

LISTENING SKILLS

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20.1 MEANING

Listening is one of the most important skills you can have. How well you listen has a major impact on your job effectiveness, and on the quality of your relationships with others.

- We listen to obtain information.
- We listen to understand.
- We listen for enjoyment.
- We listen to learn.

Given all this listening we do, you would think we'd be good at it!

In fact most of us are not, and research suggests that we remember between 25 percent and 50 percent of what we hear. That means that when you talk to your boss, colleagues, customers or spouse for 10 minutes, they pay attention to less than half of the conversation. This is dismal! Turn it around and it reveals that when you are receiving directions or being presented with information, you aren't hearing the whole message either. You hope the important parts are captured in your 25-50 percent, but what if they're not?

Clearly, listening is a skill that we can all benefit from improving. By becoming a better listener, you will improve your productivity, as well as your ability to influence, persuade and negotiate. What's more, you'll avoid conflict and misunderstandings. All of these are necessary for workplace success!

Listening
=
Learning

20.2 GOOD LISTENING FOR IMPROVED COMMUNICATION / ACTIVE LEARNING

The way to become a better listener is to practice "active listening." This is where you make a conscious effort to hear not only the words that another person is saying but, more importantly, try to understand the complete message being sent.

In order to do this you must pay attention to the other person very carefully.

You cannot allow yourself to become distracted by whatever else may be going on around you, or by forming counter arguments that you'll make when the other person stops speaking. Nor can you allow yourself to get bored, and lose focus on what the other person is saying. All of these contribute to a lack of listening and understanding.

To enhance your listening skills, you need to let the other person know that you are listening to what he or she is saying. To understand the importance of this, ask yourself if you've ever been engaged in a conversation when you wondered if the other person was listening to what you were saying. You wonder if your message is getting across, or if it's even worthwhile continuing to speak. It feels like talking to a brick wall and it's something you want to avoid. Using body language and other signs to acknowledge you are listening also reminds you to pay attention and not let your mind wander.

20.3 PRINCIPLES OF GOOD LISTENING

There are five key elements of active listening. They all help you ensure that you hear the other person, and that the other person knows you are hearing what they say.

1. Pay Attention

Give the speaker your undivided attention, and acknowledge the message. Recognize that non-verbal communication also "speaks" loudly.

- Look at the speaker directly.
- Put aside distracting thoughts.
- Don't mentally prepare a rebuttal!
- Avoid being distracted by environmental factors. For example, side conversations.
- "Listen" to the speaker's body language.

2. Show That You're Listening

Use your own body language and gestures to convey your attention.

- Nod occasionally.
- Smile and use other facial expressions.
- Note your posture and make sure it is open and inviting.
- Encourage the speaker to continue with small verbal comments like yes, and uh huh.

3. Provide Feedback

Our personal filters, assumptions, judgments, and beliefs can distort what we hear. As a listener, your role is to understand what is being said. This may require you to reflect what is being said and ask questions.

- Reflect what has been said by paraphrasing. "What I'm hearing is," and "Sounds like you are saying," are great ways to reflect back.
- Ask questions to clarify certain points. "What do you mean when you say." "Is this what you mean?"
- Summarize the speaker's comments periodically.

4. Defer Judgment

Interrupting is a waste of time. It frustrates the speaker and limits full understanding of the message.

- Allow the speaker to finish each point before asking questions.
- Don't interrupt with counter arguments.

5. Respond Appropriately

Active listening is a model for respect and understanding. You are gaining information and perspective. You add nothing by attacking the speaker or otherwise putting him or her down.

- 1) Be candid, open, and honest in your response.
- 2) Assert your opinions respectfully.
- 3) Treat the other person in a way that you think he or she would want to be treated.



20.4 THE IMPORTANCE OF LISTENING

- Listening is a critical receptive skill (“input”) that typically precedes productive ability (“output”)
- In the language classroom and outside the class students engage in more listening than speaking
- Providing students with comprehensible input is an important element of language teaching

20.5 TYPES OF LISTENING

Most communication experts agree that poor listening skills are the biggest contributors to poor communication. There are four basic types of listening.

