

The **ART** of **LISTENING**

By Erik Lilla, Metro Stars Gymnastics

The Art of Listening

In the early days of Metro Stars Gymnastics, every Wednesday night I would overhear the mother of one of our more spirited gymnasts say to her daughter, "Honey, you were given two ears and one mouth so that you can listen twice as much as you speak." The little girl then proceeded to chatter away during her entire class. While the message may have been lost on her, I heard it loud and clear – stop talking and start listening!



The dangers of not listening were clear to me. When people express their point of view, but feel ignored or dismissed, it drives a wedge into the relationship. If we do that enough times, then no matter how much we pay an employee or how good we are at coaching gymnastics, we're going to lose the relationship. At the opposite end of the spectrum, if we truly commit to listening, we'll spend our days building strong, lasting connections with our staff, our customers, and our athletes. Over time, and with lots of practice, I came to the realization that one of the most important attributes of a great coach is the ability to listen and to make others feel heard.

Eliminate Distractions

The first step to be a great listener is to eliminate the distractions. There are two types of distractions to watch out for – external and internal.

External distractions take many forms – phones, crowded spaces, interruptions, etc. Whenever possible, set yourself up for success by finding a quiet place to have the conversation, and then, turn off your phone.

Internal distractions are things going on inside our heads. Is your mind racing because you are trying to solve the staffing issue tonight? Are you stressed out because the bank just denied your loan application? If your mind is wandering you won't be able to focus all your attention to listening.

To overcome internal distractions, we must quiet our brain. We begin by taking three deep breaths, and follow it by silently stating our intentions, "My goal is to listen to you and really try to understand your point of view." If that isn't enough to gather your focus, sometimes it's best to share what's going on with the other person. Ask them if you can schedule a time a little later so that you can give them all your attention.

Reflective Listening

Once you have eliminated the distractions it's time to start listening. When I set out to improve my listening skills, I discovered that most of time I wasn't really listening. Instead I was just waiting for my turn to talk. To get out of that habit I began to practice reflective listening, where every once in awhile I would paraphrase the things I heard. All of a sudden, they expressed excitement that I understood them, and they moved quickly on to the next talking point. In the event I didn't quite sum it up correctly, they would clarify their



feelings. I would then paraphrase the new information and if I understood it correctly, they would let me know! Reflective listening takes practice. At the lowest level you parrot back exactly what the person says. For example, a coach says to you "I need tomorrow off because I have a big test at school on Friday." You then reply, "What I heard is that you need tomorrow off because you have a big test at school on Friday." Even though it feels silly to repeat it back, it gives the coach piece of mind that you at least heard what they said.

As you get better at reflective listening, you will be able to rephrase the content and reflect the emotions. In the previous example when the coach says to you, "I need tomorrow off because I have a big test at school on Friday," you might reply with "What I'm hearing is that you're feeling stressed about your test on Friday and would like tomorrow night off to study?" The coach now knows that not only did you hear her, but you really understood her perspective.

Body Language

A healthy portion of all communication is non-verbal, and listening is no different. To set yourself up for success it's important to be aware of what your "saying" when your mouth is closed. The most important thing to do is to make eye contact. Look at the speaker directly in the eyes for most of the conversation. When you do break the gaze (uninterrupted eye contact is creepy), be sure to keep your attention on the speaker.

Some other tips include leaning forward slightly toward the speaker, nodding your head in agreement (whether you agree or not), and mirroring the speaker's posture. You may find that you do these things naturally, but by being aware of them you can elevate your skills and make the speaker even more comfortable.

Finally, try to remove any barriers between you and the speaker. A desk, a vault table, or even a clipboard serves as a physical barrier, and by removing it the speaker will subconsciously know that you're listening at a deeper level.

Listening = Understanding

When I focused on listening, I developed a deeper understanding of what was happening in my gym. That understanding gave me the opportunity to make better decisions, which ultimately helped strengthen and grow

our programs, our processes, and most importantly, our people. My staff began sharing more often, and we were able to collaborate more effectively. When I ran into a customer issue, not only could I resolve it more quickly, but I ended up learning something too. There was also a trickle-down effect, and before long the staff were really working on listening to each other, to the customers, and to their athletes.

"MY GOAL is to listen to you
AND REALLY TRY TO UNDERSTAND
YOUR POINT OF VIEW."
The Listening Mantra

Put It Into Practice

To start your journey and improve your listening skills, select one or two of the strategies and put them into practice. For even better results, tell people what you're doing and ask them to hold you accountable. As you get comfortable, keep slowly adding more and before you know it you'll be using your two ears and one mouth so that you can listen twice as much as you speak!

Meet ERIK



Every morning Erik jumps out of bed in pursuit of his life's purpose – To coach and inspire others so he can celebrate their success!! From working with athletes at the gym, to mentoring our staff at Metro Stars Gymnastics,

and engaging with other leading entrepreneurs, Erik looks forward to every opportunity to wear his coaching hat.

Erik and his wife Elizabeth co-founded Metro Stars Gymnastics over 12 years ago in Omaha, Nebraska, where they've grown their initial enrollment of 5 athletes, to well over 2500 weekly gymnasts. That rapid growth has landed Metro Stars on the Inc. 5000 list of the country's most quickly growing companies in both 2017 and 2018. In his spare time, Erik runs a taxi service for his four children, Katie, Juliette, Samantha, and Charlie.