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Listening: The Toughest Management Skill

Abstract

Ranked by personnel managers as the most important problematic communication skill in organizations today, listening is the most used skill that is taught least frequently. Listening skills of managers and employees can be improved; it is the purpose of this article to describe simple, common-sense strategies for this task. Hearing, understanding, interpreting, remembering, and evaluating comprise the five skill areas of the listening model, all of which are analyzed. With sincere efforts made to improve communication skills, managers can be well on their way to building organizations with enhanced quality of worklife, supportive environments, and positive organizational cultures.

Keywords

management skills, organizational communication, workplace culture

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Comments

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Listening:

The Toughest Management Skill

Successful managers place a high priority on gathering information. That often requires being an effective listener. Here are proven techniques that can help you become a better listener

by **Judi Brownell**

MANAGERS SPEND between 45 and 63 percent of their workdays listening to someone.¹ Most of this listening is connected with the manager's job of gathering and assimilating information and solving problems. Because managers acquire so much information through listening, one might expect most managers to be good listeners. But this is not necessarily the case. In 1985, I studied the listening skills of more than 300 managers, asking them to rate themselves as listeners and then asking their employees and colleagues to rate them. The managers rated themselves as much better listeners than their employees did.²

¹William F. Keefe, *Listen, Management! Creative Listening for Better Managing* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971).

²Judi Brownell, "Perceptions of Managers' Listening Competence," (paper presented at the International Listening Association summer conference, St. Paul, Minnesota, 1985). The questionnaire described in this paper was conducted in three industries with 300 managers and 800 of their colleagues.

Indeed, personnel managers have ranked listening as the most problematic communication skill in organizations today.³ Training managers of Fortune 500 companies see high-quality instruction in listening as one of their most pressing needs. Yet listening, the communication skill that is used most, is the communication skill that is taught least frequently, compared to speaking, reading, and writing (which are all used less and taught more).⁴

³Michael S. Hannah, "Speech Communication Training Needs in the Business Community," *Central States Speech Journal*, 1978, pp. 163-172.

⁴Lyman K. Steil, Kittie Watson, and Larry L. Barker, *Effective Listening: Key to Your Success* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1983). See also "Your Personal Listening Profile," a brochure prepared by Lyman K. Steil for the Sperry Corporation in 1980.

The good news is that you *can* improve your listening skills and those of your employees. Almost 60 percent of your listening ability depends on your motivation. Simply put, a person cannot listen unless he or she wants to. In this article, I will describe several simple, common-sense strategies for improving your listening skills.

Getting started. The biggest roadblock to good listening is that people don't know where or how to begin. The model I will present in this article provides a step-by-step roadmap for the development of listening comprehension.

Listening is actually a complex activity that requires five different skill areas. The name of the listening model—HURIER—is basically an acronym of these five skills:

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Interruption is a major cause of listening problems. Many people never let the speaker finish a point.

hearing, understanding, remembering, interpreting, and evaluating.⁵ You may excel in one or more of these activities, but need practice in others. Recognizing different barriers to listening and learning how to overcome each one will make a big difference in your communication effectiveness.

Approaching listening in terms of these five skill areas makes the development of listening comprehension a much more manageable task. The model helps you to concentrate on those skills most relevant to your particular needs and concerns.

Hearing

From a behavioral perspective, hearing involves making certain first that you can, in fact, *receive* an aural message. The actions essential to hearing are (1) concentrating on what the speaker is saying and (2) allowing the entire message to be delivered without interruption.

Children learn early the power of appearing distracted when their parents are trying to give them instructions. Inevitably, the frustrated parent will shout at the child to listen. This works only when the child chooses to give up the distraction and turn his or her attention to the parent. Likewise, when we want to hear something, we must shut out distractions—both internal and external—that prevent us from focusing and maintaining our attention on the person who is speaking.

