

CHAPTER

4

Active Listening

OBJECTIVES

You should study the chapter to know

- the importance of listening
- why some people are poor listeners
- the common myths about listening and guard against them
- the traits of a good listener
- the different modes and types of listening
- the barriers to effective listening
- how to take notes and listen intensively

INTRODUCTION

Imagine that a member of your team, in a meeting with potential clients, involuntarily keeps yawning. This behaviour would obviously put the clients off. Their professional evaluation of your organization would be negative and they might not want to go ahead with their business proposal. We would definitely not want someone dozing off when we are speaking to them. Likewise, we should attentively listen when someone else is addressing us.

Listening is a very important skill. Most people are oblivious of the time they spend in purposeful listening. Listening is quite similar to reading, as it involves the reception and decoding of verbal messages from another person. It is unwise to rely solely on receiving the message; meticulous efforts should be made not only to receive these messages but also to interpret them correctly. This is illustrated by the following example: In a biology class, the teacher asked the students to refer to *Origin of Species* by Darwin. One student sincerely rummaged through the library bookshelves looking for *Oranges and Peaches*, but to his utter dismay, he just could not find it. When narrated as a story, this sounds funny, but in reality, we regularly come across such situations, where confusion arises because of poor listening skills.

No communication process is complete without listening. Several studies have indicated that business people spend almost 45 per cent of their working time in listening. According to management guru Tom Peters, listening is an essential management and leadership skill. Similarly, effective listening is extremely important for students, as they spend most of their time listening to lectures. While we may not necessarily be born good listeners, active listening skills can be learnt and developed. Sharp learners may be poor listeners and, unbelievable as it may sound, those with imperfect hearing may still be excellent listeners. We can define listening as follows: *Listening is a process of receiving, interpreting, and reacting to a message received from the speaker.*

Meaning and Art of Listening

Listening is very different from hearing. We hear numerous little sounds and noises during the day without registering most of them. Birds chirping, cars honking, kids playing, and people talking are examples of such sounds. We do not pay attention to these sounds because we are not interested in them or because these sounds are not meaningful to us. Listening is as important as talking. Good listening involves encouraging the other person (the speaker in this case) by being sensitive to the thoughts and emotions hidden in their expressions. We also need to be patient while listening because otherwise we will lose track of what is being said.

'We have two ears and one mouth so that we can listen twice as much as we speak.'

-Epictetus

Listening takes a lot of energy. It is becoming a lost art, as people have stopped realizing its importance. Most children have a very short span of attention generally as well as in classrooms, making the job of the teacher very difficult. Like any other art, such as dancing or singing, listening also should be practised with full dedication and concentration. One can practise by listening to chat shows on TV and making mental notes.

Importance of Listening and Empathy in Communication

Listening is very important in the communications process. People believe that a good speaker is essentially a good communicator, but this may not be always true. We must gauge the person's listening skills during a conversation. We realize the importance of listening more when a very close person does not listen to what we say and comes up with 'Oh! I did not get you. Can you say that again?' She may have reacted this way because of divided attention. In our professional life we cannot afford to do that. If you observe a salesperson carefully, you will realize that he/she is successful not because of his/her persuasive power in speaking but because he/she has listened to the customer's need carefully, which has enabled him/her to sell his/her point well.

There is a close relationship between speaking and listening. Empathy plays a very important role in listening. We must put ourselves in the speakers' place and then listen. If we understand the speakers' viewpoint, apart from understanding them better, we will also be able to develop a good rapport with them. It is very important to understand the emotions and feelings of a person to better empathize with his/her viewpoint. We must listen without any biases and prejudices, and be open to the views of other people.



Refer to the CD for a PowerPoint presentation on listening.

REASONS FOR POOR LISTENING

There are several reasons for poor listening. We will examine these reasons in this section.

Listening training is unavailable

Most people are formally trained in the major communicative skills of writing, reading, and speaking. While listening is a skill all of us use most frequently, it is also a skill in which we have least formal training. While workshops and conferences provide opportunities to improve writing and speaking skills, it is difficult to find training to sharpen listening skills.

Speed of thought is more than speed of speech

Another reason for poor listening skills is that people can think faster than they can speak. Most of us speak at the rate of about 125 words per minute. However, we have the mental capacity to understand someone speaking at 400–500 words per minute (if that were possible). This

How Much are You Paid for Listening?

