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I am passionate about the creative work that I do and have developed some unique skills. Are there other ways to add value and distinction to my role?

– **Looking for More**

Judy: Passion for your work and unique skills is a winning combination in any career. A third ingredient is to become known and respected as a careful listener. The fine art of listening involves everything from a thoughtful and interested facial expression to a pleasant tone of voice. Whatever you believe your current listening capacity is, consider that deep listening is a complex activity, one that you can spend the rest of your life fine-tuning.

Celeste Headlee, a long-time public radio host, includes a chapter on listening in her recent book, “We Need To Talk, How to Have Conversations that Matter.” She writes: “All too often, our conversations are like the worst kind of music concert. Imagine a violinist playing one piece of music while the pianist plays another. They can be friendly and watch each other and nod all they want, but the end result will be cacophony if they aren’t on the same page of music.”

And why does this happen? Headlee goes on to say that we are all wired to talk, and that Harvard scientists found that talking about ourselves activates the pleasure centers in our

brains. These are the same places that light up when eating dark chocolate salted truffles (or whatever is nearest and dearest to your own heart). Headlee’s book is based on her highly rated TED Talk: “10 Ways to Have a Better Conversation,” which is well worth a listen.

So, what are some ways to polish your listening skills? Here are a few of my personal favorites to get you started:

1. Delete any distractions, including turning your cell phone to mute. Tell your companion or group that you are doing this; it will clearly let them know that the meeting is important to you.
2. Be mindful of your posture. Sit upright, but with your shoulders relaxed. Taking a few gentle breaths will facilitate relaxation.
3. Face your companion or group squarely and make eye contact in a caring way.
4. Engage in the conversation by paraphrasing (saying what you heard in your own words) with “I heard you say...”
5. Encourage the conversation with words like, “Tell me more about that.”
6. Write down ideas that emerge. This physical action will confirm that you value what others are saying and will likely inspire more ideas.
7. At the end of your meeting, recap action steps and remember to say thank you!

Practice these behaviors with groups or one-on-one, even in your personal relationships,

until they become routine for you. Consider that the more you learn about others’ ideas, the more clearly you will understand their point-of-view. Understanding eliminates the possibility of becoming judgemental, and keeps you open to learning a new and expanded way to think about a topic.

If you want to look more deeply into the art of listening, you might enjoy “Seven Thousand Ways to Listen.” Author Mark Nepo writes: “I believe the humble approach to a greater life of listening begins with the acceptance that we hear more together. Accepting this, we are awakened to a committed interest in what each of us knows and wonders about. This committed interest in each other and the life around us is the basis of reverence.”



I am thinking about moving into a consultant or freelance role. What do I need to consider?

– **Curious Consultant**

Judy: First, count your pennies. Before you venture out, you must have at least enough savings to pay for your expenses for one year, preferably two. Include business expenses for developing your brand identity, a website, business cards, conference and travel, etc. Your personal website is a necessity, it helps you to build credibility with clients, but it can be costly, so it's a good idea to price it out in advance.

Next, review your skills. Do you have a unique expertise to offer? It will be easier to get the attention of potential clients by offering them something new that will help them outpace their competitors. If you are considering becoming a freelancer, you can research the kinds of projects that are being outsourced—can you assist with those projects?

Building a “living network” wall in your home office will give you a good picture of where you are and where you need to focus next. It's an engaging way to take action toward your new career, and also keep in touch your broader network of family and friends. I still have one of these in my home office;



I use the back of the entrance door so that it's only visible to me. To set up my wall, I purchased Post-it notes in four colors:

Orange: colleagues (past and present) or business acquaintances who have requested coffee time, plus those I would like to meet with.

Green: networking and community events I am considering attending.

Pink: friends and family events.

Blue: “blue sky ideas” that I want to explore and possibly include in books, articles or workshops.

On Mondays, I decide what I want to focus on for the week and pull all of those Post-its onto a separate space on the door. As the week progresses, I

can easily pull off tasks that are completed, along with meetings and events after they are scheduled on my calendar.

When considering independent work, check out a few coffee shops in your neighborhood as an extension of your in-home office. I go to a coffee shop two blocks from my home office to write, read newspapers, etc. It's a routine I look forward to, and has become the most productive part of my workday. You can also explore renting a co-op workspace for a day or two every week.

All of these steps in becoming independent take time. The more preparation you can do up front, the more smoothly you can transition from one work routine to another, and any related stress will transform into excitement. It is advisable to sign at least one client before you take the leap. Then, you can build momentum toward other opportunities with additional clients and enjoy the ride. 

JUDY BELL IS THE FOUNDER OF ENERGETIC RETAIL (ENERGETIC-RETAIL.COM) AND AUTHOR OF “SILENT SELLING.” SHE HELD AN INSPIRATIONAL ROLE FOR 22 YEARS AT TARGET CORP. AND NOW SHARES HER INSIGHTS ON NAVIGATING THE CREATIVE WORKPLACE WITH *DESIGN:RETAIL* IN THIS BI-ISSUE COLUMN. SEND YOUR QUESTIONS FOR “ASK JUDY” TO JESSIE.DOWD@EMERALDEXPO.COM.