Taking control of your environment is the key to eliminating external distractions. Ringing telephones, questions from other employees, and the general din of a busy dining room or lobby is suffi-

⁵Judi Brownell, *Building Active Listening Skills* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1986).

cient to ruin most people's concentration. The solution to this problem is to anticipate distractions. Ask someone to cover the phone, remove yourself from the center of activity, or set up a specific meeting time with employees to discuss problems and gather information. If you realistically assess your situation, you'll find that at least a portion of each day can be spent listening without outside distractions.

Internal distractions can be more difficult to overcome. An upcoming presentation, travel arrangements to make, a customer who threatens to sue you because he broke his tooth on the prime rib—situations like these can cause or aggravate fatigue, anxiety, and overload. These, in turn, can interfere with your ability to concentrate on a conversation.

Anything you can do to keep yourself actively involved in the talk will help you concentrate. Take notes, ask questions, or check your perceptions by restating the speaker's main points. Behave the way you think a good listener should behave—sit forward, nod your head, and provide other nonverbal cues that show you're listening. These will help you keep your mind on the subject at hand and encourage the speaker.

One problem with maintaining your concentration is that you can listen about three times faster than most people can talk, thereby ending up with a great deal of unused mental time.⁶ It is tempting to use

⁶See: Michael Beatty et al., "Effect of Achievement Incentive and Presentation Rate on Listening Comprehension," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, September 1980, pp. 193–200. While we speak at about 130 to 160 words a minute, we can process aural information at speeds of up to 700 words a minute.

this “bonus time” to think about other things, particularly when there is a compelling incident pulling at your attention. But it’s necessary to concentrate specifically on the matter at hand to listen well. Effective listeners direct all their attention toward one subject at a time.

To overcome internal distractions and to help you focus on the conversation, communication experts recommend the “vocalized listening technique.”⁷ With this technique, you use “bonus time” to repeat the speaker’s points mentally, to consider the speaker’s information, and to relate the information being presented to your own situation. Vocalized listening is one of the best ways of preventing your mind from wandering. It may also prevent you from committing an even more serious conversational fault—interrupting.

Interruption. Interruption is a major cause of missed information. Many listeners never let the speaker finish a point. Instead, some of them interrupt mentally by jumping to a conclusion and then go on to think about their own response. Others go one step further and break into the conversation—sometimes even finishing a sentence for the speaker. When this happens, a person is less likely to understand the speaker’s message accurately. Interruptions may be

⁷For a more thorough discussion of the vocalized listening technique, see: Florence I. Wolff et al., *Perceptive Listening* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1983).

justified when the listener can’t understand the speaker’s point, but interruptions more often result from the listener’s ego involvement or impatience.

Managers are more likely to interrupt their subordinates, and men are much more likely to interrupt women than vice versa.⁸ If you assume that you know what your subordinate is going to say, you are actually discounting his or her message by moving on before a point is completed. Be conscious of this unproductive habit, because if you constantly interrupt people, they soon will avoid sharing their ideas with you. This creates a barrier to the flow of information that could interfere with your management of your operation.

Understanding

You might think that because you have a good grasp of written materials that you will naturally be skilled at listening. Surprisingly, such is not the case. Good listening involves a thinking process that is separate from such apparently related activities as reading comprehension or memory.⁹

Perceptual differences. Perhaps the biggest obstacle to understanding a conversation accurately is differences among individuals’ perceptual orientations. Clearly noticeable in multicultural workplaces, perceptual differences exist even among members of the same society or community. Each person’s unique background, immediate needs and interests, and attitudes determine what meaning words and experiences will have for that person. The word “transfer,” for in-

⁸Mark K. Knapp, *Nonverbal Communication in Human Interaction* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1978).

⁹Donald Sperritt, *Listening Comprehension: A Factorial Analysis* (Melbourne: Australian Council for Educational Research, 1962).

Are You a Good Listener?

Ask yourself these 12 questions to investigate your strengths and weaknesses as a listener.

