

Listening and Grant-Seeking

Susan Elliot
TheListeningResource.com

As grant-seekers we spend a lot of time *telling* others what we do, why we do it and why we should do more of it. Funders want to know, donors want to know, and so does the community.

Granted, good speaking skills are critical for success in all aspects of grant-making. But they're only half of the equation. Just as critical is the activity on the other side of the communication coin: *listening*.

- When we're not listening to our constituency we may not design a grant proposal that best meets their needs.
- When we're not listening to community partners we may write a grant for redundant services.
- When we don't listen to staff and volunteers we may design a grant-funded program that exceeds their capacity to implement it.

It's true that many organizations maintain close contact with the people they serve and with community partners and funders. Many would say they spend a lot of time listening. But not listening in a way that turns what we hear into meaningful grant-related activities and successful programs means we're not really listening.

Listening to constituents

One of the worse things we can do is ask constituents what they think but then not act on what they tell us--whether that's a small thing like changing program hours to better meet client needs or developing a whole new policy that involves a myriad of programmatic changes. When we listen in a superficial or patronizing way people stop wanting to share their thoughts and feelings with us and we miss out on insights that could make a big difference in program effectiveness and the ability to attract and keep grant funding.

To be meaningful, listening must be systematic, structured and intentional. This is listening done with prepared questions, generally through focus groups, in-depth interviews and evaluation stories. These methods require thoughtful planning, focused question design, careful selection of participants, and a systematic way of summarizing what is heard. When done properly, these listening strategies signal a willingness to take what we hear seriously. They also generate the information needed to:

- Identify genuine constituent needs
- Justify funding needs to grant-makers
- Design programs that meet constituent needs
- Increase program effectiveness
- Meet funder reporting requirements
- Capture hard to measure outcomes
- Justify continuation funding

Listening to each other

It's been said that listening is the single most undervalued and underdeveloped skill within organizations. Many bad decisions and ineffective grant-funded programs can be traced in some way to poor listening.

When we don't listen to each other we miss opportunities to capitalize on local and internal talent, to understand best how to implement effective programs, and to work with partners toward a common (and generally more fundable) mission.

We can miss out on insights and suggestions from staff and program officers that could make the difference between a model program that others want to replicate and a one cycle funded program that produces anemic results at best. We can also miss out on what funders are really trying to tell us about how to improve our programs and make changes that lead to continuation grants.

Suggestions for skillful listening

Whether listener to constituents, staff, partners, or funders, there are many ways to become a better listener. No one is born with this talent but, with practice, we can all get better at it.

Here are ten suggestions excerpted from Mark Brady's book, *Right Listening*, you might want to consider:

1. Promote an atmosphere of trust. There are many ways to establish trust, but perhaps the most effective is to be genuinely trustworthy. Many people intuitively sense an authentic personality and rarely betray that trust.

2. Shut up and listen. When we interrupt, the unwitting message we send to the speaker is: "What I have to say is more important than what you have to say." By learning to hold our tongue and become genuinely curious about what others are saying, we greatly improve our listening skills.

3. Give up control. Many people feel that giving up control in a conversation is a sign of weakness. But the biblical injunction to "Seek first to understand, then to be understood" is excellent advice for those intent on developing good listening skills.

4. Cultivate "Beginner's Ear." "Beginner's ear" is a way of paying attention to the present moment with openness and curiosity—hearing it for the first time even though we think we've heard it before. Neuroscientists have shown that the more we practice this technique, the better our brain gets at it.

5. Double check for meaning. It is difficult not to overlay our own biases onto what we hear. One way to counter the process is to regularly double check for accuracy by paraphrasing what we hear and the meaning we make of it. Skilled listeners endeavor to reflect back a speaker's truth and deeper reality, not simply a version of their own.

6. Listen for differences. When we listen to others, often what we listen for are the things we understand or agree with. A skillful listener deliberately seeks out and pays attention to the way others are different.

7. Ask specific clarifying questions. Author and researcher Larry Barker said, "Words have no meaning; people have meaning." When we engage in dialogue, we frequently speak thoughts off the top of our heads. First thoughts are like first drafts—they require a good editing to clarify meaning. Asking clarifying questions can help a speaker bring their subject into clear focus.

8. Monitor for inconsistencies. Voice, tone, and body language can contradict spoken words. Skillful listeners learn to recognize inconsistencies and get to the bottom of them in a compassionate way that does not provoke defensiveness.

9. Be mindful of age, race, and gender bias. Over 100 documented cognitive biases can color everything we see, hear, and think. Skillful listeners examine how they listen to various age groups and different races or genders, then work to correct any discrepancies accordingly.

10. Cultivate patience. Skillful listeners possess a ready willingness to suspend self-expression while they focus on others without a pressing need for them to be succinct, speedy, or clear in what they have to say.

The bottom line: listening can make the difference between solid, dependable funding that supports successful programming and a pattern of endlessly pursuing one dead end funding source after another. Besides, listening is the highest form of respect we can show to each other and those we set out to serve. There's no down side to working toward getting better at it.