A manager asked her secretary to keep track of the time she spent listening on the telephone. She was shocked to discover that her company was paying her 35 per cent of her salary, or \$18,000, for this

function. Amazingly, on the average, people are only about 25 per cent efficient as listeners. With this efficiency rate, she was being paid about \$13,500 for the time she spent listening inefficiently!

difference between speed of speaking and thought means that when we listen to the average speaker, we are using only 25 per cent of our mental capacity. We still have 75 per cent of unutilized mental capacity. So, our mind starts wandering. This means that we need to make a real effort to listen carefully, and concentrate more of our mental capacity on the act of listening.

We are inefficient listeners

Numerous tests confirm that humans are inefficient listeners. Studies conducted by Gail Miller at Washington State University have shown that immediately after listening to a 10-minute oral presentation, the average listener has heard, understood, and retained 50 per cent of what was said. Within 48 hours, that drops off by another 50 per cent, to a final level of 25 per cent efficiency. In other words, we often comprehend and retain only one fourth of what we hear. We all want to be more than 25 per cent efficient. It is not difficult to see the many problems inefficient listeners can create for themselves and others. Poor listening is the cause of many personal and professional problems.

Listening versus Hearing

When we think about listening, we tend to assume that it is basically the same as hearing. This is a misconception because it leads us to believe that effective listening is instinctive. As a result, we make little effort to learn, or develop listening skills, and unknowingly neglect a vital communication function. Consequently, we create unnecessary problems for others and ourselves: misunderstandings, hurt feelings, confused instructions, loss of important information, embarrassment, frustration, and lost opportunities. Listening involves a more sophisticated mental process than hearing. It demands energy and discipline. Effective listening is most often a learned skill. The first step is to realize that effective listening is an active, not a passive, process. The belief that the power of the talker plays a major role in communication is why many managers are poor listeners. In our society, talking is mistakenly viewed as more important, with listening categorized as only a supportive function.

Poor Listening Habits

We often do a lot of things without thinking too much about them. These are our habits, which have formed over many years of doing the same thing and getting by with it. The following are some of these ingrained habits which result in poor listening.

Listening but not hearing Sometimes a person listens only to the supporting facts or details or to the way they are presented, and misses the real meaning.

Rehearsing Some people listen only until they decide that they want to say something; then they quit listening, start rehearsing what they want to say, and wait for the opportunity to jump in and talk.

Interrupting The listener does not wait to determine the complete meaning, but interrupts so forcefully that the speaker stops in mid-sentence.

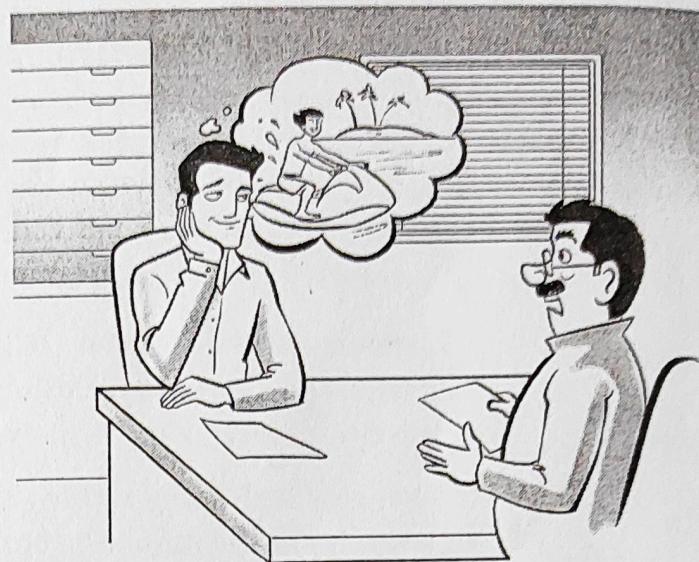
Hearing what is expected People frequently hear what they expect to hear; alternatively, they refuse to hear what they do not want to hear.

Feeling defensive The listener assumes that they know the speaker's intention, or why something was said; or for various reasons, they expect to be attacked and react defensively.

Listening for a point of disagreement Some listeners seem to wait for the chance to attack someone. They listen intently for points on which they can disagree and then attack or confront.

Labelling the subject matter uninteresting A poor listener when faced with a known topic might find the discussion dull. They are convinced that the topic is uninteresting, and turn to the many other thoughts and concerns stored up in their minds for just such an occasion—to start using that unoccupied 75 per cent of their mental capacity. A good listener, on the other hand, might start at the same point, but would arrive at a different conclusion. He/she would say, 'That sounds like a dull subject and I do not see how it could help me in my work. But I am here, so I guess I will pay attention and see what this person has to say. Maybe there will be something I can use.'

Criticizing the delivery or appearance of the speaker Many of us do this regularly. We tend to mentally criticize the speaker for not speaking distinctly, for talking too softly, for reading, for not looking the audience in the eye, etc. We often do the same thing with the speaker's appearance.



