

## CHAPTER

# 15

## LISTENING SKILLS

### 15.1. THE PROCESS OF LISTENING

There is a commonplace saying : 'Be a good listener,' which contains a great truth about our personal as well as social dealings. I want that others should listen to my views, but I would be unwilling to reciprocate the same courtesy to others. This is inherent in human nature that we want to hear only our praise. Ordinarily, listeners do not like to hear any criticism about themselves. It requires a level of maturity and patience to listen to unflattering things one may say about me.

In general, listening implies the minimum of two people talking to each other. Proper interaction is a two-way movement. It is much more than hearing. It is a process of matching of the mental faculties of the sender and the receiver. People doze in a lecture or in parliamentary debate, because the speaker presents the problem in a dry and monotonous style. On the other hand, a good speaker with his wit and humour can make any dry topic highly interesting.

#### The Listening Process

There are the six stages of the listening process :

1. Receiving
- ↓
2. Interpreting
- ↓
3. Remembering
- ↓
4. Evaluating
- ↓
5. Responding
- ↓
6. Acting

1. **Receiving** : Here, we physically hear the message and take note of it. The efficiency of this stage is affected by various external factors, such as noise, poor hearing, lack of attention.
2. **Interpreting** : This is where we infer the speaker's meaning, based on our own experiences. We may need to consider whether the speaker's frame of reference is similar or different to ours, and how this will affect our understanding of the speaker's meaning.

3. **Remembering** : Now we store the message for future reference. We make a mental note of the key points as they are mentioned.
4. **Evaluating** : We consider the points mentioned and assess their importance. We need to separate fact from opinion, chaff from the grain of truth.
5. **Responding** : In a one-to-one or group situation, perhaps we give verbal feedback, or nods or sounds of agreement. In a larger audience, our initial reaction to a message may be to laugh or applaud or agree to disagree.
6. **Acting** . On most occasions, communication is an end in itself, perhaps an update or progress report. However, very often, action is vital. How to take action on the agreed points is altogether a different problem.

## 15.2. STYLES OF COMMUNICATION

### One-Way Communication

Listening to radio or watching television is one way communication. It represents a unilateral and non-reversible process of listening as well as seeing unless the programme is video-taped. Here the broadcaster does not know the reaction of the audience, which is different from the norm of a speaker on a platform who can see and hear the effect of his words upon the audience.

### Two-Way Communication or Dyadic Communication

Except radio and television broadcast, most of the human communications are two-way communications. It implies that when someone speaks, other listens to him. Then the latter speaks, and former listens to him. This process is rarely linear as both respond simultaneously to each other in speaking and listening by turns. Proper interaction is always non-linear. It is a two-way communication which is also called Dyadic communication. Dyadic communication consists of both individual interaction as well as talking to a group. It does not mean that there always be agreement in our conversation but there must be goodwill among the interlocutors even in deep disagreements.

In public life, dyadic or two-way communication is divided either as Hard Skills or Soft Skills.

## 15.3. HARD SKILLS

Some ancient organisations like religious institutions, army and government are pyramidically organized from top to bottom. Often, with some changes here and there, they have stood the test of time. They are organized in the shape of pyramid. The leader at the top interacts only with the group-leaders just below him ; the group-leaders talk only to sub-group leader just below them; and sub-group leaders talk to sub-leaders delegated below, and so on down to the bottom :

