

Listen in Order to Understand

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By Dan Norman

On a Sunday afternoon a few years ago, I was at the Florida Mall in Orlando, sitting outside a store called Hot Topic waiting for my kids to finish shopping. I'm not sure if you've ever been in a Hot Topic, but if you have, you'll know it's a popular store among teens. It looks like someone combined a Goth jewelry store, a hardware store, a novelty shop, and a woman's lingerie boutique.

I'd originally gone inside with my kids and wound up searching for any piece of clothing, bumper sticker, or metal object I could look at and actually relate to while they shopped. I assumed the "hands-in-pockets, slightly hunched-over" look all teens develop so the other kids would think I was comfortable in their world and a cool dad. I passed two or three other "hands-in-pockets, slightly hunched-over" adults, nodded their way, and eventually went outside to recover from "generation gap syndrome."

While sitting on a bench, I noticed a dad trying to pull his little boy off the top of one of those tourist information stations. You've seen these things in restaurants and hotels all over the country—wooden cabinets packed with hundreds of brochures featuring all the fun places to visit in town. It appeared the little boy, who looked to be about 2, wanted to get on top of the cabinet. His dad lifted him up there to keep him happy and now was trying to coax him back down. The 2-year-old wasn't about to comply and was trying to pull free of Dad's grip while at the same time pulling as many flyers out of the racks as possible to create a diversion.

As Dad continued to pull, Junior started getting loud, screaming, "No, no, no!" at the top of his lungs. The more Dad pulled, the louder the boy became and the more flyers got thrown into the air. Dad tried to reason with him, but now was embarrassed due to his lack of ability to control his son. I'm pretty sure the little boy also was embarrassed by his lack of ability to control his dad. I'm not certain which one of them was the loudest.

Suddenly, something happened that I'm sure I'll never witness again. A major shopping mall food court suddenly became completely quiet and still. No movement, no sounds, just a group of amazed people staring at a little boy and his dad. People in lines at Chick-fil-A, Taco Bell, and all 17 Chinese buffet counters were speechless. The silence was broken by a Chinese "some-kind-of-meat-on-a-toothpick-sample" lady in front of one of the buffets. With toothpick held high, frozen in the "You like, very tasty" offer position, she said, "Dude, that's just not right!"

Then Mom walked up.

At that moment even Junior and Dad became speechless and stopped calling each other names. You could have heard a toothpick with "some kinda meat on it" drop. Mom put down her Gymboree and Victoria's Secret shopping bags and firmly, yet with care, grabbed her son's arm and instructed Dad to let go.

Mom was now in control. Disaster was averted, and life began to return to normal in food court land. People began talking and ordering their lunches again. The Chinese food sample lady went back to work, waving her mystery meat samples under everyone's noses.

Mom then asked Dad why their son was on top of the tourist information station.

"He was yelling and screaming that he wanted to get up there, and he wouldn't be quiet about it so I lifted him on top for a minute to quiet him down," he said. "But then he wouldn't come down. So I just wanted to get him down quickly. It's embarrassing with him screaming and out of control like this."

"Honey," Mom replied, "I understand you don't want to be embarrassed anymore, but he'll scream even louder if I yank him down, so let me see exactly what it is he wants up there."

She turned and looked up at her toddler. "Jeffrey," she asked in a calm voice, "what is it that you want up there?"

"Ah wan dah see le dee awko bel ober tear!" the toddler replied. (I didn't have anything to write on, but I think I got it word for word.)

Mom, who understood every word, then said, "Well, I'm sure you like being up there and being able to see Taco Bell, but if you want a taco, you have to come down quietly."

Junior flew into her arms, put his head on her shoulder, and scowled at Dad, who returned the scowl. Mom sent them toward Taco Bell and began gathering up flyers and brochures. Given the number of flyers on the floor and the distinct possibility that she might be needed if Junior found something else he wanted to climb, I walked over to help her. As we finished, I told her I had four kids of my own and thought she handled the situation very well.

"Well, I'm a sales rep in the hospital supply business, so this is what I do all day long," she said. "I find out what people want and persuade them to see the value of the products I recommend to them. Although I'm good at my job, I must admit that on most days those two are my toughest customers."

At the time of this incident, I was the vice president and general manager of one of AT&T's largest wireless markets, and I always had openings for good salespeople, so I gave her my card and asked her to call me.

Elaine interviewed with us, accepted a position, and became one of our top-producing business-to-business salespeople. At our annual sales recognition event that year, I had the pleasure of sitting next to her during the awards banquet. Over dinner, I asked her to tell me how she achieved such success.

"Most importantly, I listen to my customers," she said. "Developing strong listening skills is critical to uncovering what they need and want."

She credited developing the ability to listen in order to understand with helping her in her career, as well as in her personal life. She told me her marriage had always been pretty solid, but that she and her husband developed their share of difficulties after their son was born. They couldn't seem to agree on anything and often ended up yelling at each other.

During one argument, when it was her husband's turn to yell, he screamed, "I'd be happy if you simply treated me like one of your customers! When I hear you on the phone with them, you don't yell. You're nice and you always try your best to give them what they want."

"That's because I'm trying to get what I want from them&hellipa sale!" she bellowed back. "And I can't do that until I find out what they want first!"

She explained to me that at that moment, she had an epiphany. "In sales I know I can't get what I want, which is a sale, until I find out what the customer wants. In my marriage, however, I was focused on trying to simply get what I wanted without really trying to find out much about what my husband might want."

After that realization, when they had an argument, she tried to listen more carefully to find out what he was truly upset about and what he wanted from her. She asked clarifying questions like she did at work to uncover what he was really trying to say.

"Over time," she said, "he saw I was trying hard to focus on helping him get what he wanted, and he began to do the same. Today our relationship is really good—except for the times when he's just being a jerk."

As I remembered watching Mom, Dad, and Junior walk off toward Taco Bell on that Sunday afternoon, I realized how right Elaine was. Some skills are universal in their benefits. The ability to listen in order to understand has become a lost art form for most of us, but the benefits of this simple-but-often-overlooked skill can enhance your career, your personal life, and society as a whole. Listen, and you'll be able to accomplish great things.

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