'The sales are low! We need to strategize. Call for a brainstorming session in Goa.'

How to Solve Problems—by Listening

Employees frequently have excellent ideas about improving the productivity of the work environment. Managers who listen to these ideas solve more problems than those who do not. These managers create a sense of concern for their staff while receiving better-quality information. Ranjan Das, the foreman of a large manufacturing plant, called in Krishnan, a supervisor of a production line, into his office to explain the plans for a new way to assemble machinery. Ranjan described how he thought the procedure should be changed. Krishnan's only response was silence and a frown. The foreman, reading Krishnan's non-verbal communication accurately,

realized that something was wrong and sensed that Krishnan might have something to say. So he said, 'Krishnan, you have been in the department longer than me. What is your reaction to my suggestion? I am listening.' Krishnan paused and then began to speak. He realized his manager had opened the door to communication and felt comfortable offering suggestions from his years of experience. As the two employees exchanged ideas, a mutual respect and trust developed, along with a solution to the technical problems. While listening, the manager remained in complete control of the situation. He was an active, not a passive, listener.

If the speaker is not dressed as we think he/she should be, we tend to not listen closely or we may immediately classify the speaker as liberal or conservative, a hippie or boring. However, if we concentrate on what the speaker is saying, we may begin to understand the message and may even get interested. The message is more important than the form in which it is delivered.

Becoming too stimulated Suppose we disagree with something a speaker has said. Then following our own train of thought, we spend more time developing counter arguments, and no longer listen to the speaker's additional comments. We are busy formulating questions in our mind to ask the speaker, or we may be thinking of arguments that can be used to disprove the speaker. In such cases, our listening efficiency drops to nearly zero because of over-stimulation. So, we must hear the speaker out before we react.

Listening only for facts Many of us listen only for facts and, while we may recall some isolated facts, we miss the primary idea the speaker is trying to convey. We must ensure that our concern for facts does not prevent us from hearing the speaker's primary points.

Trying to outline everything that is being said Many speakers are so unorganized that their comments really cannot be outlined in any logical manner. It is better to listen, in such a case, for the main point. A good listener knows many ways of making notes and selects the best one to fit a speaker.

Common Myths about Listening

To better understand what it takes to be a good listener, we must discard the following common myths associated with listening.

Myth 1 'I do not have to concentrate: listening comes naturally.'

Truth Being a good listener requires a conscious effort. You must keep your mind constantly engaged and in gear.

Myth 2 'I am a good listener because I always get the facts and figures straight.'

Truth You may be a selective listener. You listen to the facts and figures, but do not hear or comprehend the rest of the information, such as questions raised,

emotions of the speaker, context, opinions, and ideas discussed.

Myth 3 'You should not interrupt when someone is speaking.'

Truth A good listener does not hesitate to interrupt if the speaker's information is unclear. You must be an inquisitive listener to be an effective listener.

Myth 4 'A good listener paraphrases everything a speaker says.'

Truth If you constantly parrot people's statements back to them, they will think you are slow or—even worse—proud. It is good to repeat key information and ask the speaker to verify it, but do not rephrase all the comments.

TRAITS OF A GOOD LISTENER

Although acquiring the skill of active listening needs much effort, it is not impossible. A few guidelines are given in the following paragraphs. Some actions might seem unnatural and forced but can be inculcated with practice. For instance, it is very difficult to be patient with a speaker if he/she appears to be irrational and illogical. However, we must be tolerant in such circumstances. The guidelines suggested here will definitely help develop an attitude of tolerance and understanding.

Being Non-evaluative

The verbal and non-verbal behaviour of an active listener will suggest to the speaker that he/she is being properly heard and understood. It should not, however, indicate what one thinks about

A good conversationalist is popular, a good listener even more so. Talk only if you have something to say.

the person. The purpose is to communicate, overlooking the qualities of the ideas, attitudes, and values of the speaker. In other words, the speaker is not to be evaluated for his/her personal qualities. Our behaviour should convey the impression that we accept the speaker without making any judgement of right or wrong, good or bad, suitable or unsuitable.

Paraphrasing

To clarify a point, one can simply paraphrase what the speaker has said and enquire from the speaker whether one has heard it accurately. Use phrases like the following ones to ensure that the information has been paraphrased correctly:

As I gather, you want to tell ...
So you mean to say that ...
Oh! Your feeling towards ...
Do you mean that ..

Reflecting Implications

To reflect on the implications of what has been said, it is necessary to go a bit beyond the direct contents of the speaker, indicating appreciation of his/her ideas and what he/she is leading to. This may encourage the speaker to further extend the ideas. The listener's aim here is to reflect eagerness and zest by verbal or non-verbal means, thereby giving positive feedback. Phrases such as the following can be used:

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 ...