1. **Inactive listening.** The definition of this is the old adage, “In one ear and out the other.” You hear the words, but your mind is wandering and no communication is taking place.
2. **Selective listening.** You hear only what you want to hear. You hear some of the message and immediately begin to formulate your reply or second guess the speaker without waiting for the speaker to finish.
3. **Active listening.** You listen closely to content and intent. What emotional meaning might the speaker be giving you? You try to block out barriers to listening. Most importantly, you are non-judgmental and empathetic.
4. **Reflective Listening.** This is active listening when you also work to clarify what the speaker is saying and make sure there is mutual understanding

20.6 BARRIERS TO LISTENING

Listening is not easy and there are a number of obstacles that stand in the way of effective listening, both within and outside the workplace. These barriers may be categorized as follows:

- **Physiological Barriers**

This was discussed earlier under the barriers to communication. Some people may have genuine hearing problems or deficiencies that prevent them from listening properly. Once detected, they can generally be treated. Other people may have difficulty in processing information, or memory related problems which make them poor listeners. Another physiological barrier is rapid thought. Listeners have the ability to process information at the rate of approximately 500 words per minute, whereas speakers talk at around 125 words per minute. Since listeners are left with a lot of spare time, their attention may not be focused on what the speaker is saying, but may wander elsewhere.

- **Physical Barriers**

These refer to distractions in the environment such as the sound of an air conditioner, cigarette smoke, or an overheated room, which interfere with the listening process. They

could also be in the form of information overload. For example, if you are in a meeting with your manager and the phone rings and your mobile beeps at the same time to let you know that you have a message; it is very hard to listen carefully to what is being said.

- **Attitudinal Barriers**

Pre-occupation with personal or work related problems can make it difficult to focus one's attention completely on what a speaker is saying, even if what is being said is of prime importance. Another common attitudinal barrier is egocentrism, or the belief that you are more knowledgeable than the speaker and that you have nothing new to learn from his ideas. People with this kind of closed minded attitude make very poor listeners.

- **Wrong Assumptions**

The success of communication depends on both the sender and the receiver, as we have seen in an earlier unit. It is wrong to assume that communication is the sole responsibility of the sender or the speaker and that listeners have no role to play. Such an assumption can be a big barrier to listening. For example, a brilliant speech or presentation, however well delivered, is wasted if the receiver is not listening at the other end. Listeners have as much responsibility as speakers to make the communication successful, by paying attention, seeking clarifications and giving feedback.

Another wrong assumption is to think that listening is a passive activity, in which a listener merely absorbs the thoughts of the speaker. On the contrary, real listening or active listening is hard work – it requires speaking sometimes to ask questions, agree or disagree with the speaker, give feedback, etc.

Yet another barrier of this type is to assume that speakers are more powerful than listeners. Speakers are seen as being in command of things, whereas listeners are seen to be weak and lacking authority. According to communication experts however, the reverse is true. Listeners are as important and as powerful as speakers. In fact David J. Schwartz, writer and management professor, emphasizes the importance of listening by saying “Big people monopolize the listening. Small people monopolize the talking.”

- **Cultural Barriers**

Accents can be barriers to listening, since they interfere with the ability to understand the meaning of words that are pronounced differently. The problem of different accents arises not only between cultures, but also within a culture. For example, in a country like India where there is enormous cultural diversity, accents may differ even between different regions and states.

Another type of cultural barrier is differing cultural values. The importance attached to listening and speaking differs in western and oriental cultures. Generally, Orientals regard listening and silence as almost a virtue, whereas Westerners attach greater importance to speaking. Therefore this would interfere with the listening process, when two people from these two different cultures communicate.

- **Gender Barriers**

Communication research has shown that gender can be a barrier to listening. Studies have revealed that men and women listen very differently and for different purposes. Women are more likely to listen for the emotions behind a speaker's words, while men listen more for the facts and the content.

