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by Corro

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EFFECTIVE LISTENING

Sensing – Interpreting
Evaluating - Responding

Effective Listening

Sensing – Interpreting – Evaluating – Responding

Effective listening is a core competency for students; it is the foundation of strong relationships; and good listening skills distinguish us as leaders in the workplace or as entrepreneurs – we all want to be understood. We live in a world where everyone can benefit from attentive and competent real-time listening.

Most people believe they are good listening. No one wants to be labeled as a flawed listener. However, it is a sad fact that good listeners are rare in our society. Research shows that we spend about 70% of our waking hours in communicating and 45% of that time we listen. Yet, the same studies show that only 20% of us listen effectively. Most of the time, we are not giving our friends, co-workers, or family members our full attention. It is only when we really stop to think about listening and what it entails that we realize that we do not always listen at our best even though it is an essential part of any communication. Regardless of how well we manage to express our thoughts and experiences, if we fail to listen attentively to what other people say, our communication skills will be deficient.

Our brains are adept for conversation or communication. So why is it that we have difficulty staying completely focused or engaged when someone is speaking? Basically, many of us are not good listeners because we have not learned to practice good listening skills. Of course that is the simple answer. There are underlying factors, obstacles that interfere with how effectively we listen. Listening requires effort. We all face the same obstacles, and very few exist beyond our control. No one can listen for us so we are responsible for good listening. No matter how well we may listen now, all of us can advance our ability to listening. All we need is the motivation to learn, the discipline to concentrate, and the opportunity to practice.

Let's delve into the reasons we are not adept at listening and the skills used by good listeners. We trust you can use this guide to not only understand, but to improve how effectively you listen through the strategies suggested here.

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What is Effective Listening?

Effective listening is a multi-level process of hearing, receiving, constructing meaning from, and responding to spoken and/or non-verbal messages.

- You listen to obtain information.
- You listen to understand.
- You listen for enjoyment.
- You listen to learn.
- You listen to make decisions that affect your future.
- You listen because you are interested in the passions of other people.

Listening is one of the most important skills. Yet, effective listening is an undervalued skill. When you consider that listening is one-half of the communication dynamic, the importance of developing this skill becomes apparent. Your brain is adept for conversation or communication, but you achieve much better results when you think strategically and deliberately about listening.

You can expand your level of listening proficiency in the same way as you hone your skills at reading, writing, mastering a musical instrument, playing a sport, or driving a car. Listening attentively, effectively and actively are skills that we hope you will embrace and practice.

Why is Effective Listening Important

Communication happens everywhere. Therefore, effective listening skills are crucial in school, the workplace, in relationships, home, business, and social gatherings. Effective, attentive listening redirects your focus from what is going on inside your head to the needs, views, or enjoyment of a friend, child, partner, work colleague, prospective employer, client, interviewer, or significant other. When you do not listen effectively communication breaks down. Attentive listening sends a positive message to the speaker, which results in better outcomes. How much better might your personal and business relationships be by listening effectively?

Your effectiveness as a student, entrepreneur, in leadership, business meetings, sales, negotiation, and job interviews is strongly related to how well you listen. If listening is the difference between success and failure, excellence and mediocrity, satisfaction or frustration, what option do you have but to become better listener? Effective listening presents enormous opportunity for students, professionals and entrepreneurs. Aside from the practical benefits, being a good listener is important for the quality of your social life.

How often do you hear a song and like it the first time? Something about the melody, lyrics, and emotional presentation draws your attention. Yet, you do not absorb the lyrics or remember them until you hear the song more than once. You develop a deeper appreciation for the song, the lyricist, and the recording artist; you become a fan and avid listener to more of that performer's music. Sadly, your participation in conversation may not replicated in the same manner. And, you cannot repeat the conversation in the same

manner as you can replay a song over and over again. Think of what you could be missing by not being fully engaged in the process of truly listening with intent all the time.

If you are a student you listen to absorb lecture material, make good class notes, glean pertinent information for exams, and reinforce learning which are all beneficial results of effective listening. It is estimated that between 50 and 75 percent of students' classroom time is spent listening to the teacher, to other students, or to various educational media. Teachers do a lot of talking. The more effectively you listen, the more you learn and understand. For that reason alone, as a student, you need to keep honing effective listening skills which leads to better research, participating in discussion, successfully completing an assignment, or passing an exam. Listening saves you valuable time and effort. It boosts your confidence.