If this technique is used to change the direction of the speaker's thinking, by showing one's cleverness in suggesting ideas that the speaker has not thought of before, it creates distrust between the two parties. However, if the technique is used with the genuine intention of understanding more, one can certainly help the speaker by boosting his/her confidence and making him/her believe that the listener has grasped the content well.

Attending Responses

Tone of voice can quickly indicate if you are interested. Use a warm, informal, and friendly tone. Address the speaker by his first name, whenever appropriate.

Jargon

Unless you know speakers well enough to know their familiarity with technical language, avoid using language that could be perceived as technobabble.

Reflecting Hidden Feelings

Sometimes, one has to go beyond the explicit feelings and content of what is being said to unravel the underlying feelings, intentions, beliefs, or values that may be influencing the speaker's words. The listeners must try and empathize or identify themselves with the speaker, to experience what they feel. One can express one's sentiments by using phrases such as:

If I were in your place, I would not have handled the situation so well.
That must have been a satisfying experience.
If I were in such a situation, I would have sought the help of seniors.
If that had happened to me, I would have been very upset.

In reflecting the speaker's covert feelings, one must be careful not to overexpose the speaker, by coaxing them to admit more than they desire. We should also avoid suggesting to the speaker that the feelings we reflect

As a Good Listener

Use affirmative prompting through verbal or non-verbal means, where appropriate, to encourage the speaker.

Be careful with your own body language. Crossing and re-crossing your legs, slumping, or raising

your brows can be misinterpreted by the speaker and interrupt the flow of thought.

are what ought to be felt by the speaker in such a situation. This would make the speaker feel evaluated. Acceptance is conveyed more by one's manner and tone than by words. We have already studied non-verbal communications in Chapter 3.

Inviting Further Contributions

In a situation where we have not heard or understood enough yet to respond with empathy and understanding, we must prompt the speaker to give more information. Phrases such as the following can be used:

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 ... ?

While it is useful to ask questions, one should guard against asking too many. This may lead speakers to suspect that rather than seeking information, one is interrogating or challenging them.

When we want a speaker to expand on his/her subject, we must ask *open-ended questions*, which require more than a straight *yes* or *no* answer. *Open-ended questions* encourage a speaker and help the listener gain more information. For instance, 'What solutions have you thought of?' is open-ended, whereas 'Have you thought of this solution?' is not. Avoid probing and pointed questions fired at the speaker in a dogmatic way. Open-ended questions create a more supportive, trusting climate, which helps the communication move smoothly.

The listener must keep statements and questions short and easy to understand. They should use conversational English (say *talk* instead of *communicate* and *write* instead of *correspond*). Above all, remember that if we are talking most of the time, we are probably not listening very well.

Responding Non-verbally

Listeners can show active interest by adopting certain postures and sending non-verbal signals that communicate their interest in what the speaker is saying. These include regular eye contact (without staring), body leaning slightly towards the speaker, head nods, and a slightly tilted head (refer to the photographs of appropriate and inappropriate body postures given in Chapter 3). Occasionally, certain receptive utterances such as '*yes*' and '*ur-hum*' can also be used to indicate that one is following what the speaker is saying, while being careful not to overdo it. Attentive silence is more effective than too many receptive utterances.

Non-verbal Techniques to Indicate Your Attentiveness

- Suitable facial expressions and natural smiles (without excessive smiling)
- Open posture (arms not crossed) and open palms (rather than clenched fists or fidgeting)
- Appropriate distance (usually an arm's length away from the speaker)

By giving such non-verbal signals, the listener helps the speaker feel more confident and reflects interest and understanding. This also helps generate more trust between the listener and the speaker.

LISTENING MODES

People use different kinds of listening modes in different situations. The mode depends on factors such as mood, mindset, topic, time of day, relevance, and importance. It is sometimes not enough to just listen; we should also send positive signals to the speaker that we are with him or her. Let us discuss the various types of listening one by one.

