

Listening Skills

Why Listening Is Important?

Communicating well consists of two parts: expressing yourself and listening to others. Many people forget the second part. Lots of people are good at talking, but when it's time to hear the thoughts and feelings of someone else, they fall short. Listening can be very challenging. It comes naturally to very few people, so to improve, you must be more intentional. Why is listening worth the extra effort? Here are ten reasons why it's important:

Listening builds trust

When you make the effort to listen to someone, they recognize your interest. They can tell that you're invested in what they're saying. This makes them more comfortable sharing with you and being open. If you were only half-listening, not making eye contact, or glancing at your phone, the other person won't want to waste their breath. They won't trust you to respect their thoughts and feelings.

Listening reduces misunderstandings

Misunderstandings are one of the most common effects of poor communication. When people aren't listening to each other, it's very easy to mishear something or misinterpret someone's meaning. Many times, misunderstandings aren't a big deal, but some can have major consequences. As an example, if someone isn't listening when their friend explains they have a certain food allergy, serving them a dish with a dangerous ingredient could be life-threatening.

Listening helps eliminate conflict

Poor listening skills are at the root of a lot of conflicts. Besides sometimes causing misunderstandings, not listening well frustrates people engaged in important conversations. People want to feel respected, which is irrevocably tied to feeling heard. You don't necessarily need to agree, but simply making the effort to hear another perspective keeps the situation calmer. When everyone feels calm and safe, it's much easier to work through tense situations without things escalating to conflict.

Listening encourages empathy

Humans are naturally empathetic, but we all have biases and assumptions that come from our upbringing and experiences. When you talk to people who have different backgrounds and experiences, it can be tempting to lean on

preconceived notions. Instead, you can commit to listening rather than assuming. When you hear right from a source, you'll have a deeper understanding of their perspective, which is key to having empathy.

Listening improves romantic relationships

Relationship experts always talk about the importance of listening. Poor communication is behind a lot of the conflict and heartache in romantic relationships. By listening to one another, you create a safe, judgment-free place. This can take a lot of practice as many struggling couples are used to interrupting and talking over each other. A qualified couple's therapist can recommend listening exercises that make the process more structured.

Listening improves business relationships

If your career involves interacting with others, you know how vital good communication is. Misunderstandings and conflict can derail projects and earn companies bad reputations. By committing to listening better, you can build strong relationships with coworkers and clients. People will feel respected and eager to work with you.

Listening helps deepen your friendships

Listening doesn't only improve your romantic or business relationships; it deepens your friendships, too. If you're feeling distant from your old friends or are struggling to connect with new ones, being a better listener could be a game-changer. The benefits of listening – greater trust, fewer misunderstandings, and more empathy – translate well to friendships. It's worth the effort. Deeper friendships are linked to better physical and mental health!

Listening increases your productivity

Whether you're at work or in school, listening is very important to your success. People who are good listeners are more likely to retain information, understand what's required of them, and ask the right questions. This is a valuable skill in group projects and meetings. Many people think they need to talk a lot to contribute, but listening is arguably more important. If everyone listens to each other, there are fewer misunderstandings. This saves everyone's time.

Listening helps with learning new languages

When you're learning a new language, you no doubt practice speaking a lot. Listening is just as important, but it's often neglected. Why? Many people find it exhausting – and it is – but that's because it's exercising your brain. Considering that we spend around 40-50% of our time listening as opposed to

talking or writing, hearing the language you want to learn is a big part of mastering it. Audiobooks, music, and movies are good resources.

Listening improves your leadership skills

If you're wanting to become a better leader, you should become a better listener. Active listening helps you make connections between your team's ideas, hear different perspectives, and prevent misunderstandings. A good team leader ensures everyone feels respected, which means they all feel heard. If you've always thought that good leaders are people who express themselves well, that's just half of the picture. They're also great listeners.

Qualities of good listeners.

1. They're fully present.

Being present means that you're engaged in the current moment. Instead of harbouring on the past (whether your own or the speaker's) or anticipating what they'll say next, you're processing the information as it's told to you. You avoid all distractions, including your phone and other people. This means you maintain good eye contact to emphasize and demonstrate your focus.

2. They don't listen to respond.

If you're constantly thinking about how you're supposed to react to what the speaker is saying, you're not being a good listener. Good listeners don't focus on what they're going to contribute to the conversation next. Instead, they listen to process and understand. If you're having trouble with this, try pretending you aren't able to react or respond to the speaker. What would you do if you wanted to remember and understand the conversation without verbally engaging with it? You'd be listening to comprehend, not respond.