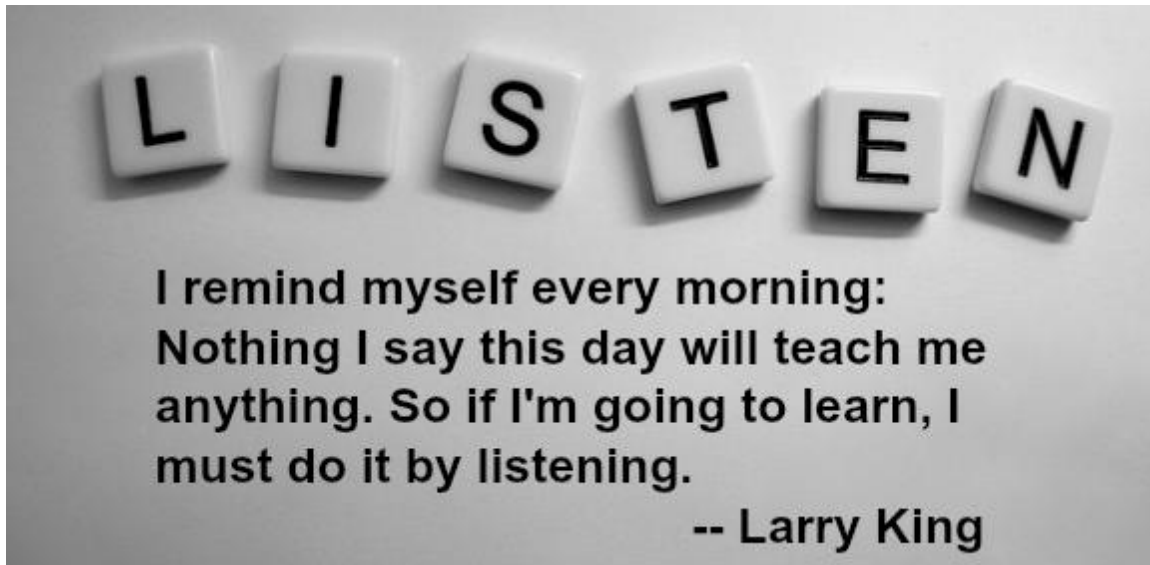


you are an executive, professional, or entrepreneur, good listening skills can make or break success in leadership, teams, customer relationships, and negotiation. Both large and small business report that poor listening skills is the #1 problem in their organization. What is the cost if ten million workers each make a simple \$10 listening mistake each year? Unfortunately, most listening mistakes cost much more than \$10. What kind of decision can a judge or jury make if they pay partial attention to the testimony of witnesses or do not understand the evidence presented? Imagine the cost if a pilot does not listen attentively to an instruction and he crashes the multi-million dollar airliner and passengers perish.

How is being a good listener important for you personally? Really listening to what another person has to say is one of the most sincere forms of respect. Research shows that active listening helps you focus on understanding others and improves your relationships by promoting trust and reducing conflict. Listening to another person's stories invites your attention into their world and cultivates connection. Listening attentively and giving someone the courtesy of your undivided attention encourages reciprocity and the

other person is more open to hearing about your point of view or your stories. Writer Henri Nouwen said: "The beauty of listening is that, those who are listened to start feeling accepted, start taking their words more seriously and discovering their own true selves. Listening is a form of spiritual hospitality by which we invite strangers to become friends."

Have you ever thought about deliberateness as a factor in your listening ability? The truth is many of us never take the time to be deliberate or thoughtful about listening. There is thoughtfulness toward the speaker or acceptance of absorbing his or her message, but also being deliberate for your own benefit:



- Listening to others, and listening well, is important for your personal growth. Exposing yourself to other thoughts, ideas, opinions, values, experiences and perspectives expands your horizons.
- Effective listening helps you learn, think, plan, make better decisions, create, or be part of something.
- When you practice good listening you are more apt to avoid conflict and misunderstanding.
- It enhances your ability to influence, persuade and negotiate.
- In a work situation, being an active listener helps you build trust and establish rapport with your team.
- In an interview listening is a useful tool since it can help you build a positive rapport with your interviewer. You can prove your interest in the organization's challenges and successes, while showing you are a team player rather than a self-absorbed candidate.
- Attentive listening makes you aware of the variety of stimuli around you through hearing, seeing and intuition.
- There is clarity in listening for a speaker's vocal modulation that might indicate pressure behind the words, tentativeness, a hard edge, or fury.

- When you are fully engaged in listening it reduced your nervousness in unfamiliar situations. Studies have shown that attentive listening can reduce your blood pressure.
- Listening attentively has great power. It draws thoughts and feelings out of people as nothing else can. Effective listening allows you to be fully involved in receiving the message so you can process the information to think and act in ways that connect you to the speaker.
- Listening attentively enhances your ability to motivate and inspire those with whom you are communicating. You will stimulates others to speak well.
- Effective listening can help you build public speaking skills. Good listeners pick up on stylistic components related to how people from arguments and present information. They analyze what works in another's speech.

When we listen well to others we reveal ourselves as curious and interested in people and events, which makes us more knowledgeable, perceptive and thoughtful. These are aspects of listening that boost confidence, strengthen personal relationships, make us better students, inspirational friends, valuable employees or entrepreneurial geniuses.

Are You a Good Listener?

You know you are a good listener when you listen with intent which is characterized by your “attentive presence”. That means you demonstrate you are paying special attention to the speaker by:

- Keeping eye contact
- Concentrating on the content of what is being said
- Being alert to the speaker’s emotional tone and body language
- Remaining patient
- Maintaining focus entirely on wanting to fully comprehend the person who is communicating.
- Encouraging the speaker to keep going through your gestures
- Picking up on the visual cues from your conversation partner to solicit your response
- Being inquisitive
- Being empathetic
- Being open-minded
- Not being defensive
- Show positive body language

You may not be necessarily in agreement with the message, but you allow the other person to voice a complete idea, concern, story, or grievance before you respond.

In your lifetime, you may have been guilty of some listening that was ineffective and realized you had to make changes to improve your communication and relationships.

- You may have been guilty of pretending to listen by nodding, smiling and dropping a few words into the conversation while masking your true thoughts, which may have wandered off in a direction far away from the context of the conversation.
- You may have been insensitive to someone by not taking into consideration that their words did not coincide with their body language or behavior.
- You may have hogged the stage for your own agenda, or been defensive, ready to admonish or ambush the speaker at the earliest opening.
 - You may have recognized the distractions in your surroundings, yet never turned off a television or music to give your full attention to a person?