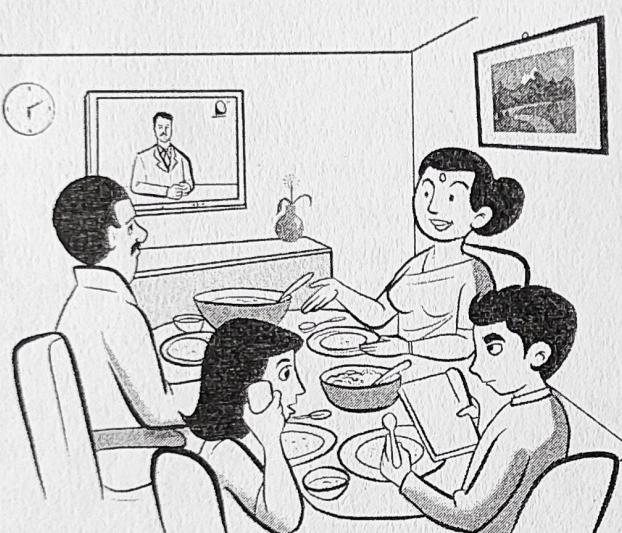
Active versus Passive Listening

Paying attention

We often listen to various forms of communication in an unconscious manner. At dinner, we glance at the television while busy eating or talking to someone else. This is not active listening—either to the TV or to the person we are talking to. How can we develop the ability to listen to others patiently and carefully? Improper listening is very harmful, as such communication is prone to distortion. It is also a waste of time. The responsibility of the listener is to *show keenness* in the speaker's talk through *expressions*,

alertness, and by *asking questions* about the speech, if required. By doing this, the listener will encourage the speaker to express his/her ideas clearly and enthusiastically. If the listener looks bored, it will discourage the speaker.

Focus on the speaker. Ignore all distractions so that you can concentrate on the speaker's flow of thought. Try to ignore feelings of hunger, weariness, or discomfort. Alternatively, you can confide your discomfort to the speaker, so that some remedy can be provided (e.g., improved ventilation).



Skills in this area can be improved by listening to commentaries on TV or radio. Concentrate on the theme, supporting ideas, and also the digressions, if any, in the speech. Further, it is helpful to write down the gist of what we have heard. This exercise can certainly help improve listening skills.

So far, we have emphasized on the importance of paying attention to a person's speech. It is equally important not to neglect the physical aspects of the person. Appearance, expressions, bodily movements, and posture are all as significant as words in conveying a meaning. A person's body language, or non-verbal communication is involuntary and, therefore, more truthful. Hence, a listener should pay considerable attention to the

physical messages conveyed by a speaker in order to assess the accuracy and sincerity of his/her speech.

If, as the listener, we feel that the speaker is being critical about us, we tend to become inattentive, as nobody likes criticism. *As a wise listener, one must look for a valid reason for the criticism* and determine the reason for the speaker's dissatisfaction. Adopting a receptive and constructive attitude to criticism can lead to self-improvement. We tend to listen carefully only to those messages that are advantageous or pleasing to us, but in order to have a fruitful conversation, we should also learn to take equal interest in speeches that contain messages of interest to the speaker.

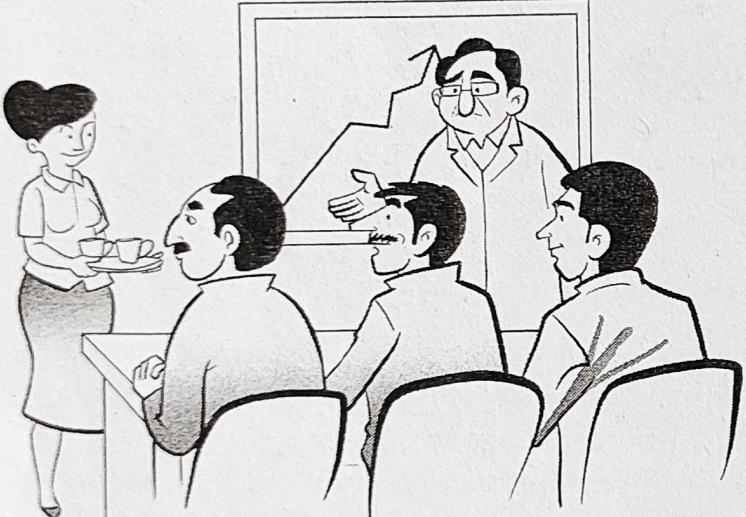
As a Sincere Listener

Accept your role as a listener by listening actively, engaging positively, participating fully, and encouraging the speaker consciously.

Do not pretend to show interest. Your involuntary non-verbal behaviour, such as glazed eye-contact or strained expression, will give you away.

Dealing with distractions

In the process of developing active listening skills, one should train oneself to avoid physical distractions and concentrate completely on the message. An attractive face in the room and sometimes even the fragrance of perfume can act as distractions. However, a careful listener has to exercise a great deal of mental discipline to remain focused on the message conveyed by the speaker.



Often, after a period of continuous listening, people get tired and start losing interest in the message. They have to force themselves hard to stay with the speech and the contents. This usually happens because of 'brain time'. As discussed earlier, our minds have 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. To overcome this difficulty, the listener should try

'The most important thing in communication is to listen to what isn't being said.'