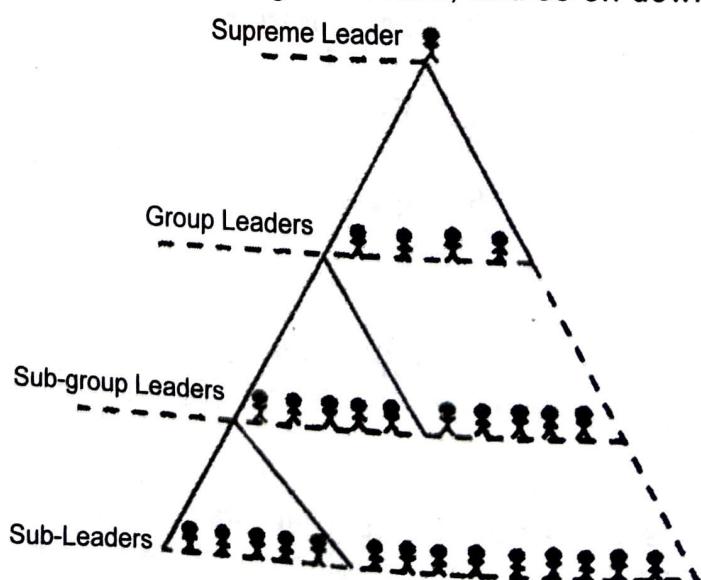
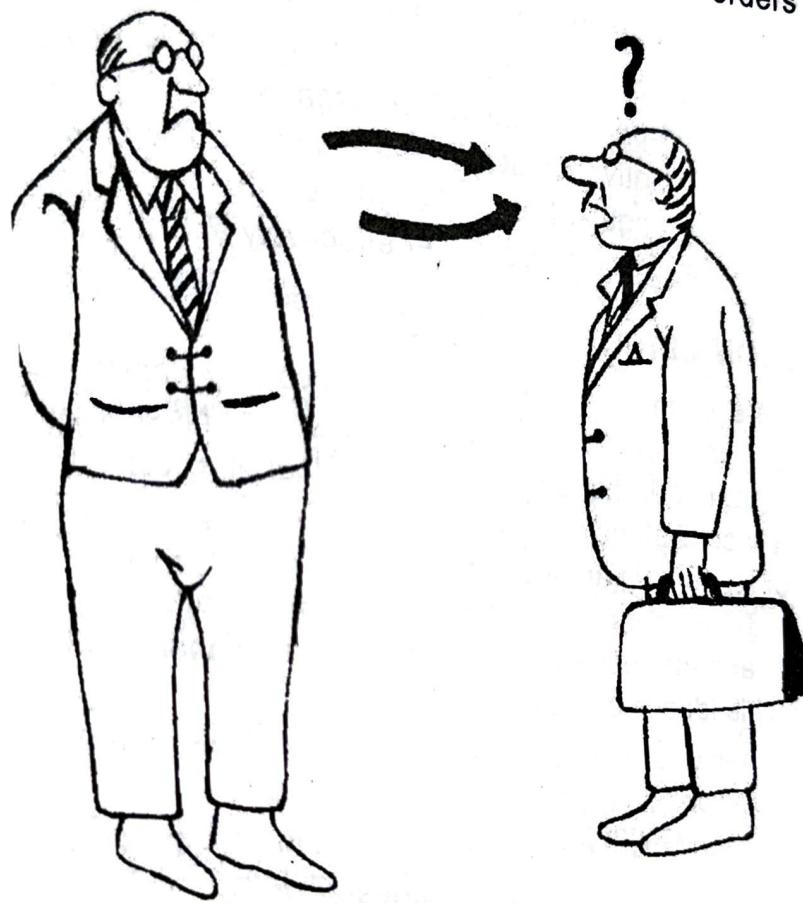


Fig. 15.1.

In a pyramidal organisation like army and government, the communication filters down largely from top to bottom. Here the upward movement of communication from bottom to top is slow and usually not effective in short run. This is called Hard skills, whose aim is command and control. In command and control system, every dynamic leader goes out of his way to establish a personal rapport and a sense of trust by talking to each worker individually. A two-way movement is essential to keep the organisation in a healthy state. Mere downward flow is like talking to a person continuously without giving him a chance to respond. In such a situation the pattern of communication takes the following form :

Here Boss (B) instructs to his sub-ordinate (S)

- (B) speaks to (S)
- (B) directs (S) to do something
- (B) gives certain informations to (S)
- (S) remains silent all the while and meekly accepts the orders of (B).