You may not plug your ears with your fingers or have an “ignore” switch that you turn on and off. However, you may not be aware of other habits that hinder effective listening and send a negative message to the speaker.

For example, you cannot fake being an attentive listener. Lack of attention is evident in your body language. It is difficult to control body language. When you are distracted or lack interest, this insensitivity or carelessness is reflected in your posture or eye contact. The speaker can detect unfavorable body language as a barrier or problem and become frustrated, stop talking, or become offended or upset. What subtle or obvious messages are you sending to others through your body language when you are not listening attentively?

You may not be fully aware of the inner monologue going on inside your head? Honestly answer the following questions:

Do I fidget while someone speaks?

Does the person speaking to me have to battle to get my attention?

Do I think about other things or daydream when another person is talking?

Am I trying to multi-task while someone talks to me?

Do I convey distraction through nervous mannerisms

Am I insulted when a person repeats the message because they sense I am not listening?

Do I ask a person to repeat what was said because I was inattentive?

Do I get confused about instructions given to me before I do a job?

Do I ignore what I do not understand?

Do I let my emotions get in the way of communication?

Do I jump into a conversation to offer advice?

Do I finish sentences for the other person?

Do I get trapped by my own thoughts? When someone talks am I thinking about what I want to say in return, looking for a point at which to interrupt or rehearsing what I'll say at the earliest opportunity?

Do I sit impassively, withholding participation?

A good listener would answer "No" to these questions. If you answered yes to some or all of these questions please do not feel discouraged. The truth is attentive listening does not come naturally to most of us. Fortunately, no matter how well you may listen now, you can advance your listening skills, and with practice become a very effective listener.

Why are we not Good Listeners?

Research suggests that we only remember between 25 percent and 50 percent of what we hear, depending upon our reason for listening. That means that when we talk to employers, colleagues, customers, or spouses for ten minutes, we pay attention to less than half of the conversation. Those are not encouraging stats! Do we simply hope we are capturing the important parts of the conversation? What if we are not?

People do not Practice Effective Listening

One major reason that our listening skills may not be all they could be is because most of us do not practice effective listening. Through the millennia, before the invention of writing, listening was not only a source of entertainment, all the knowledge of the world was passed down from generation to generation. Audiences were eager to listen and learn. They were attentive to the storytellers to glean whatever they could from tribal histories, myths, legends, folktales, and stories. They accomplished the skill of real-time listening. Nowadays, we are out of practice. We think we are listening. Rather than real-time listening, we tend to become distracted and let our attention wander because we rely on reading or the ability to replay electronic recordings.

Two reasons we people do not practice effective listening are:

1. People take listening for granted
2. Listening is difficult

People Take Listening for Granted

The majority of us do not practice effective listening because we assume that we do not have to put much effort into listening. We think it is a natural response in communication. However, listening is not a passive activity. Simply having good hearing does not make you or anyone else a good listener. As a general rule, people take listening for granted as something that just happens because we have ears. This is not true. There is a distinct difference between hearing and listening.

Hearing is physiological, the automatic brain response to sounds. The majority of us are born to hear things. Hearing is unplanned, effortless, and involuntary. You are likely accustomed to the incidental sounds that surround you: passing cars, lawn mowers, birds chirping, construction, humming refrigerators and furnaces, grocery store music. Unless you are startled or have a reason to pay attention, you may have learned to disregard these everyday sounds.

Listening is deliberate or intentional decision. It is an action you consciously, voluntarily and actively undertake. It is purposeful and focused, rather than passive. Unlike hearing, listening requires your concentrated effort. A good listener is as involved in the communication process as the speaker is. Good listeners pay attention to the speaker's words, inflections, passion,



meaning, and body language to fully understand the meaning of a message. To attain that kind of engagement requires skill and sincere effort. You are not born knowing how to read and write. They are skills you master through constant practice. You have to learn to be an effective listener the same way.

Listening is Difficult

The second reason most people do not practice listening skills is because it is tough to listen, really listening. Listening is difficult, and for several reasons.

1. Listening is difficult because of the limits of the human attention span.

You can only maintain focused attention for a limited length of time. Even when your attention is focused on something in which you are deeply interested, every now and then you pause to do something else, such as getting a drink of water, changing your body position, or glancing out a window. Even those brief pauses distract you from conversation with your co-workers, employees, family and friends?



2. Listening is difficult because assumptions, habits, and predispositions make it easy for us to overestimate the effectiveness of our listening skills.

We think we can manage a number of mental or physical tasks and still be adept at listening. Though the brain is complex and can perform myriad tasks, our brains are not wired for us to do two things at once. Science has proven that when activities require abstract thought and careful attention our brains do not have the ability to perform them simultaneously. We cannot emulate a computer.

Your brain can become adept at processing and responding to certain information, like brushing your teeth and watching a movie at the same time, but it cannot fully focus when trying to listen attentively and trying to multi-task. Depending on the complexity of the competing input switching between listening and performing a task uses up a lot of brain bandwidth. Trying to manage both takes a mental toll on your cognitive energies and is counter-productive to effective listening or anything that requires concentration.

3. Listening is difficult because we may be too self-absorbed or ego-involved to participate fully in listening.

Your mind-set, attitude and beliefs influence how well you listen. There may be times when you think that you already have it all figured out so you may not be open to allowing the perspectives, knowledge, ideas, or the opinions of others to enter your mind. There may be days when you think, why work to improve, so why listen to what this person has to say? Even in face-to-face conversation, it is difficult to stop ego from taking over. You may think you are listening and suddenly notice that you are preoccupied with formulating a response or silently arguing while the other person is still speaking. Instead of listening to understand all that another person says, there may be times when you cannot wait to jump into the communication to tell your own story, offer judgment or advice. The fact is you cannot easily keep your ego in check.

