CHAPTER 2:
DEVELOPING STRONG LISTENING AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS

A Guide to Customer Service Skills for the Service Desk Professional

Third Edition
In this chapter you will learn:

• The characteristics and benefits of active listening

• How to avoid the distractions that prevent good listening

• What to listen for

• How to build rapport and trust with customers

• How to identify and understand customer communication styles
Two of the most basic and important skills service desk analysts must possess are:

- **Listening skills**
- **Communication skills**

Use to communicate effectively with:

- **Customers**
- **Coworkers**
- **Managers**
- **Other service providers such as internal support groups and vendors**
TOPIC 1: THE POWER OF ACTIVE LISTENING
• **Listening** – Making an effort to hear something; paying attention

• **Active listening** – Participating in a conversation and giving the speaker a sense of confidence that he or she is being heard

• **Passive listening** – Simply taking in information and shows little regard for the speaker
“MOST PEOPLE DO NOT LISTEN WITH THE INTENT TO UNDERSTAND; THEY LISTEN WITH THE INTENT TO REPLY.”

— Stephen R. Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change*
Active Listeners
• Ask questions and respond to the speaker
• Verify understanding
• Pay attention to what is being said and how it is being said

Passive Listeners
• Taking in information without questions
• Accept information at face value
• Show little regard for the feeling with which the information is being communicated
Ask questions and respond to the speaker

- Ask appropriate and relevant questions
- Assimilate and acknowledge the information the customer is providing
- Use checklists to diagnose and methodically identify solutions
- Important skills include:
  - Knowing what questions to ask
  - Know when to question the answers received
• Listen to how customers use jargon and acronyms to determine their skill level

• **Jargon** – The specialized or technical language used by a trade or profession

• **Acronym** – A word formed from the first letters of a series of words

• Good listening enables you to:
  • Learn the business language that customers are using to describe their work
  • Understand the impact when the technology is failing
  • Understand and adjust to your customer’s needs – no matter what their skill level
Knowing when not to ask questions while still being responsive is a nuance of customer service

- Policies and procedures help

When customers are angry or upset, simply listen and respond to what the customer is saying in the least intrusive way possible

- Face-to-face, maintain eye contact, nod your head

- Over the telephone, use acknowledging and encouraging phrases
  - “Uh-huh,” “I see,” “Go on,” “I understand”
Verify understanding

- Verify that:
  - You understand what the customer said
  - The customer understands your reply

- Look and listen for signs of understanding

- Ask questions to determine the customer’s level of understanding:
  - “Would you like me to repeat that?”
  - “Would you like to go through that again?”
  - “How does that sound?”

- Paraphrase - To restate the information given by the customer using slightly different words
BEING AN ACTIVE LISTENER

PART 8 OF 10

• Verifying understanding:
  • Enables you to satisfy customers by meeting their needs
  • Promotes a good working relationship with other service providers

• Asking questions is the only way to determine the actual source of the incident

• Choose your questions carefully and actively listen to determine your customer’s needs
• Pay attention to what is being said and how it is being said:

• The “what” component is the incident the customer is experiencing or the information or instructions that he or she needs

• The “how” component is any emotion the customer is experiencing as a result of having an incident or not having what they need

• Listening actively enables you to
  • Hear both the incident and emotion
  • Acknowledge both
• A basic human need is to be understood
• Acknowledging customers’ emotions addresses that need
• When you don’t acknowledge emotions
  • Customers may become more upset or angry
  • Customers may be unable to actively participate in problem solving
• Being a good listener requires concentration
• Communicating that you are listening requires thought and caring
• Take responsibility and determine why if a customer does not perceive that you are listening
BENEFITS OF ACTIVE LISTENING

Active listening helps you:

• Establish rapport with a customer
  • Listen for and respectfully use their name
• Determine the customer’s emotional state
• Build trust
• Keep the conversation on track
• Determine situations that require management involvement
• Show customers that they are important and that you want to satisfy their needs
AVOIDING DISTRACTIONS THAT PREVENT GOOD LISTENING

Factors that influence the ability to be a good listener

• Distractions and interruptions
• “Third ear” syndrome
• Jumping ahead
  • Listening is NOT waiting for your turn to talk
• Emotional filters
• Mental side trips
• Talking
Take note of the key points the customer is making

• Who is reporting an incident or service request?
• What product or service is involved?
• When is the incident occurring?
• Where is the incident occurring?
• How severe or widespread is the incident?
• How is the incident affecting the customer?
• Why is determined once a solution is identified
Skillful listening enables you to:

