

Chapter 2

Active Listening

Introduction

No communication process is complete without listening. Listening is a process of receiving, interpreting, and reacting to a message from the speaker. It is a very important skill. Like reading it involves the reception and decoding of verbal messages from another person. Besides, it also needs meticulous effort to interpret them. Communication refers to the ability to understand oral message. The ability to understand would require:

- (a) The ability to listen attentively and
- (b) The ability to assimilate information

Listening communicates one's attitude through one's responses to the message.

Meaning and Art of Listening (or) Hearing v/s Listening

Listening involves encouraging the other person by being sensitive to the thoughts and emotions hidden in their expression. It has become a lost art but can be mastered if practiced with full dedication and concentration.

1. Hearing is receiving of sound signals and listening is registering the received sounds.
2. We pay attention while listening but need not pay attention to hear.
3. All sounds heard are not meaningful but we make meaning out of the sounds we hear while we listen.
4. Listening demands our interest and hearing need not always be interesting.
5. Listening takes a lot of energy but hearing does not.
6. Listening requires a lot of patience but hearing does not require patience.
7. Hearing is instinctive but listening is not. Conscious effort ought to be put to listen.
8. Listening requires more sophisticated mental process than hearing.
9. Listening demands discipline but hearing does not.
10. Listening is a learned skill but hearing is natural.
11. Listening is an active process but hearing is a passive process.

Importance of Listening and Empathy

Empathy plays an important role in listening. Listening by putting oneself in speakers' position will help in understanding speakers' viewpoint, the subject- matter, and speaker and also build good rapport with the person. It is important to understand the emotions and feelings of a person to empathize with speaker's viewpoint. Listening should be done without any biases or prejudices.

Reasons for Poor Listening

The reasons for poor listening are like

- 1. Listening training is unavailable:** Formal trainings are available in abundance for communicative skills like speaking, reading and writing but it is difficult to find training to sharpen listening skills.
- 2. Speed of thought is more than speed of speech:** People think faster than one can speak so it leaves ample time and space to wander. 25% of mental capacity is enough to understand 125-150 words spoken by an average speaker the rest of 75% unutilized mental capacity wanders. Only one-fourth of what has been heard and understood is retained due to 25% efficiency of the listener. Real effort should be taken to listen carefully and concentrate more of mental capacity.
- 3. We are inefficient listeners:** Studies conducted by Gail Miller at Washington State University have shown that immediately after listening to a 10 minute of oral presentation, the average listener has heard, understood, and retained 50 percent of what was said. Within 48 hours, that drops off by another 50 percent, to a final level of 25 percent efficiency. It means we retain only one fourth of what we hear. This survey shows that we are inefficient listeners. One must be more than that 25 percent to be a good listener.

Poor Listening Habits

The following are some of the have been used deep-rooted habits which lead to poor listening:

- 1. Listening but not hearing:** Listening for facts and details or the way of presentation but in due course losing the real meaning.
- 2. Rehearsing:** Listening until one decides on what to say next and rehearsing it and quits listening others, waiting for the opportunity to jump in and talk.
- 3. Interrupting:** Interrupting the speaker mid-sentence even before the complete meaning is determined.
- 4. Hearing what is expected:** Hearing only the expected and conveniently not hearing the undesired.
- 5. Feeling defensive:** Assuming the speakers' intention and reacting defensively.
- 6. Listening for a point of disagreement:** Listening intently to catch a point to disagree upon and then attack or confront.
- 7. Labelling the subject matter uninteresting:** Listening with a thought that the content is already known or convincing oneself that it is uninteresting, and turns to the many other thoughts and concerns that stored up in one's mind for just such an occasion.
- 8. Criticizing the delivery or appearance of the speaker:** Criticizing the speaker for not speaking distinctly, for talking too softly, for reading, for not looking the audience in the eye,

etc. And classify the speaker as a boring one and avoids listening to the message being delivered.

9. *Becoming too stimulated:*Disagreeing with someone and following one's own thoughts, and develops counter arguments, or questions, which make the listener over stimulated and reduces the efficiency of listening to zero.

10. *Listening only for facts:*Remembering thy facts and not the primary points and organization of points.

11. *Trying to outline everything that is being said:*Not able to get the framework from the unorganized content of the speaker.

Common Myths about Listening: Refer to the textbook content on page 79

Traits of a Good Listener

Guidelines to be a good listener are:

1. ***Non- Evaluative:*** the listener should not be evaluative of the speaker based on his/her personal qualities. Verbal and non- verbal behaviour should be conveying the impression that the speaker is accepted without any judgment made.
2. ***Paraphrasing:*** to clarify a point, listener can paraphrase and enquire the speaker whether one has heard it accurately.