4. Listening is difficult because of all the noise.

There are five kinds of noise that interfere with your ability to pay attention and understand a message. You cannot escape physical noise, psychological noise, physiological noise, and semantic noise, cultural but you can learn to manage them.



Physical Noise: Physical noise consists of disturbances created by your immediate environment. Everyday disruptions like loud noises, bright lights, excessive movement in the room, or pesky insects make it difficult to concentrate on the speaker.

Psychological Noise: Psychological noise is caused by your internal thoughts. When you let your inner dialogue or mental clutter get out of control, you can miss valuable parts of the speaker's message and communication suffers.

- **Person stuff** – you can become preoccupied by what is going on around you or with thinking consciously or sub-consciously about person issues. Your attention is diverted to wondering will it rain, what shall I order for lunch, should I go to Mexico or Hawaii? Having too much on in your minds at any given time is big source of inner distraction. You have to train yourself to be more aware when random thoughts and doubts creep into your mind and distract you: upcoming events, financial worries, misgivings, crushing deadlines, or other people. Rather than focusing on the speaker, you may also yourself imagine the potential future which seems much more interesting or fun.
- **Bias can trigger your inner voice and disrupt your concentration** – your predisposition could be based on your values, beliefs, attitudes, behaviors or a previous experience. You

could have a bias related to the speaker or preconceived ideas and opinions about the subject matter. You might lean toward disagreeing with the speaker before you hear the message. You may form a bias because you believe, “I don’t need to listen because I already know what I think” or “I know what they are going to say.” Your bias could be based on a previous experience within which the subject matter was poorly presented or uninteresting.

- **Your internal thoughts may focus on the presence of a person** to whom we feel attracted or perhaps we mistrust or dislike – your emotional response to the presence of a person in the room can trigger strong reactions from that nagging inner voice.
- **Your inner voice is active when you are hesitant that the information may be too complex technical or advanced to understand** – you may not being to concentrate when you are apprehensive that you might be capable of correctly or adequately processing what you learn.

In areas where your knowledge is limited you can prepare in advance to familiarize yourself with the subject matter, or make a point of engaging in discussion afterward to shed light on areas that are unclear. Who does not benefit from learning more?

Physiological Noise: Physiological noise consists of distractions caused by your body as it experiences its day to day physical and chemical reactions. Some things are easily remedied: hunger, being too cold or too hot, being uncomfortable sitting or standing too long. However, the more enduring physiological effects from fatigue, headache, pain, medications affect the way you think or feel.

Semantic Noise: You can confused by semantic noise which occurs when you experience confusion over the meaning of a speaker’s word choice. While you struggle with interpreting a work or phrase, you are distracted from listening. In the meantime, the speaker continues to make his or her point and you simply do not hear what is said. Semantic noise can be word usage, mispronunciation, technical jargon, phrases from foreign languages, euphemisms, or the use of difficult language. When you have opportunity, you can ask the speaker to clarify meaning.

Cultural Noise: This communication barrier can be produced through ethnocentrism, prejudices, stereotypes, and discrimination, but there are other cultural communication cues that can distract you. For example, the meaning of nonverbal cues or body language is not the same in every culture. You may interpret behaviours and body language incorrectly: posture, gesture, eye contact, space, touch, and dress.

5. Listening is difficult because not everyone of us may be willing to put in the effort to identify as well as overcome the barriers to listening.

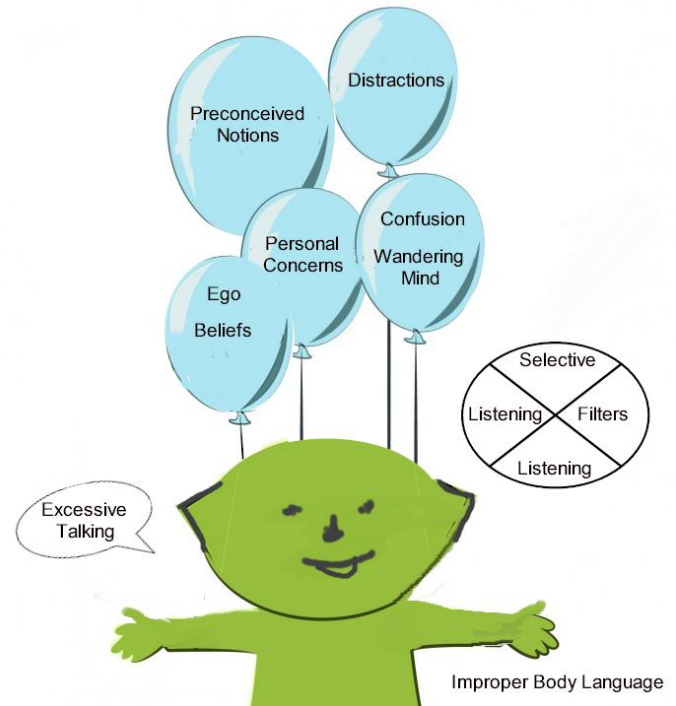
There may be several stumbling blocks to overcome. A barrier to listening is anything that hinders you from concentrating on the speaker as well as recognizing, understanding, and accurately interpreting the message.