1. Do I control the environment so that I can concentrate?
2. Do I use my extra thinking time to consider the speaker’s points?
3. Do I listen to the speaker’s *entire* message before formulating my response?
4. Do I understand what the words a speaker uses mean to him or her?
5. Do I focus on the speaker’s main ideas rather than getting overwhelmed with details?
6. Do I restate the speaker’s ideas for confirmation and clarification?
7. Do I deliberately “file” new information in my memory system by associating it with what I already know?
8. Do I use visualization as a memory aid?
9. Am I sensitive to the speaker’s voice, as well as his or her words?
10. Do I recognize and consider important nonverbal cues?
11. Can I maintain my objectivity when listening and not become so emotionally involved that I distort or filter out portions of the message?
12. Do I maintain a flexible, open-minded orientation?

Words carry only a small portion of the total message.

stance, might mean good things to one person—a better job, a bigger operation, and more money. But to another person, a transfer has decidedly negative connotations—leaving friends, moving to an unknown city, and learning the ropes of a new position. Similarly, words like “high technology,” “foreign,” and “professional” may mean different things to a speaker and to a listener. To understand what a speaker really means, then, we must know about the individual—including his or her values, goals, and past experiences.

One way to improve your listening sensitivity is to have conversations with people of different backgrounds. If you interact only with people like yourself, you will never challenge your listening ability.

Perception checking is a particularly good way to improve your understanding of what a speaker is saying. Although it seems awkward at first, perception checking involves restating the speaker’s main points to make sure that you have received the message the speaker intended.

Remembering

Although memory is not part of the listening process itself, it is essential to listening comprehension. As I mentioned, memory involves a different set of skills from those involved in listening. Effective listeners must do more than just *hear* and *understand* a communication. They must also be able to *connect* the new ideas to information already stored in their memory.¹⁰

Information that is not retained for later retrieval is hardly useful. That means the new information must be ready for use as appropri-

ate in solving problems and making decisions. The listener must be able to perceive the relationships among the ideas and pieces of information—both those being heard and those already in their memories—before they can take appropriate actions on what they hear.

Short-term. Your brain has two different forms of memory—short-term and long-term. Various bits of information are “filed” in one or the other, according to their type and how often you use them. Most information is kept in your short-term memory and has a very short life. Look up a telephone number, dial it, and your mind usually lets it go. That is an example of the use of short-term memory. When a message is more complicated, as in the case of several items discussed at this morning’s meeting of department heads, parts of it are gradually lost over time until little or nothing remains. Short-term memory is also prone to interference; if you are distracted—by, say, another conversation—you may forget what you were trying to remember.

Without the aid of pencil and paper, the only way to move information from short-term memory to long-term memory—thereby retaining it for a longer time—is through repetition. That is how you learned the multiplication tables that you can use automatically today, and that is why you can remember your old telephone numbers. If you need to recall the number of days in August, you may

¹⁰Elizabeth Loftus, *Memory: Surprising New Insights into How We Remember and Why We Forget* (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1980).

have 31 on the top of your head. But if not, you can use the old rhyme, "Thirty days hath September." Much of our ability to remember details years after the fact has to do with the original systems we used to learn the information.

The objective is to get important information picked up during a conversation into your long-term memory, which you might think of as an elaborate filing system that generally works on a process of association or "mnemonics." The richer your system of association, the easier it will be for you to find appropriate categories for new, incoming information. The more associations you make, the easier it will be to retrieve the information when you want it. Here are three methods for making mnemonic associations.

(1) Make sense out of nonsense. If a word or name seems unfamiliar or difficult to you, try connecting its sound to something more familiar. The name Chubador can be recalled better if you think of a fat door (chubby door), or think of a chair by a door. This kind of association is especially useful for remembering people's names. Another mnemonic device is the acronym, a "word"—actually, an abbreviation—made by linking the first letters of a series of words. The acronym HURIER should make it easier for you to remember the listening model presented in this article. Some acronyms have been so well-accepted that they have become words in themselves. "Snafu," an acronym denoting bureaucratic ineptitude, is a good example.

