



## Listening and Questioning Skills for Exceptional Success



Written by:

**Mark Hunter**  
**The Sales Hunter**

# Author Profile



*Mark Hunter is known for his high energy presentations that result in measurable ROI for his clients.*

## Mark Hunter The Sales Hunter

Before Mark Hunter “The Sales Hunter” began his sales consulting business in 1998, he spent 18 years honing his skills in the sales and marketing divisions of three Fortune 100 companies. Hunter’s expertise is in helping companies maximise their price by implementing strategies that engage customers and allows them to see real value for which they are willing to pay. He works closely with his clients to ensure the work he delivers is applicable to their customers. His dedication to customisation is reflected in the amount of research he does. Hunter travels globally more than 220 days a year, working with industry leaders and numerous Fortune 500 companies.

Along with his consulting work, Hunter is a regular contributor to a wide number of publications with information and articles on the subject of maximising price and minimising discounting strategies. His experience and opinions can also be found on his popular blog and website, [www.TheSalesHunter.com](http://www.TheSalesHunter.com). Businesspeople from nearly 50 countries visit his website daily, making his insights applicable to markets around the world.

Address: 15633 Underwood Circle, Omaha, NE, USA 68118

Phone: 1-402-445-2110

Email: [mark@thesaleshunter.com](mailto:mark@thesaleshunter.com)

Website: [www.TheSalesHunter.com](http://www.TheSalesHunter.com)



# Listening and Questioning Skills for Exceptional Success

- 2 Introduction
- 3 Why Don't We Listen Effectively?
- 5 How to Use Your Body Language to Your Advantage
- 11 Engaging the Other Party and Getting Them Involved
- 15 Effective Questioning Techniques
- 17 Using Questions to Reveal the Needs Necessary to Reach a Solution
- 20 Conclusion



## Introduction

Listening is often the most talked about business skill, but unfortunately also the one that is least developed. We assume we are good listeners. The truth is that listening takes a tremendous amount of intentional effort, and few people do it really well. When we strengthen our listening skills, and partner them with effective questioning skills, the results are phenomenal.

This module will equip you with listening and questioning skills that - when consistently used - will favourably impact your personal and professional life.

## Why Don't We Listen Effectively?

Before we dig into the heart of this Learning Module, answer the question for yourself: Why do you think people do not listen effectively (including yourself)?

Take a few minutes to jot down at least 5 answers that come to your mind:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

I am willing to bet that your answers will reflect what is listed below. The reality is, that identifying the things that hamper our listening skills is not overly difficult. It's overcoming those challenges that involves work. The work involves not just learning the mechanics of listening. Even bigger than the mechanics is re-training your attitude and mindset to be willing to listen. We will address both of these in this Learning Module.

We do not listen well because...

1. **We do not care**

This is a tough one to admit, but sometimes we don't listen because we are just not interested in what someone is saying. It isn't that we don't care about the actual person; it's that we are not engaged enough in what they are talking about to devote much attention to it.

2. **We are distracted**

If you are under a lot of pressure, particularly in your business life, it's easy to become distracted and not hear what the other person is saying. You are thinking about the bottom line, the sales numbers you want to hit, the administrative details you have to complete, and various other matters that demand your attention.

3. **We disagree with what is being said**

When what someone is saying contradicts either what you believe or what you know to be true, it is extremely difficult to hear what they're saying. Worse than not hearing what the other person is saying when we disagree with them, is the tendency to hear them, but in a very distorted manner, shifting what they're saying to what we want to believe.

And the number one reason we do not listen well?

#### 4. **We are waiting to talk**

As someone is speaking, you are not focusing on the actual words and message they are sharing, because your mind is consumed with preparing what you will say in response. This becomes a natural tendency because you are either afraid you won't "get a chance" to say what you want to say, or you are worried that the person will expect you have a response immediately. Instead of giving them your undivided attention, you are devoting mental energy to preparing what you will say right after they stop talking.

Becoming a better listener starts with recognising why you are a poor listener. The more you can be conscientious of the above points - as well as the ones you listed - the better able you are to stop bad habits in their tracks.