Overcome these Common Barriers to Effective Listening

Think of a time when you were too tired or distracted to give your full attention to the ideas in a speech. What did you do? What should you have done?

We have pinpointed twelve different weaknesses or underlying factors to effective listening, and provide some suggestions on what you can do to overcome them.

1. Excessive Talking
2. Distractions
3. Information Overload
4. Listening Filters
5. Expecting Others to Share your Personal Beliefs and Values
6. Misunderstanding
7. Interruptive Behavior
8. Seriously Ego-Involved
9. Selective Listening
10. Advisory Mode
11. Personal Concerns
12. Rate of Speech and Thought



1. Excessive Talking

Good conversational skills are an asset. However, when you talk more than is necessary, it is a barrier to effective listening and overall good communication. The truth is many people hesitate to interact with a person who talks excessively while failing to listen to others. Excessive talking can be perceived as aggression. You can overcome this obstacle by adopting the following habits:

- Think before speaking.
- Refrain from talking when you have nothing important to contribute.
- Practice self-control by allowing others to speak.
- Do not interrupt others, no matter the reason.
- Do not talk for the sake of talking.
- Conveying your thoughts with brevity.
- Observing the reaction of others while you speak.

2. Distractions

As we discussed early you cannot escape the distractions of the various noises (physical noise, psychological noise, physiological noise, semantic noise, cultural), but you can manage them. The main types of distractions are physical, mental, auditory and visual. It may require advance planning to do whatever is necessary to minimize the physical, auditory and visual distractions. For example, it is difficult to concentrate when you are hungry or a jackhammer is pounding the pavement outside your office. It is equally difficult to pay attention to the speaker when you try to multi-task.

To minimize distractions:

- Ensure you are comfortable – full tummy, comfortable clothing, and adequate rest.
- Where possible choose a safe relaxing environment.
- Eliminate outside disruptions –block out noise, turn off cell phones, dim bright annoying lights, ask coworkers or family not to interrupt, close the door, or move to a different environment.
- Sit closer to the speaker and face the person who is speaking.
- Maintain eye contact with the speaker.
- Semantic difficulties are sometimes overcome through preparation.
- Asking for clarification from the speaker and discussing differences afterwards is another way to avoid confusion.

Even when you eliminate the common distractions that break into your concentration, it can be difficult to stay focused for extended periods when you are tired, stressed, uncomfortable or perplexed. Do whatever you can so you are not running on auto-pilot and lack the energy to listen.

3. Listening Filters

Listening filters prevent you from being fully present in communication. Specific listening filters are:

- a) Hearing what you want to hear instead of what is meant
- b) Being oblivious to the emotional subtext of the conversation
- c) Allowing your mind to wander. This filter is characterized by daydreaming or suddenly thinking about something else that provokes a sudden change in the topic.

These filters may be triggered in situations where people hold authority over you, where you are concerned with obtaining approval, where you are only listening to solve a problem, when previous experiences have been unpleasant, or when what you hear arouses an emotion that diverts you from listening to the remainder of the message. Once you can pin-point the types of filters you use and under what circumstances you use them, you can employ strengths to remain focused.

4. Information Overload

With all you have to listen to, there are times when you experience information overload. You get tired or confused, forming coherent thoughts is difficult, and making a decision takes energy. That is when you are most likely to become overwhelmed and tune out at some point. When you do not have the luxury of going off the grid for a monastic retreat, you can moderate how you approach and manage the information that is coming at you. Studies show that you concentrate better and feel less stressed when you purposefully detach from work and enjoy real rest and relaxation breaks.



Before important meetings or lectures you can:

- Unplug from the input. Sometimes hearing alone can require genuine effort, but with so much stimulation around you it's difficult to focus on what people are saying to you. When you take the time to disengage or do nothing – avoid devices, newspapers, people – you allow your mind to recharge, which puts you in a position to be more alert when it is time to listen.
- Be more selective and prioritize how and when you handle the barrage of incoming information. For example, you can arrange your schedule so you are not inundated with a barrage of information just before meeting a new client.
- Get others involved to categorize information on your behalf.

[Learn more about rest and relaxation](#)

5. Expecting Others to Share your Personal Beliefs and Values

This can be a major obstacle to effective listening if you filter out or refuse to listen to what another person is saying simply because they hold different views. You should learn to appreciate that others do not share your opinions. In fact, their unique perspectives may shine light on problems and issues that you might not have identified or had to deal with before.

Everyone has biases, but good listeners have learned to hold them in check while listening. Good listening involves keeping an open mind, withholding your judgment, and treating the speaker with respect even when you disagree. When you listen you may have difficulty identifying your biases, especially when they seem to make sense. However, it is worth recognizing that our lives would be very difficult if no one ever considered new points of view or new information. We live in a world where everyone can benefit from clear thinking and open-minded listening.



6. Misunderstanding

Your inability to listen correctly can lead to misunderstanding what a speaker is trying to communicate. If you do not understand the message wait until the person has finished speaking and then ask questions for clarification. When that happens, you are not rude when you ask the speaker to clarify his or her words or intentions. Most people will appreciate the fact that you are making a focused effort to understand what they communicate.

7. Interruptive Behavior

You may not realize when you interrupt a conversation with improper body language or inappropriate words that have a negative impact on the other person. You can avoid this obstacle by:

- Listening without interrupting while the other person is speaking.
- Using appropriate verbal and body language such as raising a hand or asking politely when we require more details.

