



AIA Best Practices: The art of empathetic listening

Excerpted from The Architect's Handbook of Professional Practice

Summary

Good listening skills are learned over many years. You may not master listening skills from this Best Practice, but it will point out the most important factors that attribute to good communication and listening.

Listening with empathy

The essence of good listening is to listen with empathy, which requires you to view the interaction from the other person's point of view. When you try to put yourself in another's shoes, it is much easier to understand that individual's message and the motivation behind it. Empathetic listening requires that you lay aside your personal agenda, your pride, and your defensiveness, and enter into a discussion with your client as a vulnerable, teachable, imperfect person.

The strategies described below are the keys to being an empathetic listener. Learn to cultivate them in your interactions with clients, and you may find it much easier to achieve your professional and business goals.

Check your ego at the door. Empathetic listening requires a humble attitude. Professional pride is the biggest obstacle to being a good listener. Learn to focus more on what *the client* has to say than on what *you* have to say.

Acknowledge your biases. Everyone has a frame of reference. Your frame of reference will always be different from your client's.

Establish a "plane of connection." Attitude is not just a mental disposition. Empathetic listening requires a horizontal connection with the speaker, so that your communication takes place between equals.

Avoid commentary. Resist the urge to evaluate every statement your client makes for its validity or usefulness. Learn to listen without judging either the speaker or the content of the message.

Show interest. Although it may seem insincere, adopting an interested posture (leaning in, eyes front, not preoccupied) will help you become interested, even if you find the subject or the speaker less than scintillating.

It's not all about you. Resist the urge to share your own stories, however relevant they may seem to you. Especially resist the urge to top each point with an anecdote about how the same thing happened to you before, only much worse.

Give affirmation. Learn to use words and actions that affirm the speaker without necessarily expressing agreement. Affirmation means letting a speaker know his or her message is being received, not that you agree with every word.

Take notes. Taking notes is almost always permissible, unless clients specifically tell you their comments are “off the record.” If you do take notes, you’ll be surprised at how much better you remember the conversation later, even without referring to them.

Be in the moment. Empathetic listening means paying attention while your client is speaking to you, not thinking back on something that happened earlier in the day (or the meeting), and not looking ahead to something that might happen later. Being in the moment requires your full participation in the conversation taking place.

Respond appropriately. When it is time for you to respond, reinforce the communication process by responding appropriately. Appropriate responses include restating the speaker’s main points, acknowledging actions expected of you or your firm, and asking clarifying questions. Inappropriate responses include reciprocal attacks, defensive posturing, and changing the subject to something of greater interest to you.

About the contributor

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