As I gather, you want to tell...

So you mean to say that...

Oh! Your feelings towards...

Do you mean that....

3. ***Reflecting Implications:*** a good listener can go beyond the direct contents of the speaker and reflect on the implications of what has been said. This positive feedback will
 - i. Encourage the speaker to further extend the ideas.
 - ii. Reflect listeners' eagerness and zest by verbal and non- verbal means
 - iii. Create distrust between parties if used to show supremacy of knowledge and changing the direction of the speaker.
 - iv. Boost the speakers' confidence

I am sure if you did that, you would be in a position to...

So this might lead to a result which...

So you are suggesting that we might....

Will that help us to alleviate the problem of...

4. ***Reflecting Hidden Meanings:*** Good listeners try and empathize or identify with the speaker. They go beyond the words, and explicit feelings and unravel the underlying feelings, intentions, beliefs or values that influence the speakers' words. In reflecting the speakers' feelings care should be taken :

- i. Not to overexpose the speaker
 - ii. Not to coax them to admit more than they desire
 - iii. Avoid suggesting that the feelings we reflect ought to be the one they should feel.
 - iv. Acceptance of their feelings ought to be conveyed more by one's manner and tone than by words.
5. **Inviting Further Contributions:** A good listener will prompt the speaker to give more information. Open- ended questions can be used to let the speaker expand more on the content.
- Can you throw more light on...
- It would be great if you can expand more on this.
- What happened after that?
- How did you react when...?
6. **Responding non- verbally:** Listener can show active interest by adopting certain postures and non- verbal signals. Regular eye – contact, body leaning slightly towards the speaker , nodding appropriately, and occasional receptive utterances such as “ yes’ and “ummh” will make the speaker feel confident that he/she is being listened to and is being understood.

Listening Modes

Listening modes usually depend on factors such as mood, mind-set, topic, time of day, relevance, and importance. Besides listening to the speaker, we should send positive signals to him that we are with him or her. The various modes of listening are as follows

Active versus Passive Listening

Paying attention: Situations like glancing at the television while eating or talking, getting vehicles honks at work place, etc. doesn't appreciate active listening. If the same mode is used in presence of speakers, it becomes harmful and leads to distortion. A good listener should show keenness towards speaker's talk through expression, alertness and by asking questions. It encourages the speaker to express his ideas clearly and enthusiastically. This skill can be improved through exercises like listening to commentaries on TV or radio, concentrating on the theme, and supporting ideas relevant to it.

Further, important information could also be noted down in order to make this exercise more effective. Besides the former, speaker's physical appearance also speaks a lot through non-verbal cues. This may convey messages if he is genuine in his approach or not. And adopting a receptive and constructive attitude to criticism can lead to self-improvement. To make the conversation fruitful between the two parties, interest should be generated not only from the listener's interest, but also from the speaker's perspective.

Dealing with distractions: An active listener should train himself to avoid distractions like an attractive face in the setting, the fragrance of perfume, etc. and concentrate completely on the speaker's message. It needs a great deal of mental discipline to remain focused on the speaker's message. After a certain period, people become tired and lose interest in the

message. This happens because of 'brain time'. As we know, mind has the capacity to understand more than what can be said by an average speaker in a minute. This mismatch coupled with general disinterest leads to a wandering mind. This has to be overcome with fine attention and well anticipation. If the listener guesses right, it generates more interest and make him to be glued to the speech. Effective listening is possible only if the listener patiently listens require mental preparedness and energy to concentrate on the speaker's words as well as his non-verbal cues of communication like posture, gesture, eye contact, facial expressions, etc. Even noise could distract the attention of the listener. This should be ignored or side-tracked.

Above all, superiors should take care to provide a scope in welcoming their subordinates to speak and listen, so as to release their emotional tension, in order to improve their working environment.

Tips for Effective Listening: Refer to the text book table content on page 84.

Global versus Local Listening

In order to be an effective listener, one must be aware of the cultural variations involved. If the speaker is a foreigner, focus should be conscious of the diction and language to choose. In global listening, the variant specifications like idiomatic expressions, non-verbal cues, politics, demography, culture, etc. have to be analysed in effective manner. Where in local listening, these are less preferred and one could feel comfortable with his people.

An idiomatic expression of Americans 'Cover all the bases', doesn't make any sense to Indians, since it was originated from their baseball game, a sport unknown in India.