#### **Two Vital Reminders**

1. The more you refine and improve your listening skills, the more you will stand out (in a good way). Few people have exceptional listening skills, so when you demonstrate that you have them, you will be viewed as a genuine leader.
2. It's okay to not respond right away. When you decide that you are going to devote attention to fully listening to someone, you need to give yourself permission to not respond right away (even if you know what you want to say). Take a deep breath. Possibly use phrases that affirm to the person that you have heard them, but at the same time allow you room to process what you want to say.

#### **Affirmation Phrases to Use After Someone Has Spoken**

"That's interesting."

"I will have to give that some thought."

"Tell me more."

"Hmmm."

"I appreciate you telling me."

#### **In Summary**

Most people do not naturally have good listening skills. These are skills that have to be developed, often by corralling the tendency to respond immediately.

## How to Use Your Body Language to Your Advantage

We have already laid a good foundation for improving your listening skills. In this section, we look closer at the role body language plays when you are listening. Not only is it wise to be aware of your body language when you are listening to someone, it also is possible to use body language to your advantage.

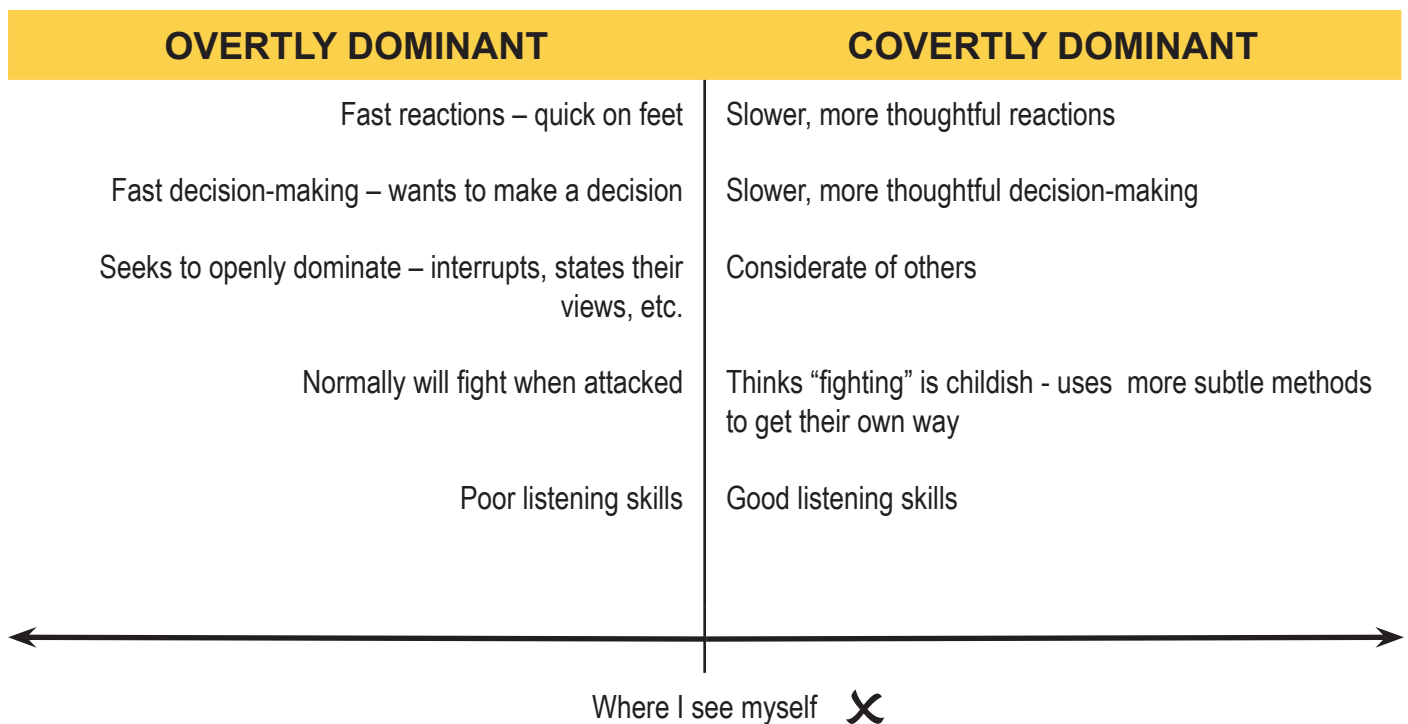
By “to your advantage”, we do not mean to imply manipulation or intimidation. Instead, body language speaks volumes about confidence in yourself and genuine interest in the other person. The more you understand your body language and the body language of the other person, the more apt you are to communicate effectively. This benefits everyone involved.