**Fig. 15.2.**

This is an example of unilateral communication which is also a type of Hard skills, but this type of one way communication is normally discarded because it has no linkage or feedback.

#### 15.4. SOFT SKILLS

The great empires in human history had been created by hard skills of command and control. They fell and disintegrated by the lack of soft skills of teamwork, communication and motivation. Even business leadership was once about **hard skills** such as planning, finance, and business decision. Rightly, the entrepreneurs were called 'Captains of Industry'. The image of military life is highly suggestive. They used to fight board-room battles. Business leaders like Tata, Birla, Wadia, Goenka, Singhania, etc., had in their days acquired larger-than-life image as their wealth was largely inherited. When they spoke, their sycophant employees used to jump and applause.

greatness thrust upon them." The last category of people are born with silver spoons in their mouths, so are not relevant here. The born greats like Alexander and Ashoka are exceptions to the rule as they appear once in a blue moon. Some people like Darwin, Karl Marx and Gandhi achieve greatness by their sheer honesty, dedication and hard work. They learn to understand the challenges of their times, and learn step by step to be excellent and disciplined followers. They empathize with their friends as well as foes. That is to say, a good leader not only communicates but also inspires people around him. He never shirks unpleasant work or responsibility. He is sincere and compassionate to the core of his heart. These are precious values which we must always try to imbibe in our character and personality.

You do not communicate in a vacuum. The communication process takes place at several levels : individual to individual, to small groups, in the task of briefing to the group of individuals on objectives and plans. At a higher level the leader briefs the organisation. Particularly, when there is a bad news to give, the task of briefing is formidable. The speaker, at all levels, must use clear and simple language and keep his ego under control. Nothing destroys human relations more than arrogance and tantrums. The proper use of wit and humour always creates the right atmosphere, promotes teamwork, and encourages each individual.

### **Good Listening**

The most important ingredient of good communication is good listening. The individual who has successfully mastered the art of good listening has a wider perspective and is able to view the world in a more comprehensive manner. Listening accurately with goodwill develops in the listener an increased sense of competence. The following are the elements of good listening :

Good Listening	Positive features
1. Wider perspective	Comprehensive approach
2. Increased sense of competence	Sense of accomplishment
3. Increased sense of mastery	Sense of self-confidence
4. Greater objectivity and open-mindedness	Objective viewing of facts
5. Decreased defensiveness, newer avenues	Opening up to new ideas
6. Positive attitude	Acceptance of the speaker
7. Concentration	Careful listening and subsequent viewpoint
8. Examination of the speaker's interaction	Greater participation and hence more effective listening
9. Question-answer sequences	Clarification of ideas and thoughts

### **Factors that Help in Listening**

The motivation of the listener is an important factor that helps or hampers his listening capabilities. Further, his verbal competence also plays a significant role, for there is greater comprehension if one is familiar with the nuances of the language. Together with this, the knowledge and capabilities of the speaker as well as the information about the organisation are also important.

"Are you listening? Yes, I am." A question-answer sequence of this sort can gear up the speaker for further interaction. Although the statement just made in response to the above query could be

**Date**

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of superficial nature, yet it keeps conversation going, and promotes arriving at a satisfactory conclusion. The discrepancy between the spoken words and the understood intention of the speaker can, on most occasions, lead to misunderstanding at the communicative level. The resultant factor may be a complete distortion in understanding the original intent of the speaker.

## 15.8. DIVISIONS OF HUMAN COMMUNICATION

There are different types of listening-passive, marginal, projective, sensitive and active-which we use according to our particular needs.