• Detect any emotion the customer is experiencing
• Obtain the details of the incident or service request
• Graciously receive any complaints
• Detect any misconceptions
• Learn ways that products and services can be enhanced and improved
• Gain insight that can be used to improve the quality of services
• Listening involves keeping your eyes open as well as your ears
  • Look for nonverbal cues

• Over the telephone, silence may mean the customer is confused or disagrees

• Avoid the temptation to view silence as acceptance
Good listening:

• Requires discipline

• Begins with a willingness to fully comprehend and retain everything that customers are saying

• Does not begin and end with the conversations you have with customers

• Listening is a skill that you can use and apply on a daily basis in all areas of your life!
TOPIC 2: COMMUNICATING WITH CUSTOMERS
COMMUNICATING WITH CUSTOMERS

- Communication - The exchange of thoughts, messages, and information

- Communication requires:
  - Skills such as listening, speaking, and writing
  - The desire to convey information in a meaningful and respectful way

- Knowing what to say and how to say it takes practice and patience
• What you say is a simple matter of knowing and selecting the right words to use for a given situation

• How you say it requires an understanding of how people communicate
BUILDING RAPPORT AND TRUST WITH CUSTOMERS

PART 2 OF 8

38% Tone of voice
7% Verbal communication
85% Tone of voice
15% Verbal communication

55% Nonverbal communication
Face-to-Face

(0% Nonverbal communication)
Telephone
• “It’s against our policy”
  • State your response as a positive
  • “Our policy states…”

• “That’s not my job”
  • It is your job to determine who can
  • “What I can do is…”

• “That’s not the way we do things”
  • Offer a positive option that addresses the customer’s need
  • “I need for you to fill out a form… and then I can…”
• “There is nothing else I can do” or “I don’t know what else I can tell you”
  • There is always something you can do
  • When in doubt, offer to let the customer speak with your manager

• “You need to look this up on our Web site”
  • Replace “You” with “Have you,” “Let me,” or “Let’s”
  • “Let me show you how to locate that information on our Web site.”
• “You set it up wrong”

• Replace “You” with “Let’s”

• “Let’s look at the system parameters and make sure they are set up correctly.”

• If the customer figures out that he made a mistake, offer empathy

• “We don’t support that. You need to call…”

• Use a positively stated phrase

• “What I can do is give you the telephone number of the group that supports this product.”
• “We’re swamped. I can’t get to that until later.”
  • Give an honest estimate or communicate the terms of any existing SLA
  • “Per our SLA with your department, this request will be completed within 48 hours.”

• “What’s your point?”
  • Ask the customer in a respectful way to clarify what he or she means
  • “Would you explain that again? I’m not sure I understand.”
• “Whoa! Slow down!”
  • Get the customer’s attention and respectfully ask him or her to slow down
  • “Mr. Lee, could I ask you to slow down just a bit so that I can be sure I am getting all of your information correctly.”

• “You’ve got to be kidding!”
  • Consider the customer’s request and positively and respectfully let the customer know what you can do
  • “What I can do is take control of your system…”
It's against our policy.
That's not my job.
That's not the way we do things.
There's nothing else I can do.
You need to look this up on our Web site.
You set it up wrong.
We don't support that. You need to call...
We're swamped. I can't get to that until later.
What's your point?
Whoa! Slow down!
You've got to be kidding!
• Nonverbal communication - The exchange of information in a form other than words
  • Facial expressions, body language, clothing
• Over the telephone, nonverbal qualities have no impact whatsoever
• Face-to-face, they make up over half of our conversation
• People read meaning into nonverbal cues
ZITS

UNspoken COMMUNICATION

Girls

- Check out hair
- Evaluate skin
- Judge makeup
- Inspect jewelry
- I've seen that top
- Is that a real tan?
- Compare figures
- Mane or cutie?
- Cleavage or breast?
- Legos or jeans?
- Have you shaved?
- Are your shoes on or off?
- Beads or ankle bracelet?

GUYs

- Hi

By JERRY SCOTT & JIM BORGMAN

Ch. 2: Listening & Communication Skills
• Learn to use your nonverbal vocabulary in the same positive way you use words

• Be respectful, be attentive, and “listen” to a speaker’s nonverbal cues

• Observe and consider emulating the nonverbal techniques used by someone that you believe is an excellent communicator

• Be aware of the culture at the company where you work or when traveling to another country
Factors that make up your tone of voice:

- Energy
- Rate of speech
- Volume and pitch
Energy:

• The energy in your voice reflects your personality and attitude

• Facial expression mirrors mood and mood mirrors facial expression

• Approach all interactions with customers as if they were standing in front of you
  • Put a smile on your face, focus your attention on what the customer is saying, be as responsive as possible