(2) Recognize logical relationships among ideas. It would probably be difficult for you to remember check totals of \$12.82, \$16.28, \$25.64, and \$8.14, without writing them down. If, however, you are able to find some logical combination in this series of numbers or any group of ideas, the material will be easier to remember. In the case of the check totals above, you might look for mathematical relationships or other meaningful connections that would help you recall them.

(3) Visualize material. Connecting visual images to verbal messages can be a powerful memory tool. There are numerous schemes recommended by memory experts to help you use both verbal and visual images to make vivid, lasting impressions. At the most basic level, you can use visualization to help you remember where a specific item is. When you need to remember where you stashed your briefcase, take the time to form a mental image of your desk as you put the case away. Exaggerating the image—perhaps by picturing the briefcase ruefully watching the lights go out as you shut the desk drawer—will further imprint the action in your memory. (Remember, no one else knows what you're thinking, unless you tell them.)

A more complex application of visualization is to picture events taking place as they are explained to you. As a complaining guest states his or her problem, visualize the guest sitting at the table, and the server standing there. This will fix the guest's comments in your memory so that you can discuss the matter later with your server.

When you need to remember items in a series, you might practice one of the best known methods for

remembering. Imagine yourself walking through a familiar environment—your house, for example—and place the series of things you want to remember in that environment. Say that your chef has told you that the following items need to be purchased: eggs, haddock, sugar, mustard, carrots, and hamburger buns. To remember these, start by envisioning yourself opening the door into your house and seeing the lampshade covered with dripping egg. As you walk farther, you envision the haddock swimming inside your TV set and sugar piled waist-high in the closet. If you continue through this procedure, making the images vivid, you will probably be able to recall all six items with little trouble.

Interpreting

Interpretation involves many of the skills that apply to understanding. To interpret a person's speech successfully, you must look at the situation from the other person's point of view as well as your own. It is particularly helpful to know the context behind the speaker's remarks. To know that a particular employee has had a previous bad experience with your appraisal system or that a customer was overcharged for his meal on his last visit makes a big difference in how you handle the current situation involving that person.

Paralanguage. We know that words carry only a small portion of a total message. The rest comes

Although most managers considered themselves sensitive to their employees' feelings, their subordinates gave them extremely low ratings in this area.

through in tone of voice, stance, eye contact, and the like. Empathetic (sensitive) listeners look carefully for these nonverbal components of a message. If you are to interpret a message successfully, you must be alert to the person speaking, as well as the words being uttered. Although most managers in the survey I conducted considered themselves sensitive to their employees' feelings, their subordinates gave them extremely low ratings on empathy. The discrepancy between the managers' perception of their ability to interpret messages and their colleagues' ratings of them on this skill was almost twice as large as the difference for the other four listening skills studied.

The effective listener will observe several facets of communication beyond the words spoken. Meaning communicated in this way is called "paralanguage." To begin with, the speaker's voice communicates important information about attitudes and feelings. Indeed, an organization's entire image can be transmitted by the voice characteristics of the person who answers the telephone. Clients and guests can get the idea that a company's entire staff is irritable, friendly, abrupt, or helpful, depending on the reservationist's or receptionist's manner of speaking. Combinations of vocal characteristics—pitch, rate, and volume—convey different meanings. With different tones of voice, the phrase "thank you" can make a guest feel welcome or shunned.

In person. Body posture, eye contact, and facial expressions also reinforce or contradict verbal mes-

sages. When the speaker is sending one message through the words she chooses and another message nonverbally, which is the real perceived meaning? In the face of a contradiction between words and actions, you might misinterpret the meaning, but it's more likely that the nonverbal cues will make a stronger statement.

When the message is unclear, actions give you the cues for a proper response. Consider the hotel guest who walks up to the front desk and says, "Those sure were fine directions you gave me." The only hope for a proper response is in nonverbal cues. If the guest slams his luggage to the floor and glares at the clerk, you can be sure the comment is meant sarcastically. On the other hand, if the guest is relaxed and cheerful, you know that your directions were good ones. In either case, continued guest satisfaction demands an appropriate response—either an apology or a thank-you.