Types	Manner
1. Passive	Hearing and not listening takes place
2. Marginal	Superficial listening takes place
3. Projective	Message sent is received within the receiver's own frame of reference.
4. Sensitive/Empathetic	An attempt is made to match the perception of the receiver with that of the sender.
5. Active	Levelling and assimilation take place

### (a) Passive Listening

The physical presence but mental absence of the listener can be defined as passive listening or hearing. All that is being said is being heard but not really absorbed. In passive listening there is no invasion on the thought process or an onslaught of ideas which could probably change the trend of thinking or strengthen the preconceived ideas of the receiver. This kind of listening is commonly found in classroom situations when the teacher is seen to reprimand the students for their physical presence and mental absence in the class.

In passive listening, the sender should be held primarily responsible for the lapse in listening on the part of the receiver. It is only when the speaker and the presentation are boring and monotonous that the listeners switch off their mental faculties. Such listeners are physically present but mentally absent.

### (b) Marginal Listening

Provision of too much information can lead to an information overload. As a result of this, listening again tends to get hampered. One listens to the entire presentation merely because one is expected to do so. We have instances when the individual listens only at the superficial level and does not try to go beyond a brief understanding of the topics discussed. For instance, the debates in Parliament and the legislatures arouse the situation of marginal listening.

### (c) Projective Listening

In projective listening each individual has within him a frame of reference in which he tries to adopt the perspective of the speaker. While listening, the receiver tries to view and absorb the contents of the presentation within his own frame of reference. The arguments in the law courts are examples of projective listening, where contending legal counsels pick up only what is favourable to different parties. To a large extent, we all do it in our day-to-day affairs.

### (d) Sensitive Listening

This can also be referred to as sympathetic listening. Some people also call it empathetic listening.

Part of the emphasis in sensitive listening lies in the ability of the receiver to match his perceptions with those of the sender. It is a myth to presume that words always mean the same to everyone. If two people have learnt to speak a common language, it does not mean that all utterances will be understood by the receiver in toto or as were intended. Contrary to this, meanings assigned to spoken words lie in our perceptions of the interaction and background of the speaker. For instance the doctor's conversation with the patient is always an attempt to uncover the underlying nature of the symptoms which the patient may narrate to him.

### (e) Active Listening

This is the most important aspect of listening. The receiver absorbs all that is being said and also makes an attempt to verify that he has been listening. When combined with sensitive listening, active listening creates a sense of confidence and trust in both parties.

Active listening depends upon the person's situation and motivation. For example, if a serious problem in the family or office has cropped up, suddenly, all participants get engrossed in talking seriously about the matter.

## 15.9. BARRIERS TO LISTENING

There are several hindrances to effective listening. Some of these are :

Deterrents	Behavioural patterns
1. Lack of interest	Unable to concentrate
2. The ego—basic communication block	Unable to accept the speaker or his viewpoint
3. Involved with the self	Unable to listen
4. Lack of self confidence	Indulgence in self-pity
5. Fear	Unable to concentrate
6. Preconceived ideas and notions	Closed mind
7. The familiarity trap	Over confidence
8. Personal stress in life	Not in a position of to show empathy and poise.

### Lack of Interest

The first in the list of deterrents is lack of interest. If an individual were not interested in the topic being discussed, no matter how hard he may try, he would not be able to concentrate on the issue. Lack of interest thus hampers the listening process.

### Ego—The basic communication block

Superiority complex within an individual also prevents him from listening to what the other individual is saying. It becomes more or less a case of ego hang-ups. It is, in fact, the biggest communication block which the individual erects as he is not willing to accept the viewpoint of the speaker.

### Involvement/preoccupation with the self/

If the listener is too busy with his own thoughts or is too involved with himself, there are bound to be discrepancies in understanding the intention of the spoken word. In this two-tier process, either the receiver is listening to his own self, or is trying to decipher the intention of the sender. In this swing between listening and hearing, the object of good communication is not served.