### Are You Overtly or Covertly Dominant?

I imagine some of you read that question and your first reaction is, “Well, neither. I’m not dominant”. Truth is, though, we all have a “dominance” perspective that we generally incorporate into our interactions.

That dominance perspective can negatively or positively impact our interactions. Our dominance perspective also reflects the strength of our listening skills. Someone who is overtly dominant tends to have weaker listening skills, whereas someone who is covertly dominant tends to have stronger listening skills.

When you read the below chart, where do you see yourself along the spectrum of the horizontal line with arrows?



Now, think about the people around you. Write down at least one person in each of the two categories below:

Overtly Dominant:	
Covertly Dominant:	
What do you like about each one?	
What do you dislike about each one?	

As you can see, we are beginning to peel back the layers of body language. Let's look now at Informal and Formal Communication Styles.





What do you dislike about each one?

Body language encompasses many facets, and all lend themselves to how well you give the other person attention:

- Use body language to reinforce the spoken word, and
- As a technique to mirror the body language of the person with whom you are interacting. This includes mirroring their speaking tone and pace

As you look through the categories below, consider how these body language cues show up in you. Be very cognizant of this, because often we are unaware of the messages our body language could be sending. Also, the body language cues below can give you vital information when you observe them in the person with whom you are interacting.

## Body Language Cues

Your body language and the other person's body language both matter. There is far more emphasis placed on trying to read the other person's body language than realising how important it is for us to know how others are reading our body language.

Note that the items listed below are only "the most common definition". Depending on the culture and environment in which the conversation is taking place, there can many times be significant differences to these definitions. These are listed here to help you know how to better communicate with your body language, and so that you are conscientious of how they may be mistakenly misused in reading other people.

A guideline to use when communicating with another person, is to observe a specific body language signal at least three times before you begin to draw any form of a conclusion. By observing it at least three times before starting to draw a conclusion, you will avoid misjudging someone based on one or two things they may do that are outside the range of normal definitions.

## Posture (Standing / Sitting)

- Leaning forward demonstrates that you are with the person in thought. Leaning away can mean you are not in sync with what they are saying.
- Leaning back with both hands clasped behind the head demonstrates self-confidence in either oneself or the subject.
- Fidgeting while either standing or sitting shows a person is under stress.

## Hand Motions

- Tightly clenching or wringing hands usually shows a person is under pressure / stress.
- Casually rubbing the eye with one finger can mean a person is not sure about what the other person is saying.
- Open hands means a person is receptive to what is being said.
- Placing hands in pockets means the person feels guilty, bored or insecure, or is suspicious.

## Eye Contact

- Honest people will look others straight in the eye.
- Uncomfortable questions lead people to look away.
- Looking the other way can mean a person is suspicious of the person to whom they are talking.
- One eyebrow raised shows disbelief.
- Two eyebrows raised shows surprise.
- Looking toward a door or outside means the person wants to end the discussion.

## Head Movement

- A person dropping their head can suggest boredom.
- Stroking their chin or rubbing their hair can mean the person is giving the other person's comments serious thought.
- If a person's head is tilted slightly when the other person is talking, it means there is interest in what is being said.
- When a person covers their mouth while speaking, it usually means they are not confident in what they are saying.

## Gestures

- Rapid body movement means a person is uncomfortable and driven by time.
- Crossed arms or legs means a person is defensive and not open to the opinion of the other person.
- Tapping feet or hands is a sign of boredom.