8. Seriously Ego-Involved

Instead of listening to understand all that another person says, there may be times when you cannot wait to jump into the communication to tell your own story, offer judgment, advice, or make your sales pitch. The fact is you may have difficulty keeping your ego in check.

One of the most common ego-centric errors among average listeners is that they jump into too quickly to convey empathy or show they understand how the speaker is feeling. They may say things like, “I know what that is like,” and follow up the assertion with their own story of a similar situation.

- Expressing empathy is a good thing, but you should not be presumptuous and rush into expressing empathy until the other person has fully expressed their thoughts and feelings.
- Furthermore, you should not rely upon this type of empathy as a response to another person’s experience. After all, no two experiences are exactly alike. When you rush to speak about yourself it may send a message that you are really only interested in them if they give us the opportunity to speak about yourself.
- It is challenging to understand another’s feelings if you only focus on your own feelings. You may need to remind yourself that other people have value, perspectives and experiences that are just as important as yours.

9. Selective Listening

Selective listening is responding only to the parts of the speakers' remarks that interest you and rejecting everything else that was said. Selective listening occurs when you hear what you want to hear. You mentally filter out or tune out someone's opinions or ideas when they do not line up with yours. You may think you may have heard the main points or have the gist of what the speaker wants to say and subsequently ignore or filter out the rest. When that happens, you may have a tendency to stop listening, allow yourself to become distracted, or change the subject thinking there is nothing more worth hearing. It is not a good way to build rapport. People tend to know if you are attentively listening to them. They tend to feel insulted if they catch you drifting off into your own little world when they are talking.

- You can choose to care about what another person says. You can practice by having someone tell you a brief story and then immediately summarizing what the person said and discussing it for accuracy or interpretation of intent and meaning.
- You can avoid instances of selective listening by practicing attentive listening for the pure pleasure of hearing what the other person has to say.
- Nurture curiosity as a strategic tool. Curiosity is associated with your motivation to listen as well as your engagement and agility for communication. Lack of curiosity can interfere with how well you concentrate. Curiosity is like a muscle that withers when not used. Curiosity is a skill that can be learned and fine-tuned.

10. Advisory Mode

You may want to jump in early in a conversation and start to offer advice before you fully understand the problem or the concerns of the speaker. True people come to you with problems; they want to know they are not alone in their feelings; and they may want advice. However, you should make sure you have paid attention and understand the full message before relaying your thoughts.

11. Personal Concerns

You have a lot going on. It could be the everyday responsibilities of building a business, raising a family, studies, and working through personal issues. Sometimes when you are absorbed in your own concerns, you cannot focus on what others say. To eliminate psychological noise, you have to give yourself permission to park those worries in a safe place so you can focus on the speaker.

- It helps to get better organized. As you declutter and get organized with the things around you – using calendars, schedules, and to-do lists to plan your day and week – your mental clutter will also diminish.
- Another solution to keep random thoughts from disrupting you is to do a “brain dump”. It is incredibly freeing to use a notebook and pen and simply let it all out – no sorting or judging, just writing it all down. Your brain dump lists can be reviewed later to figure out what you need to deal with.

12. Rate of Speech and Thought

Most people speak at a rate of 125 words per minute. As a listener, we can filter 500-700 words a minute. If we can process so many more words than we actually hear, a mental lag can occur. Eventually, we stop listening or drifting in and out. To keep ourselves engaged, we should be able to detect the subtleties of speech and mannerisms, mentally recap the speaker's ideas, and link those ideas together to make better sense of the message.



A Close-up Look at the Best Listeners

In our experience, good listeners do more than remain silent while another person talks. Silence does not signify that person is truly listening. Good listeners are more than sponges who can repeat practically what others have said. The best listeners are thoughtful, plan in advance, and employ strategies for a studied approach to listening that puts them in the best position to concentrate on the listener and the message. It is not just that they have developed skills for being good listeners, it is that they are disciplined in their priorities to:

- Clear away distractions
- Not try to multi-task when others are speaking
- Let others know they are listening through eye contact, facial expressions, encouraging gestures, and short verbal cues like ("Oh, Mmm-hmm, Tell me more.")

The Best Listeners are Disciplined

- Not interrupt, over-talk, and never hijack the conversation
- Create a climate of mutual understanding, respecting the perspective of others
- Periodically ask questions that promote discovery and insight
- Capture ideas, ask questions, and restate a message to confirm that their understanding is correct
- Validate the feelings of the speaker and convey confidence in the speaker.

What differentiates average listeners from effective listeners is that the above average listener seeks to understand the substance of the message along with the body language of the speaker. Good listeners concentrate to comprehend well what the other person is thinking and saying. They ask questions if they do not understand something. They clarify statements, develop ideas, or expand the discussion with the aim of deeper understanding. They inquire into further points of interest and probe as deeply as the speaker allows in double-checking the meaning of what was said. Good listeners confirm or advance understanding by saying:

Let me test my understanding.

Here's what I heard you say.

Correct me if I'm wrong. Here's what we should focus on...

In essence good listeners are helpful listeners or partners in communication. They evaluate all the information before determining what appropriate action they will take.

Above all, good listeners are never trapped into thinking that any listening situation is easy or ideal. They know that no two listening situations are exactly alike. Things change, people are different, life happens around us and to us. Good listeners are able to adjust to unusual or complex listening challenges.

