

No: 345

BECOME AN ACTIVE LISTENER (revisited - 09/08)

Why would a farm financier and consultant want to write about listening?

In my work in the rural sector, I often find people experiencing financial and emotional difficulties do not fully listen to the advice given by their professionals; in fact many do not listen at all.

I also find that rural professionals, sales people and so on do not actually listen, properly to the farmer. If you are not listening attentively how can you help them solve their problems?.

I was recently involved in resolving a matrimonial situation where the husband wanted to talk but not listen. As soon as his wife spoke, he talked over her without giving her a chance to be heard. When I tactfully pointed this out, he had no idea of what he was actually doing.

Conversely, I have witnessed a sales person just keep on talking not realising he had closed the sale. He lost the deal, because he didn't stop doing the hard sell.

So what do we need to do? Here are a few simple ideas to become an effective listener?

- Make a conscious decision to listen. This is actually quite difficult, but make a commitment, slow down and concentrate on listening to what the other person is saying.
 1. Look at them – your eyes to their eyes.
 2. Don't interrupt them.
 3. Ask questions, that show you understand what they are saying
 4. Empathise
- Be objective and don't be judgemental. If they think you are judging them they will not tell you anything.
- Try to step into the other person's shoes and look at the situation from their point of view. You may find this hard, but I have found if you consider things from the other person's perspective and how it is affecting them, you will better understand what they are really saying.

- Try to draw a mental picture of what is being said. People retain only 7% of what they hear and 85% of what they see, so if you visualise you will find it helps tremendously. If you can't see the picture, ask some questions.
- Take notes. In my work I always take notes and you would be amazed at the number of times it is necessary to refer back to them. The other person then realises that you mean business, and you are recording some of the issues.
- Connect with the person who is speaking by being an active listener. This involves actually commenting positively about what has been said. One way to do this is to summarise their comments by saying something like: "So, from what you've said I understand that you mean ...". Look out for the shocked expression of the speaker when they realise you have really listened, have taken their message on board and are able to repeat it.

In the farming industry as in any industry, listening is just another skill you need to acquire. If you hear what others are saying and inwardly digest it, the speaker will feel better and you will have a much clearer understanding of what they are trying to tell you.

When you are actively listening, you need to realise that people will only tell you 20% of what is really going on. In other words, they are withholding 80% from you. Armed with this piece of knowledge, it is easy to see why you need to ask questions to get points clarified. This will give you a lot of scope to ask questions to get more information from them.

Even if someone is talking a lot, this does not mean they are being honest with you. Chatter is often just a cover up for a whole lot of non disclosure.

Once you get the person talking on the right track, keep them on track. Don't let them wander off the topic. This is where a few well directed questions can help. Examples could include: "So I understand you are saying ...". or "How did that feel?"

Do not be tempted to rabbit on about yourself or your own experiences in the matter. Keep people talking about themselves and you have a friend for life.

The temptation is to butt in with your knowledge and experiences but don't do it. They just don't want to know.

IN SUMMARY:

Learning to be a good listener is a real skill. It is an ability that few people have. Being an active listener can be really rewarding, as people unfold what is really happening for them.

They paint a picture for you but you have the brush. The brush is the questions you ask, and the guidance you give, to get the complete story. When you have the whole story, you have painted the picture on the canvas for them.

These are the opinions of Don Fraser of Fraser Farm Finance. Any decisions made should not be based on this article alone and appropriate professional assistance should be sought.

Don Fraser is the Principal of Fraser Farm Finance and a consultant to the Farming Industry. Contact him on 0800 777 675 or 021 777 675.