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## WHY YOUR SENIOR CARE STAFFERS NEED TO BE GREAT LISTENERS ►

If you have ever observed day-to-day operations at a senior care facility, you know how important it is that members of the staff know how to listen well.

A young woman named Aisha takes her aging mother Margaret on a tour of a senior living community. After the tour, they sit down for a conversation with Mark, one of the center's admission counselors. Aisha has dozens of questions to ask, as does Margaret, who is understandably nervous about starting a new chapter of her life. The success or failure of the conversation is entirely dependent on how well Mark understands Aisha and Margaret's questions - and how well he answers them.



John, a robust man who is just beginning to exhibit some signs of age-related dementia, moves into an assisted care facility. Yet due to the stress of his new living situation, he has a hard time understanding details of life in the facility - the times meals are served, where they are served, how he can sign up for special excursions and experiences outside the facility, and more. He asks his questions once, and then feels anxious when he realizes that he will need to ask the

same questions again. He needs to connect with someone who really listens to his questions, answers them, and makes sure he has access to the information he needs to know, when he needs to know it.

## Training Your Staff to Listen Better

Here are some important listening skills that your staffers can master:

**Active listening** - The most important skill is to avoid interruptive listening, which means that while people are speaking to your staffers, they should not already be formulating a response in their minds. Good listening is all about focus.

**Compartmentalizing** - Your staffers, like many workers, are handling several tasks at the same time. Yet you can train them to think in only one “compartment” at a time. If your admissions counselors are speaking with new potential residents, for example, they can learn to concentrate on that task alone and ignore ringing phones and interruptions.

**Observing** - Train employees to observe and notice something about each person they encounter. Employees who take a moment to observe something personal about each community member will listen better to them.

**Connecting on a personal level** - Employees can be trained to start each interaction by asking a question like, “Where did you travel from to see us?” or, “What are your most important interests and activities?” Connecting in that way is more than a pleasantry; it establishes a level of communication where better listening happens.

**Repeating back** - Repeating back to people what they have said only takes a moment, and it helps assure that your employees accurately understood what they heard. A good technique is to say, “Let me be sure I understood” and then to restate in their own words what they just heard. Following those steps elevates the level of communication and assures that residents and customers have been heard, respected and well served.

## What’s the Best Way to Teach Listening Skills?

Work simulations offer a great way to teach the listening skills I recommend in this article. Have some trainees take the roles of residents and customers, and others take the roles of your front-line staffers. Practicing real-world interactions in that way makes sure that good listening skills will “stick,” be used, and elevate the quality of the experience your facility delivers.

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