**Lack of self-confidence**

The lack of self-confidence may occur because of some uncontrolled factors in the present environment of the listener or because of some past event. A lot of time is wasted in thinking about the past which may have been problematic for him. The present too becomes rather uncertain for him as he makes futile attempts to break loose from the past. It has a strong bearing on the individual as it creates an impediment in listening process primarily because of his preoccupation with past events.

**Fear**

Developing fear or being scared of an individual or situation can close the mind to whatever is forthcoming. The element of fear blocks the mind of the participant to the ongoing activities. He is unable to comprehend the true import of the interaction with the speaker.

**Preconceived ideas and notions**

To enter into any kind of interaction with preconceived ideas, notions and thoughts always entails a negative impact on the listening process.

**The familiarity trap**

Quite often, our previous knowledge of a particular topic can close our mind to the ongoing communication. This is what is normally referred to as the familiarity trap.

**Working under stress**

The mind gets blocked to what is happening all around and it becomes difficult for the participant to grasp what is being said in the situation of stress.

**15.9.1. Overcoming Barriers to Effective Listening**

- Control whatever barriers to physical reception you can (especially interrupting speakers by asking questions or exhibiting disruptive nonverbal behaviours).
- Avoid selective listening by trying to focus on the speaker and analyzing what you hear.
- Keep an open mind by avoiding any judgement and by not listening defensively.
- Try to paraphrase the speaker's ideas, giving that person a chance to confirm or correct your interpretation.
- Don't count on your memory, but record, write down, or capture information in some physical way.
- Improve your short-term memory by repeating information, organizing it into patterns, or breaking it into shorter lists.
- Improve your long-term memory by association, categorization, visualization and mnemonics.

**15.10. OFFICIAL MEETINGS**

Note taking, either a class lecture or for preparing the proceedings of a meeting or conference requires a lot of spade work. One must be a very attentive listener. There is no need to jot down every word of the speaker. Try to grasp the main theme of the speech, its purpose and presentation. Note down the main points in short phrases and key words. Try to figure out the topic sentence. Some people keep meandering in their talks. Therefore, see whether they are able to conclude their speeches.

**Agenda:** Preparing minutes of a meeting is a very important part of meeting. But every meeting requires an agenda, whether it is formal or informal agenda. The word agenda is the Latin plural

## Distinguishing Effective Listeners from Ineffective Listeners

### Effective listeners

- Listen actively
- Take careful and complete notes
- Make frequent eye contact with the speaker  
(depends on culture to some extent)
- Stay focused on the speaker and the content
- Mentally paraphrase key points to maintain attention level and ensure comprehension
- Adjust listening style to the situation.
- Give the speaker non-verbal cues (such as nodding to show agreement or raising eyebrows to show surprise or skepticism)
- Save questions or points of disagreement until an appropriate time
- Overlook stylistic differences and focus on the speaker's message.
- Make distinctions between main points and supporting details
- Look for opportunities to learn.

### Ineffective listeners

- Listen passively
- Take no notes or ineffective notes
- Make little or no eye contact.
- Allow their minds to wander; are easily distracted
- Fail to paraphrase
- Listen with the same style, regardless of the situation
- Fail to give the speaker non-verbal feed-back
- Interrupt whenever they disagree or don't understand
- Are distracted by or unduly influenced by stylistic differences
- Unable to distinguish main points from details
- Assume they already know everything that is important to know.

### GENERAL QUESTIONS

1. What are the differences between One Way Communication and Two Way Communication? (p. 236)
2. What are Hard Skills? (pp. 236-237)
3. Why do public administration business management, military organization, etc., need Hard Skills? (p. 237)
4. Write a note on soft skills and their main components. (pp. 237-238)
5. "Feedback is like thermostat system". Discuss. (pp. 238-239)
6. Write a note on the importance of Feedback skills in management and administration. (pp. 238-240)
7. What are the main types listening? (p. 243)
8. What are the main barriers to listening, and how to overcome them? (p. 244)
9. What are the suggested guidelines to improve our skills of listening? (pp. 246-47)

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