Although some speakers may attempt to manipulate their nonverbal behavior, most such behavior is unconscious. Perceptive listeners look for nonverbal cues that "leak" the real message. Facial expressions seem to be one of the most difficult aspects for speakers to control, so an attentive listener should look the speaker in the eye.¹¹

¹¹Paul Ekman, "Communication through Nonverbal Behavior: A Source of Information about an Interpersonal Relationship," in *Affect, Cognition, and Personality*, ed. S.S. Tompkins and C.E. Izard (New York: Springer, 1965).

Evaluating

Evaluation is a natural human behavior. The minute you see someone, you form an opinion of that person. (In selection interviews, recruiters make their *negative* judgments within 40 seconds of meeting the candidate.) We are so much a product of our past experiences that our “instant evaluations”—before any words are spoken—may block effective communication.

Effective listeners consciously try to suspend their judgment while they are listening to a speaker. They first try to *understand* what the speaker has to say, and then they evaluate the speaker’s ideas. Suspending judgment involves two rules: (1) keep from letting your emotions influence your judgment, and (2) practice objective thinking.

Whenever you become emotional—whether excited, angry, or frustrated—your ability to listen objectively decreases, and you start filtering or distorting incoming information. Perhaps the emotion that interferes with listening most often is a feeling of defensiveness. As soon as listeners feel threatened or challenged, they stop thinking about what the speaker is saying and turn their attention to the task of defending themselves. You have probably been in numerous situations where a customer or employee expressed dissatisfaction to you. If you took the criticism personally, you probably lost your ability to maintain an objective, problem-solving orientation, and little real communication took place. The encounter might have even deteriorated further, with *both* parties primarily concerned with defending their positions. In cases like this, it becomes impossible to create

shared understanding—which is the goal of effective communicators.

It is essential that you maintain an open mind whenever someone is trying to explain something to you. Managers who fail to do so are often labeled rigid, dogmatic, or stubborn, and their subordinates become frustrated and angry.

Several mental habits can help you delay judgment and listen with an open mind.¹² First, remember that you never have all the facts. Whenever you disagree with someone, consider the possibility that the person might be presenting new information—ideas or arguments that you haven’t heard before. Individuals who act as though they know it all will ultimately back themselves into a corner and find it difficult or impossible to revise their position as circumstances change.

It is also important to allow for a change in the facts over time. If you have the impression that an employee is too aggressive or too sloppy, you may be right. But if this image was formed some time ago and you haven’t really observed the person since, it might be wise to withhold your judgment until you’ve had a more recent encounter. We have all been victims of a self-fulfilling prophecy, in which others’ expectations have made it impossible for us to improve our-

¹²For example, see: Samuel I. Hayakawa, *Language in Thought and Action* (New York: Harcourt and Brace, 1941); Wendell Johnson, *People in Quarantines* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1946); and Wendell Johnson, “The Fateful Process of Mr. A Talking to Mr. B.” in *Readings in Business Communication* (Champaign, IL: Stipes, 1982).

selves. Rather than do the same thing to our employees, we should approach each encounter objectively, thereby inviting them to learn and be recognized for their personal and professional development.

Finally, effective critical listeners recognize shades of grey. Things are not either-or, as they often sound. When we speak of other people, for example, we label them careful or careless, competent or incompetent, and rude or polite. In many cases there are points in between. If we think of performance or behavior on a continuum, instead of as a choice between polar opposites, we can think more reasonably about the problems we encounter and listen more openly to the opinions we hear.

Building Organizations

When managers talk about enhancing the quality of worklife, building positive organizational cultures, and developing supportive environments, they are describing goals that seem intangible. But one of the most important means of achieving these goals is by improving communications.

All human activities require communication, and the quality of this communication determines the nature of the many relationships that combine to form the organization’s culture. If top managers are effective listeners, they set the tone for this culture. Good listeners contribute to organizational performance by encouraging others to express their views and by communicating a sense of concern for each employee. Effective listening skills are the links that enable employees of diverse backgrounds and interests to work together in building a successful service organization. □