## Handshakes:

- The Flabby Handshake - Some people offer a limp, soft hand that feels like overcooked pasta. They are pessimists who need reassurance before anything else.
- The Squeeze Handshake - A person squeezes your hand like a bench vise. These people - usually men - want to show strength and power, possibly to cover up an inferiority complex.
- The Next-to-the-Body Handshake - Often used by politicians and others who are hesitant to take risks. The arm and elbow are bent and the right hand stays close to the side.
- The Impelling Handshake - This person thrusts their hand forward and shakes with vigor. May be a sign of insecurity or nervousness.
- The Non-Gripping Handshake - Although not really a handshake at all, the hand is thrust forward and the fingers do not move. These people are saying, "I don't want to get involved".
- The Robot Handshake - The hand is offered quickly and automatically. These people are indifferent and self-interested. When dealing with them, show how what you have to offer is indispensable to their needs.
- The Jackhammer Handshake - These hand-pumpers hold your hand and won't give it back until they have your full attention. They may be opportunists.
- The Normal Handshake - This open, honest handshake is an indication of trust and usually demonstrates an openness to interact and talk.

## In Summary

Increasing your awareness of body language and adjusting your body language effectively allows for clearer communication. Clear communication obviously goes beyond merely hearing the words that are spoken. True "listening" takes into account the entire message being sent. Again, keep in mind that cultural and environmental situations will alter the definitions listed above.

## Engaging the Other Party and Getting Them Involved

While each interaction is unique, your listening skills, combined with some of the tips we have already discussed, can greatly improve the outcome of your interactions.

It also is helpful if you determine how you best like to interact with people – in person, on the phone, in meetings, through email, and so forth. The reason it is important to discern this, is so you purposely force yourself to become proficient in forms of interaction that are not your favourite.

Even if you do not like to talk on the phone, it is still important you master the listening and speaking skills necessary to carry on successful phone conversations. Likewise, if you are avoiding face-to-face interactions because you feel uncomfortable, this is all the more reason to purposely put yourself in these situations where you have to practice the necessary communication skills.

Take a few moments to think about how you prefer to communicate with people. Rank the following from 1 to 5, with 1 being your most preferable communication form and 5 being your least favourable.

- \_\_\_ In person
- \_\_\_ On the phone
- \_\_\_ Voicemail
- \_\_\_ In meetings when others are present
- \_\_\_ Email

This is simply an exercise to heighten your awareness as to the areas where you need to strengthen your ability to interact.

Below are tips for greater success in various communication scenarios. Each section includes two blank lines so that you can add any additional tips that come to mind but are not listed.

### IN PERSON

1. People are not just listening to the words you're saying, they're also "listening" to your body and how you say what you're saying. Likewise, you too need to pay close attention not only to what you are hearing, but what you observe in the other person's body language to see if their words mesh with their body signals.
2. Allow your personality to come through. Trying to hide your personality will only decrease the effectiveness of your message, as it shows a lack of integrity and honesty.
3. Listen and do not interrupt.

4. Engage the other party by showing interest with the questions you ask and your body language.
- 5.
- 6.

## IN MEETINGS

1. Model integrity by respecting all comments made by others.
2. Ensure understanding by asking questions and clarifying all key comments and to engage everyone.
3. Ensure there is agreement on next steps and who is responsible.
4. Leave all conversations on a positive note.
5. Any conversations involving a disagreement run the risk of becoming both emotional and personal. Although both of these can at times be necessary, they will also very quickly begin to change the entire communication process. More often than not, they change it for the worse.
- 6.
- 7.

## SELLING SITUATIONS

1. Talk less and listen more. Ask more questions.
2. Allow your knowledge to come through in the questions you ask.
3. Always make sure each sales call ends with you and the customer agreeing on something.
4. Set clear next steps and ensure the customer is in agreement.
5. Allow the customer to do most of the talking.
6. Your objective is to uncover the needs of the customer so that you can meet those needs with your offering.
- 7.
- 8.