3. They react at the moment.

Like not listening to respond, good listeners use their focus in the present to react on the fly. While the planners among us might be made uneasy by this quality, these moment-to-moment responses will be great if they're made with understanding. If you're present, you'll be able to focus and react with your gut, not with a critical (and often wrong or harsh) mind. Your honest responses will produce an organic environment where you're more likely to foster better connections with the speaker.

4. They don't have an agenda.

Good listeners go into conversations without any expectations. They're not attached to a certain outcome, so they're not going to steer the conversation any

way purposefully. Rather, they let the speaker guide the interaction and respond based on how they feel in the current moment. They don't have a higher initiative, but rather let the conversation flow where it needs to go.

5. They don't jump to give advice.

While good listeners shouldn't stray from helping someone in need or giving their input, they don't think their goal is to "fix" whatever the speaker needs. Sometimes, the best way to work through a problem is to talk through it—and that might mean no responses from a listener at all. Good listeners know when to offer their assistance and don't rush to add in their thoughts and risk taking attention away from the speaker.

6. They never interrupt.

It's frustrating to speak and constantly get interrupted. You might lose your argument or train of thought or even get your whole point derailed and forgotten. Good listeners understand this fury and simply listen until the speaker's finished. If they're confused, they follow up after the speaker has made their point. Often, initial confusion will be clarified later.

7. They ask follow-up questions.

An important part of listening is engaging with the speaker. Good listeners encourage what the speaker has to say and make sure they understand what's been communicated. They ask relevant questions or try to get more detail. If it's an emotional conversation, they provide support and ask the speaker about their needs. If it's more business-related, they may clarify and reiterate the agenda or ask anything they might not be sure about.

8. They listen as much (or more than) they speak.

Good listeners aren't worried about getting their say in. Instead, they're focused on what the speaker's saying and respond when necessary. Because they don't interrupt or have expectations of what to say, they respond organically and appropriately. They don't aim to dominate the conversation, but rather try to listen to the same amount or even more than they verbally contribute.

9. They show that they're listening.

Although they might not be speaking much during the conversation, good listeners show that they're engaged by using active body language. This may include nodding or leaning in to show agreement or to encourage the speaker to continue. One of the best ways to show you're listening is to keep eye contact

with the speaker — even if they're looking away, make sure to focus on them instead of letting your eyes constantly wander.

10. They're patient.

While they might want to jump in with a response, good listeners don't interrupt and wait until the speaker's finished with what they have to say. Imagine all that someone has to say fill up an imaginary personal balloon. Listeners don't wait until the speaker pauses but rather until they've emptied "their balloon." This means they encourage them to say all that they have to rather than rushing to finish the conversation.

11. They listen to learn.

Good listeners believe they'll learn something new from each conversation. They actively listen to understand new information or ask open-ended questions to allow the speaker to elaborate. Instead of having similar conversations, again and again, they remain interested and invested and try to learn something from everyone.

12. They're interested in what the speaker is interested in.

This doesn't mean that every good listener loves basketball and indie movies if their speaker does. Yet caring and supporting other people means being interested in what they have to say. Good listeners are genuinely curious and want to find out more about what the speaker has to say. They aren't asking questions to seem polite; they want answers, and they're excited about how the speaker will provide them.

13. They summarize what they've heard.

While they don't need to repeat what they've listened to word for word, good listeners respond with a summary that clarifies and processes what the speaker's just said. This typically comes closer to the end of the conversation to help highlight important moments or illuminate any outstanding issues.

Benefits of being a good listener.

- **You'll be more focused.**

Good listening requires the listener to pay great attention to what others are saying. This ability to focus is a great tool in any situation, whether you're working with others or trying to accomplish something yourself.

- **You build strong relationships.**

Imagine what it's like to have someone focus on what you're saying, without any distractions, and encourage you and engage with what you've communicated. You're likely to feel respected and valued. When you're a good listener, you connect with others more easily by showing you're trustworthy, reliable, and supportive.

- **You'll process information better.**

Because you're not focused on a specific outcome or expecting anything out of the conversation, you'll be present — which allows you to focus on the current moment and exactly what the speaker is saying. Instead of letting your head wander elsewhere, you can put all your attention into the interaction and take in all the information you need.

Learning to be a good listener is a continuous process, one that changes based on the situation, environment and person you're listening to. Although there are many listening opportunities to learn from, becoming a better listener means you can apply your skills across the board, whether you're in a business meeting or letting a close friend confide in you. Good listening is therefore an invaluable skill, one that not only improves your ability to understand and focus but also your relationships with the world and with others.

Barriers to Listening

Information Overload

Seventy percent of our waking time is spent in some sort of communication situation. Of that seventy percent, forty-five percent of that time is spent listening. Information overload is when you have so much information coming at you; it's easy to become overwhelmed. In a public speaking class, you can experience this when listening to your classmates give speeches— especially if you're hearing 20 speeches one after the other. You become overwhelmed and you'll probably find yourself tuning out at some point. Or what if a speaker condenses so many statistics into the presentation that you cannot keep track of all the numbers? That's information overload.