As a rule, we tend to seek out a good listener when we want to bounce ideas around because:

- They create a safe environment within which a cooperative conversation takes place.
- Feedback flows smoothly in both directions.
- Good listeners not only absorb our ideas and energy, they bounce back energy in a manner that encourages us to continue.
- They may test assumptions or disagree, ask probing questions or open up alternative paths to consider, but they do not do so to win an argument or take over the conversation.
- They allow differences or issues to be discussed openly with neither party becoming defensive or competitive.
- Good listeners simply offer us feedback as encouragement and a means of helping, while making us feel better.
- The best listeners check their ego at the door. They are interested in other people and demonstrate that interest when we speak. They do not shift emphasis to themselves by one-upping us or hogging the stage.

Types of Listening

Listening is the combination of hearing and interpreting. There are two basic types of listening: discriminative listening and comprehensive listening.

Discriminative Listening

Discriminative listening develops through your childhood and into adulthood as you distinguish between sounds, the way sounds are made, and what they mean. You recognize voices and the subtleties of foreign languages, regional accents along with clues to the emotions and feelings of others. You can tell if someone is happy or sad, angry or stressed. You become sensitive to everything you recognize as visual and vocal stimuli. Nuances of body language, mannerisms, tone, pitch, emphasis or volume of voice add value to what the speaker says, and helps you derive meaning from the message. Discriminatory listening helps you to capture emotions from another person's voice.

Comprehensive Listening

Comprehensive listening builds on what you learned through discriminative listening. Comprehensive listening is the interpretation of the words and ideas. To understand the listener you need appropriate vocabulary and language skills combined with the knowledge that you have about relative topics. The broader your horizons, the more you can fully comprehend what the speaker is saying. How you interpret the message will be affected by how well you pay attention to visual and vocal cues such as tone of voice or body language.

Your understanding also depends on your beliefs, desires, fears, motivations, or how open-mindedly you approach the experience. For these reasons, you will encounter people who listen to the same thing but may understand the message in different ways. Other factors in deriving meaning might be differences in listening skills, mismatches in vocabulary, complicated language, cultural interpretations, technical jargon, or how interested the person was in the message. In a group setting, like a classroom or business meeting individuals often derive different and numerous meanings. All those differentiations that help one person comprehend the message could also lead another person to confusion or misunderstanding. That is why whether alone or in a group it is vital that you seek clarification and utilize other skills like reflection, discussion, or problem-solving to aid your comprehension.

Styles of Listening

You have a preferences for how you listen best, which is related to your learning style. There are four different listening styles.

1. People Oriented
2. Action Oriented
3. Content Oriented
4. Time Oriented

1. People Orientated

If you are a people-oriented listener, you are interested in the speaker. You listen to the message in order to learn how the speaker thinks and how passionate he or she feels about the subject.

2. Action or Task Orientated

As an action-oriented listener, you are primarily interested in finding out what the speaker wants. Does the speaker want votes, donations, volunteers, or something else? This style of listening can be difficult because you have to listen to descriptions, evidence, and explanations with patience as the speaker builds his or her case to a conclusion.

3. Content

When you are interested in the message itself, you are a content-oriented listener, keen on wanting to listen to well-developed information with solid explanations. You interested in the message to find out if it makes sense, learn what it means, and determine if it is accurate.

4. Time

If you are a time-oriented listener, you prefer the speaker to get to the point quickly. You can become impatient with slow delivery or lengthy explanations. You may be receptive for only a brief amount of time and may become rude or even hostile if the speaker expects you to focus for longer.

Exercise to develop your awareness of listening styles:

1. Make a list of benefits and drawbacks to each of the listening styles.
2. Identify ways that you can adapt your listening style to encompass more than one style for more effective listening.
3. Get together with a small group to discuss what each person's usual listening style is. Under what circumstances might each of you practice a different listening style?

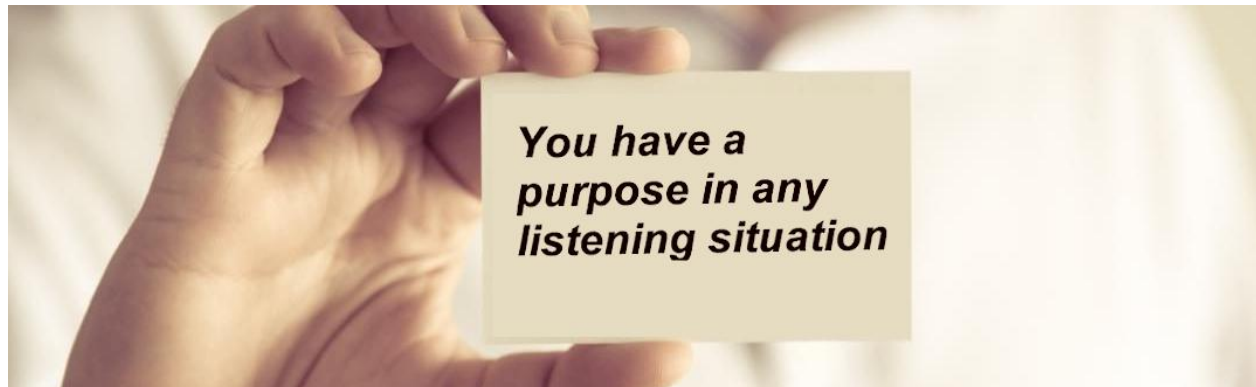
Approaches to Listening

We will discuss five approaches to listening. Take a moment with each to think about how you could use each approach in your day to day affairs.