## NEGOTIATING SITUATIONS

1. Leverage your body language. It can and will “speak” louder than the words you say.
2. Speak less than the other person. Always allow them to go first.
3. Watch their body language for clues.
4. Never say anything you’re not comfortable having the customer remember forever and share with others.
5. Never view a negotiation as being a one-time event. Although many are one-time events, when you assume this from the start, you will limit both your discussion and the potential to reach a final agreement.
- 6.
- 7.

## PHONE

1. Never ask if it’s a good time to talk. This gives the other person a perfect excuse to end the call. If you are unsure if the person has time to talk, then state up front that the phone call will take only 3 minutes. When you give the person an exact time, be sure you time the call. After the allotted time, tell the person you’re at the end and ask them if they would like to continue or reschedule. Using this practice allows you to demonstrate how much you respect their time.
2. Ask questions. People will never hang up on themselves.
3. Use the person’s name at least 3 times in every phone call. Who doesn’t like to hear their name said?
4. When greeting people on the telephone, avoid using their last name. It makes the call seem too formal. Your objective should be to have a casual conversation, in the same way you would talk to a good friend. By doing so you will be able to increase the overall outcome from the conversation.
5. Use visually descriptive words to help paint a picture of what you’re saying. A phone conversation doesn’t have to be boring and stale.
6. When starting a new telephone conversation, always give your first and last name if you are calling someone you do not know very well. Never assume the person to whom you are talking is going to recognise your voice or think you’re the only one with your first name.
7. Watch your facial expressions by placing a mirror in front of you when you talk. It’s amazing how your expressions come through your voice over the phone.

8. Add energy to your phone calls by standing up. Nobody likes talking to a “blah” person. People who have good posture tend to come across more enthusiastic than those who don’t.
9. When you end a conversation, always summarise it in the same way you would end a live meeting. By doing so, you prevent misinterpretation of what was said.
10. Always allow the other person to have the final comment or question. Just because you’ve asked all your questions doesn’t mean the other person has asked all of his.
11. Avoid negotiating over the phone. Use it as a means to introduce information and to follow up or confirm information. It’s impossible to truly read body language over the phone. Body language is a major negotiating tool, so you don’t want to lose this. A phone call, however, can be an excellent way to introduce a new idea on which you would like to receive some feedback. Many times it will allow you to gain feedback in a less threatening manner than if it were to occur in a traditional sales call.
12. Never use a speaker phone in a one-on-one conversation, even if the other person says it is fine with them. Speaker phones add to the perception that the conversation is not important enough to capture 100% of the person’s attention. (Only exception, of course, is if there is a group involved.)
- 13.
- 14.

## **In Summary**

You have many tools at your disposal to engage the other person. Each tool requires strong listening skills and awareness of all factors that impact communication. By being able to communicate effectively in various scenarios, you can’t help but strengthen your role as a leader.



## Effective Questioning Techniques

### Stop Talking so You can Accomplish More

Regardless of what business you are in, it doesn't matter how much you know about your product or service. It also doesn't matter how much of an industry expert you are. It doesn't even matter how great your mother thinks you are. The only thing that really matters to be successful is your ability to stop talking and listen.

On numerous occasions, everyone in business has heard how important it is to get the customer talking, so it's imperative to have an arsenal of great questions to ask. Despite trying to follow this guideline, every business-person seems to overstate the amount of time they believe they allow the other person to talk.

To talk less means you have to ask questions that truly engage the person with whom you are interacting. However, this doesn't mean you need to develop complex questions. Instead, the best tactic is to ask shorter ones. Long questions tend to result in short answers, while short questions will generally result in long answers.

### Below are a few examples of short questions:

"Why?"

There isn't a better follow-up question you can ask after someone has shared with you information that expresses their assessment of something. Ask them "why" they feel that particular way or "why" they arrived at that conclusion.

"Can you elaborate on that?" or "Will you please explain more?"