Example:

A salesperson giving a demonstration of a new type of office equipment may be asked by two colleagues if the equipment will work without any problems and respond by saying "Sure." A male user may take his answer at face value, whereas a female user may detect some hesitation in his voice. This is because the male user listens for the content of the message, whereas the female user listens for the tone of the message.

- **Lack of Training**

Listening is not an inborn skill. People are not born good listeners. They have to develop the art of listening through practice and training. Lack of training in listening skills is an important barrier to listening, especially in the Indian context.

Lee Iacocca, former Chairman of the Chrysler Corporation in the US, was one of the first to recognize the need for organized training programs in listening skills. Today, many

organizations both in India and abroad incorporate listening skills in their training programs.

- **Bad Listening Habits**

Most people are very average listeners who have developed poor listening habits that are hard to shed and that act as barriers to listening. For example, some people have the habit of “faking” attention or trying to look like a listener, in order to impress the speaker and to assure him that they are paying attention. Others may tend to listen to each and every fact and, as a result, miss out on the main point. Yet another habit is to avoid difficult listening and to tune off deliberately, if the subject is too technical or difficult to understand. Sometimes, the subject itself may be dismissed as uninteresting, because the listener does not want to listen.

20.7 DIFFERENCES BETWEEN DISCRIMINATIVE LISTENING AND COMPREHENSION LISTENING

- **Discriminative Listening**

This is the most basic type of listening, whereby the difference between the sounds is identified. Unless the differences between the sounds are identified, the meaning expressed by such differences cannot be grasped.

Once we learn to distinguish between sounds in our own language, we are able to do the same in other languages. One reason why people belonging to one country find it difficult to speak the language of another country is that they find the sounds similar and cannot understand the subtle differences.

- **Comprehension Listening**

Once we have learnt to discriminate between the different sounds, the next step is to try to comprehend the meaning of these sounds. In order to do this, we require a dictionary of words, along with the rules of grammar and syntax. Apart from the verbal communication, we also need to understand the meaning conveyed by the speaker's nonverbal behavior. This can be achieved by closely observing various aspects of the speaker's body language and tone of voice.

20.8 PROCESS OF LISTENING

SIX STAGES OF LISTENING PROCESS: hearing, attending, understanding, remembering, evaluating, and responding. these stages occur in sequence, but they generally performed with little awareness an often rapid succession

I. HEARING - it refers to the response caused by sound waves stimulating the sensory receptors of the ear; it is physical response; hearing is perception of sound waves; you must hear to listen, but you need not listen to hear (perception necessary for listening depends on attention)

II. ATTENTION- brain screens stimuli and permits only a select few to come into focus- these selective perception is known as attention, an important requirement for effective listening; strong stimuli like bright lights, sudden noise... are attention getters; attention to more commonplace or less striking stimuli requires special effort; postural adjustments are aided by physical changes in sensory receptor organs; receptor adjustments might include tensing of the ear's tympanic muscle for better response to weak sounds

III. UNDERSTANDING- to understand symbols we have seen and heard, we must analyze the meaning of the stimuli we have perceived; symbolic stimuli are not only words but also sounds like applause... and sights like blue uniform... that have symbolic meanings as well; the meanings attached to these symbols are a function of our past associations and of the context in which the symbols occur; for successful interpersonal communication, the listener must understand the intended meaning and the context assumed by the sender.

IV. REMEMBERING- it is important listening process because it means that an individual has not only received and interpreted a message but has also added it to the mind's storage bank; but just as our attention is selective, so too is our memory- what is remembered may be quite different from what was originally seen or heard.

V. EVALUATING- it is a stage in which active listeners participate; it is at these point that the active listener weighs evidence, sorts fact from opinion, and determines the

presence or absence of bias or prejudice in a message; the effective listener makes sure that he or she doesn't begin this activity too soon ; beginning this stage of the process before a message is completed requires that we no longer hear and attend to the incoming message-as a result, the listening process ceases

VI. RESPONDING- this stage requires that the receiver complete the process through verbal and/or nonverbal feedback; because the speaker has no other way to determine if a message has been received , this stage becomes the only overt means by which the sender may determine the degree of success in transmitting the message.