Personal Concerns

Let's face it, you have a lot going on in your life. You attend school, you probably work, you might be raising a family, and you have your issues to work through every day. Sometimes when we are absorbed in our thoughts and concerns, we can't focus on what someone else is saying. Your role as an audience member is to listen to what the speaker is saying. If you find yourself focusing on your upcoming speech rather than listening to your classmates,

you're allowing your concerns to distract you. Or perhaps you are worried about something happening at work or home. When you allow those worries to take your focus, you will often find that you become a less effective listener.

Outside Distraction

Classroom doors slamming, cell phones ringing, and students having conversations outside in the hall are all examples of outside distractions. It is your job to check out the speaking situations before you present. That way you expect some of the above-mentioned outside distractions. If you have a good idea of what to expect, you can adjust the volume, pace, pitch, and tone of your speech. If you are an audience member you can move to another seat, close the door, and do whatever is necessary to minimize distractions.

Prejudice

Sometimes you might have a hard time listening because you do not agree with the speaker. We, as humans, tend to be closed-minded at times. If you have an emotional reaction to a speaker or you disagree with his/her ideas on a personal level, you might allow personal prejudices to distract you. Keep an open mind. While you may not agree with the speaker, his or her message may be valid. You'll never know unless you hear them out.

Rate of Speech and Thought

Most people speak at a rate of 125 words per minute. As a listener, you can filter 700 words a minute. If we can process so many more words than we hear, a mental lag can occur. Eventually, you'll stop listening or you'll find yourself drifting in and out. It might be to your benefit to mentally summarize the speaker's ideas from time to time to keep yourself engaged.

Barriers to Active Listening

1. External Distractions

Physical distractions or things in your work environment that divert your attention away from the person with whom you're communicating.

2. Speaker Distractions

Any speaker peculiarities or distinctive characteristics that get in the way of hearing the speaker's message. These may include perceptions by the listener of the speaker such as culture, gender, age, communication style and job role. For example, a technical person who is very left-brained may be difficult for a marketing person who is also very right-brained to listen to.

3. Message Intent/Semantics

Any phrases and words that can be misinterpreted or have different meanings depending on who is using them or who is receiving them. Acronyms are a classic example. However, often people do not speak in full sentences or if they do, do not give context to a complex message. People seemingly refrain from telling the whole story.

4. Emotional Language

Phrases that generate emotion and, as a result, inhibit understanding. The use of extreme language such as “you always”, “we never”, “you must” or “we are forever” make it difficult for people to listen to a speaker.

5. Personal Perspective

Priorities or personal “baggage” that people carry with them, affect the communication process. This may include preformed solutions in the mind of the listener which occupy their mind when the speaker talks about a problem. The compulsion to solution find is great and can effectively stop us from listening.

Overcoming these barriers of noise can be difficult. Practising some simple techniques will take away the difficulty and the rewards for doing so are great.

Techniques to practise

1. External Distractions

This is the simplest of all barriers to overcome. Find a quiet area and sit with your back to windows and away from traffic, both vehicular and people.

2. Speaker Distractions

This is one of the more difficult barriers to overcome. The first step is to be self-aware that the speaker is distracting you. The trick if you find the speaker is distracting you is to paraphrase or reflect often. Don't allow the distraction to build to a point where you stop listening.

3. Message Intent/Semantics

This is reasonably simple to deal with by asking questions of clarification. Never let an acronym go unchallenged and use “What...?” questions when the context is ambiguous. “What do you mean by..?” is the simplest form. “Under what circumstances do you see that affecting/being important/occurring...?” is another useful form (Read the article: “The Power of “What...?” to learn more).

4. Emotional Language

Another difficult one for those of us not in control of our own emotions. Whilst it may not seem intuitive given that we are talking about being able to paraphrase and reflect on what the speaker is saying, this is the time to stop the speaker and call them out for the emotional/extreme language. Inform them that you want to listen to what they have to say and want to engage, but it is very difficult to have a conversation when one person is using very emotional or extreme language.

5. Personal Perspective

Personal baggage when listening is, to my mind, the most difficult noise to overcome. This is because the baggage usually triggers emotions which put us in a place where we are not in full control of ourselves. The technique is to watch for emotional triggers. Are you already not listening? Have you gone flush in the face? Are you thinking more about what you are going to say rather than concentrating on what the speaker is saying? If you can recognise that you are reacting poorly and if you cannot immediately recover your active listening capacity, then ask for a short break. Clear your head and focus on what was your goal of being an active listener. Start the conversation again with a steely determination to focus on what you want to achieve through being an active listener

References:

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