These questions elicit detailed responses, which will give you a better understanding of what the person is expressing. More complex questions can perplex people if used too often. It's not that there is never a time for complex questions; it's just that those times are much rarer than most people realise.

### Use Questions to Verify if the Person to Whom You are Talking is Following You

It is not unusual for a business-person to get caught up in sharing about their expertise or the features and benefits of their product or service. When you are talking, you can overestimate what the other person comprehends.

A good guideline when you are talking, is to pause every 20-30 seconds and ask a question to gauge what the person understands. The key to this is to truly listen to their responses and then proceed accordingly.

### Effective Questioning and Listening During a Sales Call

Your goal on any sales call is to talk only 20 percent of the time. To help ensure that this takes place, you have to plan ahead. Before you start developing your sales presentation, create your list of questions. This is contrary to the pattern of most salespeople who often spend a substantial portion of their time developing their presentation and, at the last minute, develop their list of questions.

If you're expecting to have a 20 minute presentation, you should have 40 questions (2 questions per minute). Even

though you may not use all 40, you'll definitely be more prepared. In addition, you'll be able to pick and choose which ones you want to ask. If you're following the rule of asking short questions, you'll ensure that the customer is doing most of the talking. You'll learn valuable information that will help you better understand the customer's needs.

If you ever find yourself in a sales call or any other type of meeting where you are expected to be leading the process and you find yourself suddenly confused as to what you should do next, use the opportunity to ask an open-ended question that gets the other person(s) talking.

The easiest approach is by asking them to explain more regarding something they just shared with you. This will give you time to collect your thoughts and allows the other person to share more. You may wind up uncovering another key piece of information.

## **In Summary**

In this section we covered why shorter questions asked frequently tend to result in more in-depth and more productive conversations. In essence, questioning affords you more opportunities to listen, which benefits both people involved.

## Using Questions to Reveal the Needs Necessary to Reach a Solution

Any time you can get a customer, client or associate talking about what they want to talk about, the more confidence they will gain in you. People like to talk about themselves, so the more you can focus your questions on them personally and their interests, the more likely you will engage them in good dialogue that will lead to effective solution.

### **The Power of Patience**

When someone is sharing with you, don't attempt to stop them or quickly interject with your own agenda. Instead, use what they share with you as the opportunity to ask them questions.

The objective with the questions you ask, is to get them to share with you what specifically they want and need. Sometimes when a customer is talking about something, they can overlook key items that are truly important to them. The only way to uncover these is by asking them questions.

We all can recall far too many times when we've sat across the table from someone we're trying to help – and we know we can help - if they would just provide us information about their needs and goals.

The problem is that no matter what question we ask, we get the same response: a big fat "I don't know" (or something along that line). Then, almost without thinking, we put on our super cape and start telling the person everything they need. Unfortunately, with this approach, the person may quickly turn cold. Ultimately, this becomes a lose-lose scenario.

Our problem in dealing with this type of client is we need to find a better way to engage them and to get them to think about what they want and need – and then share that information with us.

### **The Answer to this Dilemma? Short Questions**

As mentioned in the previous section, short questions get you long answers (while long questions get you short answers). What too often happens is we are talking to a client and asking them what we believe are simple questions, but in reality, those questions are simple only to us. Asking a question with a couple of facts wrapped into it really is more of a statement. We don't genuinely want to hear a person's honest response, but rather we are looking merely for agreement.

### **Some examples of short questions:**

"Could you give me an example?"

"Could you explain that again to me?"

"Why?"

"How come?"

The shorter the question, the more likely we are to get a long answer. The next step is to ask them another short question, following up on what they just said. The beauty about this is it allows the person with whom you are interacting

to do most of the talking. By doing most of the talking, they'll tell you what their needs are. They'll reveal a level of information you need to determine how to best serve them.

When using the short question approach, there are only two things you need to remember.

