applied active listening when meeting with clients. That helped me transform the facts and data into meaning.

It made the difference between me just gathering information, and instead, gaining understanding.

And I actively listen when I'm teaching in my workshops. When students ask questions, they often already know the answer, but it's hidden somewhere in the back of their mind.

Part of my job is to help them discover the answer by guiding them to focus in the right place. Active listening helps me do that.

So how do you learn to listen?

Well, a tourist was walking down 7th Avenue in New York City, when he stopped a fellow on the street and asked him: "Excuse me sir, how do I get to Carnegie Hall?"

"Practice, practice, practice," replied the New Yorker.

That advice applies to you too.

Here are a few ways you can practice active listening.

1. Be willing to listen. Let go of the urge to talk, and allow yourself to be present and open. Listen with the intent to understand, not with the intent to reply. Be willing to be silent.

Silence is a powerful communication tool.

This is especially important in situations like Zoom meetings, when everyone talks at the same time.

## 2. Acknowledge the speaker with simple sounds or gestures

It can be something as simple as nodding your head, or a subtle smile, or saying "uh huh." And using your body language or verbal cues to acknowledge you're listening, reminds you to pay attention.

## 3. Repeat what the speaker said by paraphrasing or asking questions.

You can confirm details by asking questions like “Is the Thursday deadline by 5:00 pm, or is it Thursday morning?” or “Can you tell me more about your expectations for our meeting this afternoon?”

## 4. Look directly at the speaker.

Looking at the speaker and nodding slightly is a simple, almost subconscious affirmation that you're listening. But don't feel you have to stare without looking away or blinking! It's natural to glance away from time to time, especially when you're thinking.

## 5. Avoid interrupting.

This is a delicate balance. Sometimes, interrupting with an affirmation like “Yes, exactly!” or “Wow, that sounds like a big challenge,” is a great way to show you’re listening.

But when you interrupt just to get your point across, you’ve stopped listening, and you’ve signaled to the other person that you’re not interested.

## 6. Avoid judgment statements.

It’s easy to project our own beliefs and values on others. But this doesn’t make good listening. Empathy and compassion are important parts of active listening.

Instead of replying with something like “Oh, that shouldn’t bother you,” try an empathetic statement like “I imagine that was upsetting at the time. How do you feel about it now?”

Empathetic statements like that help show the other person you were paying attention.

By learning to listen actively, you’ll help create healthier and happier relationships – at work, and at home.

So the next time you're participating in Zoom meeting, amid the cacophony of eager talkers, remember the simple and yet profound words I heard backstage those many years ago: "Just listen!"

Who knows? You might discover you like the sound of that idea.

That's Say What?! for this week. Thanks for listening!

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## Episode 15: Just Listen

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This week, we explore 5 ways to be a better listener.