-Peter F. Drucker

to stay alert by anticipating what the speaker will say next. If the listener's guess turns out correct, his/her interest in the speech will revive. This will enable the listener to grasp and recall the speech better.

Since a listener's capacity to absorb information is much more than a speaker's ability to talk, a lot of time is available for the listener to evaluate the message. Sometimes a listener focuses on the message in fragments and is, therefore, unable to take in the entire message. Further, listeners also interrupt the speaker without listening to the complete message. Careful listeners, however, never jump to conclusions about the message unless the speaker has finished. *Effective listening is possible only if the listener patiently listens to the complete speech.*

A sincere listener always puts in a conscious effort by listening with a positive attitude. A pretentious listener will show his/her attentiveness by awkward postures like resting his/her

chin on his/her hand, or bending forward too much to show that he/she is paying a lot of attention to the message while his/her mind is actually far away. He/she has no clue about what the speaker is saying. Effective listening does not come easily; it requires great effort to pay complete attention. Listeners require mental preparedness and energy to concentrate on the speaker's words as well as his/her non-verbal cues of communication like posture, gesture, eye contact, facial expressions, etc.

Sometimes noise distracts the attention of the listener. This should be ignored or sidetracked. If you go to your boss to discuss something and he continuously shuffles papers and talks over the telephone, his listening will be distracted. Superiors should take care to provide an ambience conducive to sympathetically hearing their subordinates. Proper listening will enable the speaker to release emotional tension, which will improve the working environment of the organization. Table 4.1 lists a few tips for effective listening.

TABLE 4.1 Tips for effective listening

Dos	Don'ts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be mentally prepared to listen. • Evaluate the speech, not the speaker. • Be unbiased towards the speaker by depersonalizing your feelings. • Fight distractions by blocking off sound sources. • Be open-minded. • Ask questions to clarify and confirm thoughts. • Paraphrase from time to time. • Send appropriate non-verbal signals from time to time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pay undue emphasis to the vocabulary, as you can use the context to understand the meaning. • Pay too much attention to the accessories and clothing of the speaker. • Prepare your responses while the speaker is speaking. • Get distracted by outside influences. • Hold preconceptions and prejudices. • Concentrate too hard. • Interrupt too often. • Show boredom even to an uninteresting speaker.

Global versus Local Listening

To become an effective listener in multicultural settings, one must be aware of the cultural variations involved. In the case of a foreign speaker, one must pay attention to the diction and choice of language. One should also be aware of the possible idiomatic expressions that are specific to any particular region. For example, 'cover all the bases' is an idiom originated from baseball, a sport not known in India. So, if an American speaker uses such a phrase, the listener shouldn't be taken by surprise. The non-verbal conversational behaviour of people from different countries also varies. For example, 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. Therefore, in global listening, one must make an effort to pick up the differences in culture, politics, demography, non-verbal cues, etc. It is much different from when you are in a local setting, listening to people you are comfortable with.

TYPES OF LISTENING

While certain skills are basic and necessary for all types of listening (receiving, attending, and understanding), each type requires some special skills. Before we can fully appreciate the skills and apply the guidelines, we must understand the different types of listening.

Appreciative listening

Appreciative listening is listening for deriving aesthetic pleasure, as we do when we listen to a comedian, musician, or entertainer.

Empathetic listening

As we have learnt, empathy is very important in communication, particularly in listening. A good example of empathetic listening is that practiced by nurses. So much so that it gives a healing touch to the patient. For effective empathetic listening, one

has to feel what the speaker is feeling. One has to appreciate the speaker's emotions, circumstance, mindset, and perspective, and be able to provide



emotional and moral support. When a psychiatrist listens to her subject, she employs empathetic listening. We must feel the person's nerves. This can be done through phrases like 'I can understand what you have gone through,' 'It must be difficult to face such a situation,' etc. Sometimes the situation is very sensitive and must be handled with caution.

'You do not listen with just your ears: you listen with your eyes and with your sense of touch, you listen by becoming aware of the feelings and emotions that arise within yourself because of this contact with others. You listen with your mind, your heart, your imagination.'

-Egan Gerard (1988)

Comprehensive listening

This type of listening is needed in the classroom when students have to listen to the lecturer to understand and comprehend the message. Similarly, when someone is giving you directions to find the location of a place, comprehensive listening is required to receive and interpret the message.

