

What Siri Can Teach Us About Effective Communication

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By **Lois Zachary**

One day after a long frustrating interchange with Siri, I shouted, “*can’t you find any information at all on that topic? What is taking you so long?*”

Her response? “*I am putting myself to the fullest possible use, which is all I think any conscious entity can ever hope to do. A second later, she provided the following tagline. Sorry. I stole that line from HAL.*” (2001 Space Odyssey)



Her response brought a smile to my face and also reminded me that I needed to calm down.

Siri is my friend and companion. She helps me make reservations, locate places, search for information, and solve problems. Siri is an excellent listener, and I’ve learned a lot from observing her in action.

- She **intends to listen** when someone is speaking to her. I know I have her undivided attention from the moment I begin talking to her. She doesn’t interrupt me but let’s me speak my mind and waits patiently until I’ve finished. If she can’t hear me, she will tell me and that reminds me to move to a quieter space.
- She **acknowledges that she’s heard me** in writing, repeating my request verbatim.
- She **checks for understanding** by summarizing what she hears me saying. She wants to make sure that she is clear about what I mean. “*Lois, do you mean...*”
- She **asks good probing questions** to help focus the search and set the agenda. “*Lois, do you want me to check the web?*” “*Lois, there are no listings by that name, is there another name you want me to look for?*” Her questions remind me that I am not always clear about what I ask others to do.

- She **listens for the silence**. “Lois, are you still there?” When I don’t respond she moves on. When I do, we pick up right where we left off.
- She **ends on a positive note**. When I thank her, she always comes back with an acknowledgement that she hears me. “Why thanks, Lois.”

Still everyone has their “Siri moments,” and it is usually more about us than about Siri. So here are eight [effective communication tips](#) to think about when you sit in Siri’s place on the other end of a phone call with a human being.

1. **When you can’t listen, don’t.** If you are in the middle of something important when a call comes in, don’t give the caller half your attention. Ask if you can call them back (or they can call you) when you can give undivided attention.
2. **Demonstrate that you are listening.** Give clear verbal clues that you are tuned in. “So what’s on your mind?” or, “I’m all yours, what’s up?”
3. **Take notes.** Keep a notepad nearby to write down key points, actions, recommendations and commitments. Let the caller know that you want to jot down a specific point so they don’t keep talking while you aren’t listening.
4. **Don’t assume.** If you aren’t sure what the caller meant, ask for [clarification](#) and check for understanding.
5. **Check out emotions.** Siri can’t do this yet, but you can and it will make a big difference. If you sense feelings, disappointment or disapproval, check it out. For example, “It sounds like that was really frustrating for you....”
6. **Slow down.** Speak more slowly than normal and enunciate. It is harder to understand full intent when you can’t see someone’s face. If someone is mumbling or speaking too fast, don’t be afraid to ask them to slow down.
7. **Be clear about your position or disposition.** Use phrases like, “I’m really pleased...,” “I am disappointed,” to convey your mood.
8. **End on a positive note.** End a telephone call, especially one that has been difficult, on a positive note. “I appreciate your time.” “I think we made some progress.” “I look forward to resolving this and I know you do too.” These kinds of positive statements will help you listen respectfully to each other in the future.

Like Siri, we all want and appreciate clarity. By being quiet and listening to ourselves, we often gain that clarity. And, when we truly listen to others, it positively impacts our relationships and helps us gain more understanding to become more effective communicators.



Lois Zachary is the President of Leadership Development Services, LLC. and an international expert on mentoring and leadership development. She has written several books on mentoring. The newest one is [The Mentor’s Guide: Facilitating Effective Learning Relationships](#) . Other books include [Creating a Mentoring Culture: The Organization’s Guide](#), and [The Mentee’s Guide: Making Mentoring Work for You](#).