

Want to be an Effective Advocate? Be an Effective Listener

Do you want your voice to be heard? If so, then exercise your ability to listen.

It is the advocates' inclination to speak out on a cause and be heard. After all, how else are decision makers expected to know what it is you and the brain injury community want and need? The twist here is that in order to be an effective advocate, one must be an effective listener.

In some circumstances, the decision maker may not be familiar with your need or want. Or, they may be marginally familiar with it. Or, they may have an understanding of the matter that is different from yours. Whatever the case, these decision makers may need clarification. To gain clarification, they may ask questions. The advocate needs to hear the question in order to effectively address it – and, as a result, make the advocacy effort effective. This cannot be done without effective listening.

Better listening improves relationships, lessens misunderstandings and enhances understanding.

How can one become an effective listener? Consider the CARESS Model as presented by Tony Alessandra, Ph.D. and Phil Hunsaker, Ph.D. in their book “Communicating at Work.”

- **Concentrate:** Focus your attention on the speaker and only the speaker.
- **Acknowledge:** When you acknowledge your speaker, you demonstrate your interest and attention. Your acknowledgement encourages the speaker and actually helps the speaker send a clearer message.
- **Research:** Gather information about your speaker, their interests and objectives. This will help you prompt a more in-depth conversation and respond to the speaker in a way that promotes communication.
- **Exercise Emotional Control:** Deal with highly charged messages in a thoughtful manner and wait until the entire message is received before reacting. Regardless of how provocative the message is, you must concentrate on understanding it first.
- **Sense the Nonverbal Message:** Try to understand the vocal and visual messages as well as the words being spoken.
- **Structure:** Structure and organize the information as you receive it. This is what you should do with the time generated by the gap between speaking and hearing speeds. By organizing the information as you receive it, you will improve your retention and understanding of the material.

Listening is an important factor in maximizing advocacy success. It can make the difference between success and failure. Listening can tear down the walls and bridges that stand between you and decision makers. Harness listening skills and maximize your chances of advocacy success.