Critical listening

Also known as *evaluative*, *judgemental*, or *interpretive* listening, critical listening involves analysing, evaluating, and judging what is being said. Just as we formulate opinions about people before they speak based on their physical attributes, we also tend to get judgemental about the contents of their speech. We try to see if the person has said something based on facts or is simply beating about the bush. This type of listening is applicable when the other person is trying to persuade. In such cases, we try to evaluate the tone, the non-verbal signals, and the underlying meaning of the words. We judge the argument based on our knowledge and experience. For example, listening to a salesperson before making a purchase or listening to politicians making their election campaign speech involves critical listening.

Superficial listening

Superficial listening can be compared with hearing or passive listening. One pretends to be listening by giving fake expressions to avoid offending the speaker. However, not much is fed into the brain. This happens, for example, when one is forced to attend a guest lecture on an area that is not of one's interest.

'You' viewpoint

Covey says 'Seek first to understand, and then to be understood'. This is a subtle way of saying that we should put the other person before us. If we give the other person more importance and avoid forcing our opinion, we can listen better. Using this 'you' viewpoint, we boost the speaker's confidence, making him/her more open to communication. Another way of achieving this is to address the speaker by his/her name, which gives the impression that we are listening with full attention.

 Refer to Payoffs of Effective Listening on the Students' Resource.

BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE LISTENING

In this section we will examine some common barriers to listening, which, with some practice, can be overcome. An average person spends 70 per cent waking hours communicating, and 45 per cent of those listening. The following could be some factors that create barriers to listening.

Content

Listeners knowing too much They feel that their knowledge is so extensive that there is little left to learn.

Listeners knowing too little They tune out when faced with difficult intellectual or emotional content. They only listen to information that conforms to their beliefs.

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.

Speaker

 *Delivery* The speaker's accent, organization, clarity, speed, volume, tone, inflections, emotions, and appearance affect the interpretation of the message. (Refer to the telephone conversation in the CD.)

'When people talk, listen completely. Most people never listen.'

—Ernest Hemingway

Attitudes toward speaker Listeners are influenced more by their attitude towards the speaker than the information presented. If the listener likes the speaker, he/she is more likely to empathize and, therefore, comprehend the message.

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

Medium

Distance and circumstances Listening requires least effort when the speaker is not visible. More effort is needed when the speaker is visible, but not physically present (e.g., a speaker on TV). Maximum effort is needed in face-to-face interactions. This happens because the amount and variety of both verbal and non-verbal stimuli increase. These stimuli can either help or hinder communication.

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

Distractions

Extraneous stimuli Sounds, lights, odours, mannerisms, voice inflections, and moving objects can easily distract listeners. Psychological studies indicate that a listener's attention span is sometimes not more than two or three seconds. These stimuli can be categorized 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.

Mindset



Language

Ambiguity Listeners rarely hear every word spoken and may attach different meanings to words than intended by the speaker.

Misinterpretation This can occur when the words used are imprecise, emotional, technical, or overly intellectual. It occurs most often when listeners interpret words based on personal definitions, established by 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.

Attitudes Attitudes are structured by a listener's unique physical, mental, and emotional characteristics. An individual's mindset can either magnify or diminish 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.

Listening speed

Rate The average speaking rate is 125–150 words per minute. The average listening capacity is 400–500 words a minute, leaving a lot of excess thinking time.

Think time Poor listeners use the excess time to daydream, often missing part of the message.

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.

Feedback

Inappropriate Often, the listener ends up giving premature comments or evaluations without a full understanding of the speaker's viewpoint. Such comments, which may be coloured with emotions of resentment, defensiveness, or suspicion, can hinder the speaker by confusing them or diverting them into tangents.

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. These must be timed so as to assist rather than hinder the speaker.

Cultural barriers

Listening is tough, and more so if someone is from another culture or subculture. The problem crops up because of the different choice of words, accents, pronunciation, and many other intangible reasons. One must be extra careful while listening to a person from another region or culture. In fact listening can be improved by talking to more people of different nations and trying to understand them. (Refer to the telephone conversation in the CD.)



For example,

At a hotel lobby in Tokyo:

American: I would like a room for two nights.

Japanese speaker of English: For tonight?

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

LISTENING FOR GENERAL CONTENT AND SPECIFIC INFORMATION

When listening to a speaker for general content, one's focus should be on an overview of the topic. Do not pay attention to the minor details and the examples, but observe the gist of it. If one is clear with the purpose of listening, one's task will be easier. However, one needs to concentrate even when listening for general content.

Specific information is a lot simpler to collect. The method remains similar to that just described, just that the scope is limited and efforts reduced. We can ignore the peripheral details and look only for the keywords.

Practice 2



Audio Clip Group 2: Listen to the three short audio clips based on a discussion on diabetes by a professor with his students. Choose the best option for the following questions:

- (i) What does the professor imply about many people?
 - A. Some people should know that sweets are unhealthy.
 - B. Some people believe that sweets with organically grown sugar do not cause diabetes.
 - C. Some people incorrectly think that sugary foods are the cause of diabetes.
 - D. Some people already know that eating sweets can cause diabetes.

