

## **IS ANYONE LISTENING?**

**By Mark Meeson**

"You know, it's at times like this when I'm trapped in a Vogon airlock with a man from Betelgeuse and about to die of asphyxiation in deep space that I really wish I'd listened to what my mother told me when I was young!" "Why, what did she tell you?" "I don't know, I didn't listen!" — Douglas Adams

How many really good listeners do you know? The answer is likely to be a limited number.

How good are you at listening? Most of us think we are pretty good and in the current market place developing client relationships is critical. Listening and understanding their requirements and needs will form the basis of that relationship.

Really listening to your clients will generate greater value for them and will enhance the quality of service, an adviser can provide.

With the rise in electronic communication the ability to listen is becoming even more restricted as face to face communication is reduced. With this decline the likelihood of missing opportunities or misinterpretation of instructions is likely to increase.

Few would deny that listening is a key skill for all the elements of an adviser's role – including giving advice, consulting with the client, relationship development, management and leadership. A trusted adviser must refine their listening skills in order to generate greater value for their clients.

Why is listening such a rare skill? The answer is simple; it is far harder than it would first appear. Hearing is not listening; it requires total concentration and is a skill which needs to be practised regularly. Good listeners are generally interested in what is being said and in the person who is saying it. Their body language as well as their eye contact reinforces this message. They are not only interested in the information that is of benefit to them or their business but in a wider understanding. This wider depth of knowledge builds a stronger client relationship founded on trust.

The biggest barrier to effective listening is thinking. No-one can do both effectively at the same time, whatever they claim! Many of us are tempted to start thinking about how we could help, similar experiences, what skills we could bring to the problem. Unfortunately the client will notice this and may stop trying to maintain our attention and the bond of trust is broken.

Just listening is not enough, you need to demonstrate that you have heard and understood. This means giving feedback through summary and reflection and by the imparting of relevant information. If you are finding it particularly difficult to concentrate on what someone is saying, try repeating their words mentally as they say it – this will reinforce their message and help you control mind drift.

Feedback is crucial. Restate what you think you heard and ask “Have I understood you correctly?” This also establishes with the other party that you are actively listening and builds trust and confidence. By listening in a way that demonstrates understanding and respect, you cause rapport to develop and that is the true foundation from which a genuine adviser is able to generate greater value for their clients.

In answer the question posed at the beginning of this article “Is anyone listening?” The answer should surely be “Yes, what are you trying to say and how can we help?”