1. The first rule is to ask the other person or client a soft easy question to which you know they'll respond. Then after they have given you a response, continue with the short questioning approach by asking, "Could you give me another example?". You then pause and allow the other person to give you more information, upon which you follow up again with another short question such as, "How?" or "Why?". Basically, you want to do whatever you can to get them talking more.
2. The second rule to remember is to not keep asking the same short questions. If you do, you'll come across as an inquisitive 3-year-old rather than the professional you know you are. You can avoid this best by picking up on a single item they shared with you and drilling down on just that one item. When you drill down on a single item, you demonstrate your listening skills and your ability to truly discern information. Many times the person you're having the conversation with will share with you the most important information only after you have asked a follow-up question.

When you think of your ability to ask questions that get at the heart of the other person's needs and wants, how would you rate yourself? Mark one of the below:

I am very conscientious of using questions effectively. This section has been a good refresher course, but for the most part I have these techniques mastered.

---

I use questions, but I think I could be more deliberate in the type of questions I ask and the timing of them.

---

I ask very few questions when interacting with others. I think I could do a lot more to strengthen my questioning skills so that I can truly hear the other person's needs and wants.

---

## What About Moving Your Questioning Process to the Next Level?

If you want to maximise your questioning even further, make half of the questions you ask be ones that help the other person see and feel the pain they have. By doing so, they will be much more open to receiving your solution. It is far better to allow the other person to share with you their needs and desires than it is for you to tell them. By allowing them to voice them, they will be far more likely to believe them and accept the solution from you than if you were to attempt to tell them both what their needs are and what the solution is. (In a sales call situation, it is appropriate to state the needs the customer is looking for only as part of closing the sale.)

For example, if you're selling computer back-up systems, you might ask, "Can you explain to me what happens when data is lost?". This short, concise question is designed to get the customer thinking about the risks they face. Furthermore, the beauty of this type of question is that no matter what the customer's response is, some good follow-up questions will naturally arise.

By adhering to these guidelines, you will be able to see dramatic results in your effectiveness. As simple as it sounds, the more you find ways to get the other person talking, the more you will hear their needs and wants.

## **In Summary**

Using short questions, as well as well-timed follow up questions, will encourage the person to whom you are talking to reveal more information. This information is vital as you seek solutions that benefit all parties involved.

## Conclusion

In this Learning Module we have dug deep into specific communication elements. While you cannot incorporate all of these immediately, you can steadily begin to strengthen your communication abilities. Solid listening and questioning skills are often what differentiate leaders from the crowd, so the more intentional you are with these skills, the more success you will have personally and professionally.



IIDM is a 24/7 global centre of learning, with an expansive research library, providing the latest in management development and thought leadership from around the world.

Launched in November 2000, IIDM has been developed in association with The CEO Institute to provide business leaders and managers with an efficient and cost effective way of staying abreast of current information, solutions and bottom line business benefits.

Discover proven management solutions. Join thousands of business leaders and managers in Australia and worldwide who get fresh tips every day designed to enhance their management and leadership skills, build competitive advantage and improve the performance of their business.

Authority to republish

Republication of IIDM Learning Modules is prohibited without written permission from IIDM. Having been granted permission from IIDM, the material must not be edited or modified in any way without obtaining prior written approval.

© IIDM Pty Limited  
ABN 22 056 669 106

Suite 1, 1632-1638 High Street  
Glen Iris, Victoria 3146  
AUSTRALIA

Telephone: +61 3 9571 6902  
Facsimile: + 61 3 9885 5786  
Email: [online@ceo.com.au](mailto:online@ceo.com.au)  
Website: [www.iidmglobal.com](http://www.iidmglobal.com)

IIDM - an associate company of The CEO Institute - [www.ceo.com.au](http://www.ceo.com.au)

#### Disclaimer

The information contained in this IIDM Learning Module is of a general nature only and is not intended to address the specific circumstances of any particular individual or entity. As such, the information will not be appropriate in all situations, and must not be used as a substitute for information and advice that readers obtain from their own qualified advisors. The views and opinions expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views and opinions of IIDM. IIDM does not assume or accept any responsibility for the accuracy or appropriate use of any information the Learning Module and, to the maximum extent permitted by the law, exclude liability for loss the reader or any other person may suffer from any such reliance or use.