

Are you listening?

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My partner can't stand it when I talk to her on the phone and check my email at the same time. She thinks I'm not listening. I am only willing to admit that she's right some of the time. After all, I am a queen of multi-tasking – and in my mind, I'm still listening to her. Or am I?

As lawyers, we spend a lot of time thinking about what we're going to say – in a meeting with a client, in a letter to the other side, to the judge in court. But what about listening? I believe that listening is undervalued in our profession and it is with highly developed listening skills you can transform from a good lawyer to a great lawyer.

Here are some tips to help you become a better listener:

Use a beginner's mind. It's easier to be curious when you don't know anything. Think of the wonder of a child, and all those "why?" questions. What can you gain from having conversations from such an open place?

Get out of your own head. Some of us have a chatterbox between our ears and this makes it hard to hear what others are saying. Shift the focus away from your inner thoughts so you're present to the conversation. This simple but powerful action of intentionally listening not only opens you up to greater learning, it makes others feel more valued too.

Stop everything else you're doing. I'm a knitter and I like to knit while talking on the phone so it's hard to acknowledge the truth of this next statement. If you're doing anything other than listening to the person talking, you're not fully listening. I can get away with this in conversation with my Mom, but it doesn't work so well with clients.

Turn off the gadgets. Even if your phone doesn't ring, your pager doesn't beep, your cell doesn't vibrate and your blackberry doesn't buzz just having these devices turned on can be distracting. Of course, it's even worse when one does interrupt.

Make eye contact. If you're face-to-face, be face-to-face. Don't look at a client's file when you're talking to them, no matter how much more comfortable this can be.

Listen beyond the words. As lawyers we know that discovery and court transcripts are important, but they don't tell the whole story. What's the emotion behind the words? What does body language and tone of voice say? What are you picking up on that is not being said verbally? It's one thing to remember what was said verbatim, and quite another to have taken in the full person.

Ask about feelings. We lawyers are good at gathering the factual information. And sometimes our clients are so caught up in their emotions it's hard to collect basic information. But for those times when people aren't emotive, ask. You'll learn more about what's important to them, and why.

Don't interrupt. Well, you're still going to make relevant objections! But otherwise, shut up. You will have your say – just listen for now.

Let silence be part of what you hear. It's okay to give space for silence. There's no need to fill gaps in conversation. Check out what hangs in the air when there is silence.

Let someone else take notes. If resources permit, have someone come with you to meetings or court so they can take notes and you can focus on listening. See how it changes your experience.

As you practice these and other listening skills at work and home, notice how people respond to feeling truly heard. For me, it keeps the peace at home and, more importantly, I feel more connected to my partner.