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LISTENING SKILLS

Listening is the ability to accurately receive and interpret messages in the communication process.

Listening is key to all effective communication. Without the ability to listen effectively, messages are easily misunderstood. As a result, communication breaks down and the sender of the message can easily become frustrated or irritated.

If there is one communication skill you should aim to master, then listening is it.

Listening is so important that many top employers provide listening skills training for their employees. This is not surprising when you consider that good listening skills can lead to better customer satisfaction, greater productivity with fewer mistakes, and increased sharing of information that in turn can lead to more creative and innovative work.

Many successful leaders and entrepreneurs credit their success to effective listening skills. Richard Branson frequently quotes listening as one of the main factors behind the success of Virgin.

Good listening skills also have benefits in our personal lives, including:

A greater number of friends and social networks, improved self-esteem and confidence, higher grades at school and in academic work, and even better health and general well-being.

Studies have shown that, whereas speaking raises blood pressure, attentive listening can bring it down.

Listening is Not the Same as Hearing

Hearing refers to the sounds that enter your ears. It is a physical process that, provided you do not have any hearing problems, happens automatically.

Listening, however, requires more than that: it requires focus and concentrated effort, both mental and sometimes physical as well.

Listening means paying attention not only to the story, but how it is told, the use of language and voice, and how the other person uses his or her body. In other words, it means being aware of both verbal and non-verbal messages. Your ability to listen effectively depends on the degree to which you perceive and understand these messages.

Listening is not a passive process. In fact, the listener can, and should, be at least as engaged in the process as the speaker. The phrase 'active listening' is used to describe this process of being fully involved

The Purpose of Listening

There is no doubt that effective listening is an extremely important life skill. Why is listening so important?

Listening serves a number of possible purposes, and the purpose of listening will depend on the situation and the nature of the communication.

To specifically focus on the messages being communicated, avoiding distractions and preconceptions.

To gain a full and accurate understanding into the speakers point of view and ideas.

To critically assess what is being said. (See our page on Critical Thinking for more).

To observe the non-verbal signals accompanying what is being said to enhance understanding.

To show interest, concern and concentration.

To encourage the speaker to communicate fully, openly and honestly.

To develop an selflessness approach, putting the speaker first.

To arrive at a shared and agreed understanding and acceptance of both sides views.

Often our main concern while listening is to formulate ways to respond. This is not a function of listening. We should try to focus fully on what is being said and how it's being said in order to more fully understand the speaker.

Barriers to Effective Listening

To improve the process of effective listening, it can be helpful to turn the problem on its head and look at barriers to effective listening, or ineffective listening.

For example, one common problem is that instead of listening closely to what someone is saying, we often get distracted after a sentence or two and instead start to think about what we are going to say in reply or think about unrelated things. This means that we do not fully listen to the rest of the speaker's message.

This problem is attributed, in part, to the difference between average speech rate and average processing rate. Average speech rates are between 125 and 175 words a minute whereas we can process on average between 400 and 800 words a minute. It is a common habit for the listener to use the spare time while listening to daydream or think about other things, rather than focusing on what the speaker is saying.

Of course the clarity of what the speaker is saying can also affect how well we listen. Generally we find it easier to focus if the speaker is fluent in their speech, has a familiar accent, and speaks at an appropriate loudness for the situation. It is more difficult, for example, to focus on somebody who is speaking very fast and very quietly, especially if they are conveying complex information.

We may also get distracted by the speaker's personal appearance or by what someone else is saying, which sounds more interesting.

These issues not only affect you, but you are likely to show your lack of attention in your body language.

Generally, we find it much harder to control our body language, and you are likely to show your distraction and/or lack of interest by lack of eye contact, or posture. The speaker will detect the problem, and probably stop talking at best. At worse, they may be very offended or upset.

Our page on Barriers to Effective Listening explains more about common listening problems, and our page Listening Misconceptions details some of the common myths and misconceptions about listening.

Commandment of listening skills are

1. Stop Talking:

The first commandment of good listening is to stop talking. One cannot be talking and listening attentively, at the same time. The speaker cannot speak and get the message across if the listener continues to talk. Stop talking and start listening.

2. Put the Speaker at Ease:

The speaker can really organize his thoughts and convey them meaningfully only when put at ease. The listener does so through several positive signals such as sitting down, turning to the speaker and observing.

3. Show You Want to Listen:

This calls for a positive attitude on the part of the listener. The listener should indicate preparedness. The listener should make it clear that the listener is attentive and is keen to receive the message the communicator wants to convey. This may be done by appropriate body movement, right posture or by keeping the pen and pad ready.

4. Remove Distractions: Communication between the sender and receiver cannot progress if there are distractions. The receiver of the communication should show interest in listening, just as the speaker is interested in speaking. The listener has to remove distractions, if any, such as shut the door, switch off the cell phone and remove objects, if any, placed between the speaker and the listener so that body movements can be observed.

5. Empathize with the Speaker:

An important requirement for effective listening is that the listener should show empathy or proper understanding. The speaker may not be perfect and may have shortcomings. As a listener one should learn to put oneself in the speaker's shoes.

6. Be Patient:

This is an important attribute of good listening. A listener should not only be attentive, but also patient. One should wait for the speaker to complete the talk. The listener should refrain from making frequent interruptions, should avoid making derogatory remarks, cynical comments and distracting gestures. Every speaker has a train of thought, and gestures of impatience on the part of the listener may disturb the

delivery of the speech.

7. Hold Your Temper:

Good listening also calls for the right temperament. The listener may not appreciate what the communicator is conveying or the listener may decide that the speaker is factually incorrect. That does not give the listener a right to instant reaction.

8. Refrain from Argument and Criticism:

This is not an uncommon happening. Occasions are many when the listener picks up an argument with the speaker. The listener tries to challenge the speaker and criticize the person. Any such argument or criticism would be detrimental to the flow of communication.

The speaker and the listener have their respective roles to play and the listener should not make any verbal attack on the speaker. If there are many listeners or a large audience, any such act will deprive them of the benefit of the speaker's message.

9. Ask Questions and Elicit More:

While negative interventions and interruptions, as cited above, should be avoided, positive interventions by the listener are desirable. The listener should ask appropriate questions at the right opportunity to elicit more information.

In fact, any speaker would welcome this, for it not only provides the feedback, but also provides an opportunity to clarify the message and correct misconceptions, if any. In structured sessions in particular, the speaker provides for a question and answer session for facilitating greater understanding.

10. Stop Talking Again:

This aspect is so essential to the process of listening that it is repeated again as the tenth commandment. For speaking to progress smoothly, talking should be stopped not only at the beginning, but also throughout the message delivery process. Stop talking and keep listening.

It is evident that these Ten Commandments help the speaker in coming out with the best and making communication very effective.