Japanese nod their head when they are in conversation to reflect that they are just hearing; however, Americans will nod while in conversation to indicate that they are listening attentively.

Types of listening

1. Appreciative Listening: Listening to derive aesthetic pleasure is called appreciative listening.

2. Empathetic listening: Listening with appreciating the speaker's emotions, circumstance, mind-set, and perspective and being able to provide emotional and moral support is called empathetic listening.

Phrases like 'I can understand what you have gone through,' 'It must be difficult to face such a situation,' etc.

3. Comprehensive listening: Listening to understand and comprehend the message is called comprehensive listening.

4. Critical listening: Being judgmental about the contents of a speech by analysing, evaluating, and judging the spoken word is called critical listening. It is also known as evaluative, judgmental or interpretive listening. If we involve in this, we evaluate the tone, the non-verbal signals, and the underlying meaning of the speaker's words based on our knowledge and experience.

5. Superficial listening: Pretending to be listening by giving fake expressions to avoid offending the speaker but actually not listening is called superficial listening.

6. 'You' viewpoint: Listening to understand the speaker's viewpoint and boost the speaker's confidence is called 'you' viewpoint listening. The best way to achieve this is by addressing the speaker by his name, which gives attention that we are listening with full attention.

Barriers to effective listening

1. Content (knowing): Knowing too much or too little about the subject – matter poses as a barrier to listening.

Remedies:

- Do not sit back passively and allow sound to enter ears.
- Develop a positive attitude towards the message.
- Anticipate the importance of the message content.
- Seek areas of interest in the message.
- Remind yourself that something of value can be learned.

2. Speaker (Delivery): The speaker's accent, organization, clarity, speed, volume, tone, inflections, emotions and appearance alter the attitude of the listener and affects the interpretation of the message thus becoming a barrier to listening.

Remedy: Concentrate on the 'what' of the message, not the 'who' or 'how'.

3. Medium (Distance and circumstances): When the speaker is not physical present the stimuli is not well created so it can be a hindrance to listening. Maximum of this effort is needed in face-to-face communication.

Remedy: Realize the potential for better understanding, and increase listening effort.

4. Distractions (Extraneous stimuli): Sounds, lights, odours, mannerisms, voice inflections and moving objects distract the listeners. Psychological studies indicate that a listener's attention span is sometimes not more than two or three seconds. This stimuli can be categorised as environmental or physical, but most often psychological.

Remedies:

- Identify and eradicate distractions.
- If distractions cannot be eliminated, increase concentration.
- Free yourself from preconceptions, prejudices, and negative emotions.

5. Mind-set (Attitude): Attitudes like physical, mental, and emotional characteristics and the mind-set of the listener can diminish or magnify the stimuli, distorting the message.

Remedies:

- Strive to not let personal biases interfere with comprehension.
- Respect others' freedom of values and beliefs.
- Accept that attempting to understand another's viewpoint is not necessarily agreeing with it.
- Realize that there may be more than one acceptable point of view.

6. Language (Ambiguity & Misinterpretation): Unwise use of words which are imprecise, emotional, technical or overly intellectual may lead to misinterpretation by the listener. This happens when words used are imprecise, personal definitions, based on background, education and experience.

Remedies:

- Realize that different words may have different meanings for different people.
- Evaluate the context in which the word is used.
- Remember that the meaning is in the mind, not in the word.

7. Listening Speed (Rate & Think time): Average listening capacity is 400-500 words a minute so a listener has excess time to daydream.

Remedies:

- Use the excess time to outline messages
- Identify the purpose and how it is supported
- Evaluate the soundness of logic; verify and integrate it with existing knowledge.
- Maintain eye contact to observe and interpret non-verbal signals.
- Formulate questions to enhance and verify understanding and provide feedback.

8. Feedback (Inappropriate): Giving premature comments and evaluation without a full understanding of the speakers' viewpoint will divert the listener's attention. The feedback with such type of anger, defensiveness, or suspicion, can hinder the speaker with confusion.

Remedy: Supportive feedback can demonstrate interest through appropriate eye contact, smiling and animation, nodding, leaning forward, verbal reinforcements such as 'I see' or 'yes', and phrasing interpretations of the comments for verification.

9. Cultural Barrier: Listening is tough especially when someone is from another culture and subculture. The choice of words, accents, pronunciation and many other intangible reasons become barriers for listening. One must be aware while listening to a person from another region or culture, or else it creates a barrier.

Example: American: I would like a room for two nights.

Japanese speaker of English: For tonight?

American: No, not 'tonight'. Two nights.