

# Soft Skills at Work: Listening carefully shows respect for colleagues, customers

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One of my favorite radio broadcasts is StoryCorps, which airs Fridays on National Public Radio's "Morning Edition." StoryCorps, an independent nonprofit, has helped more than 40,000 Americans record brief stories.

On Nov. 27, StoryCorps sponsored the second annual National Day of Listening where people pledged to spend an hour interviewing and recording family, friends or other community members. The intent was to capture life memories and to pay full attention to what another person had to say.

This type of listening is essential in the workplace as well. Donna Safko, owner of Mudpuddle Creations in Linthicum, told me why she thinks it is so important.

"I learn by listening," Donna said. "When I went into business, I was new to that world. I was always listening for how businesspeople managed their growth or answers to problems I saw showing up. But sometimes I've been a good listener even if I'm not interested. It's a matter of respect."

Employers expect that workers will show respect for others by paying attention and not interrupting. But Kevin Murnane, senior sales manager for the Marriott Hotels at Arundel Mills, has often observed people not listening well.

"It's all about manners," he said. "It isn't very prevalent in society today. People talk on top of you in meetings and you can have a tough time finishing your thought."

Kevin has noticed this lack of manners in all age groups. He said people interrupt with excuses such as, "I'll lose my train of thought."

"It is an instant society," he said. "They don't care who is talking, and the louder they speak the more attention they think they'll get. It's rude."

Poor listening skills affect both companies and a person's career. Donna explained how employers react when this problem occurs.

"If you have employees who keep coming back, just talk and don't listen, they think they know more than you do, and don't care what you have to say," she

said. "That's how it is perceived by the employer. If employees don't listen, they don't respect us. They don't realize that conversations are give-and-take."

Kevin talked about the bottom-line impact on companies when employees fail to give customers their full attention.

"You won't get the business," he said. "People recognize if it's rude. Customers think, 'If you don't listen, how will you know what my needs are?' "

Donna, who works in Web and graphic design, elaborated on Kevin's point.

"Listening is extremely important in customer service," she said. "Customers want to be heard and given the opportunity to express their views.

"In my field, a lot of designers just want to create what they feel is beautiful and clients become discouraged. The designer won't hear what the client needs so the end result doesn't reach the client's goal.

"I'm a service organization," Donna said. "I need to help them, not just provide what I think is great."

Kevin also talked about responding to customer needs. He recalled a time where careful listening resulted in a long-term stay at the hotel.

"We do surveys, mingle with guests to find out how their stay is, what they like and changes they would like to see," he said. "We found out that one guest wanted to have a boom box in the fitness center so people exercising could hear more energetic music. The next day they had a boom box. The guest stayed nine more months. We would not have found that out without asking and actively listening."

This skill is essential for people to move ahead in their careers, too.

"It all starts with the interview," Kevin said. "If you listen well, you set yourself up well. The interviewer can determine if you would be good with clients. Too many people ramble on and don't realize that communication is a two-way process. Many people only demonstrate half of this process."

Listening carefully and not interrupting are important long after the job is secured. But Donna observed that people can become complacent once they have been in a position for some time.

"When you think you know everything, you tend not to listen," she said.

That is a caution worth remembering - both for the company's sake and your own.

## **CONNECT! Coalition**

Planning is under way to present a workplace skills boot camp for high school juniors and seniors in April.

Participating students will attend workshops designed to improve soft skills that all employers want. The boot camp will include a do's and don'ts how to dress fashion show put on by the South River High School Theater Group.

A limited number of exhibitor tables will be available. Watch for more information in the coming months.

Marcia Hall, founder of Reputation COUNTS, is a workplace behavior trainer and author of "Jumpstart Your Job: 12 Simple Ways to Shift Your Career into High Gear." She is a member of the CONNECT! Coalition, the Anne Arundel County group of organizations dedicated to promoting the importance of essential workplace skills, and can be reached at [marcia@reputationcounts.com](mailto:marcia@reputationcounts.com).

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