• False enthusiasm can be just as offensive and distracting as no enthusiasm
  • Be yourself!
• Place a mirror on your desk at eye level to
  • Monitor your facial expressions
  • Ensure you are sitting straight and practicing good posture
• Take a quick look in the mirror before you answer the telephone to ensure you have a relaxed and pleasant facial expression
Rate of speech:

- A normal rate of speech is about 125 words per minute

- Speaking too quickly or too slowly can:
  - Be distracting to customers
  - Affect their ability to listen

- Determine your normal rate of speech by recording yourself

- Strive to adapt to the needs of your customers
Volume:

- Loud enough that the people involved in your conversation can hear you
- Not so loud that it disturbs the people around you
- Service desks can be loud
  - If things get too loud, politely signal your coworkers
  - Graciously accept and respond to any signals you receive
Pitch:

- Refers to the highness or lowness of vocal tone
- Generally speaking:
  - High-pitched voices are viewed as weak
  - Low-pitched voices are viewed as strong
- Voice pitch is influenced by:
  - The way you hold your head
  - The way you breathe
  - Your posture
Coupled with the right words, the tone of voice you use can dramatically change the message you communicate to a customer.

- “What do you expect me to do about it?”
- “How would you like to see this situation resolved?”

Customers recognize and respond to your “words,” whether they are spoken or communicated through nonverbal cues or your tone of voice.
Customers are people and people are different

They have different

- Personalities
- Ways of handling change and stress
- Communication styles

Determine a customer’s communication style by listening to:

- The information they provide
- The responses they give when you ask questions
Aggressive people:

- Aggressive people like to be in control

- Give them time to tell their story and then jump into the conversation when they pause or ask you a question

- To get their attention, respectfully call out their name and then state specifically what you can do

- Always restate the information they give you and their opinions of the incident
Chatterers

• Chatterers can be fun, but they can also be a challenge when things are busy

• Avoid encouraging them

• Take control of the conversation by asking closed-ended questions
Chatterers:

• Closed-ended questions – prompt short answers such as “yes” or “no”
  • Have you ever been able to access this system?

• Open-ended questions – cannot be answered with a “yes” or “no” response
  • What other applications did you have open when this incident occurred?
Complainers:

• Complainer behavior:
  • Whine and object but cannot always identify reasons why a solution will not work
  • Cannot or will not take responsibility for problem solving
  • Empathize but do not necessarily sympathize with their complaint
  • Paraphrase their main points
  • Make sure you understand the specific nature of their complaint
  • Ask them how they would like things to turn out
Know-it-alls:

- Know-it-alls believe they know everything and tend to resist advice or information
- Suggest alternatives without attacking their opinions
  - “In my experience, this will work.”
- Be respectful when asking questions and acknowledge their knowledge
- Use phrases that engage them in the problem-solving process without rejecting their perspective
  - “What if . . .” “Let’s try this”
Passive people

- Passive people avoid controversy at all costs and often cannot or will not talk if information is needed.
- Ask open-ended questions to encourage a prolonged response.
- Do not feel you have to fill the silence when waiting for them to respond.
  - Wait for them to answer.
  - Resist the temptation to jump in and put words in their mouth.
- Listen responsively when they are talking.
  - If they perceive you are not listening, they may resume their silence.
SPEAKING THE CUSTOMER’S LANGUAGE

• Customers tend to speak business

• Analysts tend to speak technology

• To keep communications on track and to avoid alienating customers:
  • Avoid jargon and acronyms
  • Ask clarifying questions to avoid invalid assumptions

• The best way to serve your customer is to
  • Understand their business
  • Learn to speak its language
TOPIC 3:
CHAPTER SUMMARY
• Listening is the most important skill for a support person

• Active listening involves:
  • Participating in a conversation by asking questions
  • Responding to the speaker
  • Verifying understanding

• Good listening requires discipline and a willingness to fully comprehend:
  • What customers are saying
  • How they are saying it

• Listening is a skill you can use and apply daily in all areas of your life
• Communication is the exchange of information
• It requires:
  • Skills such as listening, speaking, and writing
  • The desire to convey information in a meaningful and respectful way
• What you say—the words you choose to use—greatly influences the response you receive from customers
• How you say it—the nonverbal ways you communicate and your tone of voice—can say as much as your words
• People read meaning into your nonverbal cues
• Customers have different communication styles
• Determine your customers’ communication style by listening
• Determine your customers’ response by learning to speak their language
• Most people consider technology a tool
• The best way to serve customers is to understand their business and learn to speak its language
  - You can then translate that language into your language, the language of technology
ALWAYS REMEMBER,
“PEOPLE DO NOT CARE HOW MUCH YOU KNOW UNTIL THEY KNOW HOW MUCH YOU CARE.”

— John Maxwell
CHAPTER 2 QUESTIONS