

Be an effective LISTENER

We've got 10 ways to help you improve your listening skills:

- 1 Let the other person speak.** When you're talking, you're not able to listen. Interrupting or criticizing the speaker hampers the communication process and can frustrate workers. "Sometimes when we're supposed to be listening, we're agitated and we think we need to talk," said veteran safety expert, professional speaker and *Safety+Health* columnist Richard Hawk. "We need to do something. But you *are* doing something. Listening isn't passive – it's very active."
- 2 Maintain eye contact.** When listening, don't break eye contact with the speaker, Hawk says. This signals to them that you're fully engaged and interested in what they're saying.
- 3 Limit distractions.** Distractions in the workplace are numerous. They include electronic devices, machinery and even personal issues, according to the National Safety Council. Conduct meetings in a quiet setting with cellphones turned off to improve listening.
- 4 Ask questions.** After listening to a worker's concerns, ask "further" questions by pulling tidbits from the conversation and asking for a deeper explanation.
- 5 Be mindful.** Hawk says a key to his growth as a listener was reading about and practicing mindfulness, which can help you learn "how to pay attention to what's going on in your environment without judging."
- 6 Be aware of your emotions.** Keeping your emotions under control can improve your ability to listen, NSC says. Anger, fear, suspicion, jealousy and distrust can be barriers to beneficial conversations.
- 7 Take notes.** If you want to take notes during a conversation, ask the speaker first. "I say, 'Is it OK if I take notes?'" Hawk said. "It means I'm going to be using this information later."
- 8 Act on a conversation.** When learning of a safety issue, moving the conversation along will advance a worker's trust in you. Be sure to let them know their concerns are being reviewed and taken seriously, communications consultant and author Leslie Shore says.
- 9 Focus on improving.** "No one is born knowing how to listen," Shore said. "So, we have to take people where they are and let them grow from there."
- 10 Practice, practice, practice.** Whether you're at a dinner party or at work, listening is a skill that can be honed. "You can purposefully practice everything," Hawk said. "It's like exercising."

These tips are from "Be an effective listener," published in the December 2022 issue of *S+H*.