- (ii) What does the professor mean when he says: 'And this can be tricky!?
 - A. Controlling blood sugar levels is like performing magic.
 - B. Maintaining healthy insulin levels throughout the day is not easy.
 - C. Diabetics cannot give themselves insulin without a doctor's assistance.
 - D. Determining the correct amount of insulin for an injection is not difficult.

- (iii) Referring to question (ii), Why does the professor say this?
 - A. To point out to students that they may have experienced low blood sugar.
 - B. To determine how the students manage their blood sugar levels.
 - C. To determine whether there were any diabetics in the class.
 - D. To point out an error that a student had made earlier.

Listening and Note-taking

You might have noticed that when you present a topic to your class, your teacher takes notes, and after you complete, she refers to her notes and gives her comments on your performance.

Note-taking is a process of summarizing information from spoken material. This skill requires adequate practice. As a student, you do this exercise daily when you attend your classes. Most probably for every subject you have a notebook in which you write the main points of a lecture. First, one has to listen to what is being said with full attention. Next, one has to recognize quickly the main points that the speaker makes and note them down immediately. As we know, the speed of speech is faster than the speed of writing. So some extra effort is required to keep pace with the speaker. Unlike written material, where one has the advantage of going back and referring to it, speeches, unless recorded, are not available afterwards, and hence require one's complete attention.

You might have found it easy to take notes during certain lectures. In such lectures, the speaker would have given a signal when he/she was about to discuss a main point and/or a summary of the main points. So you could quickly check the points you had noted. Some speakers write the full text of their speech and read it before an audience. In such a case one might procure a copy and *make* notes.

While taking notes, one may also take down the important examples or quotations that the speaker may use for support, illustration, or explanation. If visual material is used for this purpose, the note-taker's job is easier, as there is the advantage of being able to see the matter being presented. Usually, the speakers present only the very important points visually. One need not, however, copy everything that is presented visually. One must exercise one's judgement and note only the main points.

Keyword outline method of note-taking

To use this method, one needs to note the speaker's main points and supporting evidence in a rough outline form. Consider the following speech:

Reports from a range of scientific disciplines are telling us with certainty that we are making a mess of the earth, we are fouling our nest, and we have to act decisively and against our immediate inclinations for we tend to be superstitious, hierarchical, and self-interested just when the moment requires us to be rational, even-handed, and altruistic. We are shaped by our history and biology to frame our plans within the short term, within the scale of a single lifetime; and in democracies, governments and electorates collude in an even tighter cycle of promise and gratification. Now we are asked to address the well-being of unborn individuals we will never meet and who, contrary to the usual terms of human interaction, will not be returning the favour.

To concentrate our minds, we have historical examples of civilizations that have collapsed through environmental degradation—the Sumerian, the Indus Valley, Easter Island. They extravagantly feasted on vital natural resources and died. Those were test-tube cases, locally confined; now, increasingly, we are one and we are informed, reliably or not, that it is the whole laboratory, the whole glorious human experiment that is at risk.

Using the keyword outline method of note-taking, you would take the following notes:

- Reasons for making mess of the earth
 - superstitions, selfishness, hierarchies, inadequate planning, clash between governments and electorates
- Examples of environmental degradation
 - the Sumerian, the Indus Valley, Easter Island
- Situation facing us
 - ancient civilizations feasting on natural resources—localized
 - now it is globalized

Notice how brief the notes are. There are only 45 words as compared to the speaker's 193 words, but they accurately summarize the speaker's main points. Also notice how clear the notes are. By separating the main points from the sub-points, the outline format shows the relationship among the speaker's ideas.

When taking notes, the name of the speaker, the topic, and the date of the speech should also be noted. Since notes are taken under pressure of time, it is necessary to read them soon after the lecture is over. This would enable one to insert any omission or delete any irrelevant matter that may have been included. Whenever one's own short forms are used for certain words (e.g., 'sth' for something, 'sb' for somebody, 'exp' for experiment), these must be expanded soon after. It is advisable to make it a habit to use fixed short forms, so that one does not falter in deciphering (e.g., 'exp' should always refer to experiment and not experience).

Intensive Listening

Intensive listening is required when the answer to a specific problem is required. You must have observed that when you are listening to some popular speaker to get the answer to a particular query, your focus is on the answer to that query, while the rest of the details are unimportant. To test your intensive listening skills, you could read the test questions first and then listen to the passage for answers to those questions. The following practice exercise will help you practise intensive listening.