1. Informative listening to understand.
2. Critical listening in order to evaluate and form opinions about what is being said.
3. Relationship listening to improve the relationship between people.
4. Empathic listening to understand feeling and emotion
5. Appreciative listening is characterized by the response of the listener

Purposes for Listening

Because listening requires conscious mental effort you want to eliminate as many cognitive barriers as you can beforehand. You can prime yourself to listen more effectively by determining your goals for listening to any message so you can choose the best approach to listening. You should determine: “Does this message relate to me or affect my life?” Then ask questions:



- Am I listening to receive information?
- Am I listening to follow instructions?
- Am I listening to evaluate information?
- Am I listening to make a decision?
- Am I listening for pleasure?
- Am I listening to empathize?

You have a purpose in any given listening situation, whether it be a discussion with fellow entrepreneurs, attending a lecture, or visiting with a friend. Actually, you might have more than one purpose. For example, in a classroom lecture, your primary purpose might be to learn and understand a new theory and your secondary purpose might be to glean clues as to what parts of the lecture will be included in the final exam. When you know your goal, you can choose an approach that will help you gather and understand all the information you need.

1. Informative Listening

Information listening is goal-based listening that requires you to interpret verbal and non-verbal cues to learn. Much of what you learned from the world around you or in school came from informative listening. What and how well you learn depends on how well you listen to a teacher, a documentary, the guru talking you through a technical problem, a friend reciting a recipe or directions to a party.

Usually, in this form of listening you focus on understanding the speaker's message and postpone critical thinking and processing until later. In education and business, informative listening is often accompanied by note-taking to record key information for later use. In the workplace, you listen to reports, briefings, and speeches to better understand practices, procedures or directives. How well you perform depends on how well you listen. If you listen poorly, you may not be not have absorbed enough information to solve a problem, complete a task, advance an idea, or pass a test.

2. Critical Listening

Many of your day-to-day decisions are based on some form of critical listening and the thinking that accompanies it. The use of the word "critical" does not mean that you are listening to information that is flawed or deficient. It means you are listening with caution and asking yourself questions fundamental to learning more so that you can put that information into perspective and determine if the message makes sense and is supported by factual evidence.

As a critical listener you are not making any judgements or openly challenging the speaker. To fully understand what the other person has to say you must keep an open-mind until you have attentively listened to everything. You may agree or disagree with a speaker's opinions, but the point is that you are listening to recognize when a message you are hearing is based on opinion and when it is factual.

What is the speaker trying to say?

What is the main argument being presented?

How does what I'm hearing differ or fit in with my beliefs, knowledge or opinion?

Is the message inconsistent with what I already know?

Is the argument illogical or unsupported by evidence?

Is the speaker mistaking an assumption for fact?

Is the language exaggerated?

When you listen to scrutinize a message it requires significant real-time cognitive effort to keep everything in perspective. Some aspects of this form of listening are instinctive. Still you have to be intentional to:

- Analyze what is being said and relate it to existing knowledge, rules, values
- Assess strengths and weaknesses, agreement or disparity
- Gauge the expertise and credibility of the speaker

- Weigh the pros and cons of an argument
- Differentiate facts from inferences, persuasion from manipulation
- Determine the speaker's message and intentions
- Comprehend inner meanings
- Determine whether the message makes sense or is helpful

This is one of the best ways to broaden your knowledge and perception of other people and ideas. The ability to listen critically is essential in today's world.

You are exposed to many kinds of messages through all manner of communication: institutional rules, instructions, warnings, political discourse, advertisements, gossip, text messages, jokes, invitations, web links to name a few. It is not always clear how to separate the truth from the messages that are misleading or blatantly false. It is not always clear which messages are intended to help you and which ones are merely self-serving for the speaker. If something is factual, supporting evidence exists. However, you still need to be careful about what evidence does and does not mean. Assumptions are gaps in a logical sequence that listeners passively fill with their own ideas and opinions and may or may not be accurate.

Without critical listening skills, you simply accept the speaker's assumptions and you are apt to be persuaded by illogical arguments based on opinions rather than facts. This is not to say that speakers should not express their opinions. Many of the greatest speeches in history include personal opinions. However, by listening critically you will have both reason and the responsibility to evaluate the message for how it was said and for what purpose it was said. Likely you will notice unwarranted assumptions, which may prompt you to question the speaker or to conduct further research to examine the validity of his or her assumptions. Afterwards, you can evaluate all the information before you make informed decisions, formulate your own opinions, solve a problem, or follow-up with appropriate action.

Relationship Listening

The most essential part of communication between two people is based on relationship listening. Relationship listening is paramount in forming strong connections in your personal and business relationships. The stronger this connection is, the easier it is for you to understand each other. Although relationship listening requires you to listen for information, your emphasis should be on understanding the other person, being patient, supportive and demonstrating empathy. When you approach listening with the purpose of identifying the qualities, strengths, capabilities, and values of the other person, he or she feels heard and respected which in turn improves rapport and builds a more positive work or personal relationship. When someone says, "It's like you read my thoughts!" you should applaud yourself for being a superb listener.

When interacting with clients, relationship listening is essential. Miscommunications and conflicts can slow down the sales process and even drive customers away. The best listeners are able to affirm that they are listening to the needs and opinions of their potential clients. Rapport and trust follow which leads to a mutually beneficial long term experience.

Empathic Listening

Empathic listening is the practice of being attentive and responsive to the other person's input during conversation. You do that with compassion, feeling, insight, and an emotional connection, which helps you to understand where the other person is coming from before you respond or react. You should not confuse empathic listening with feeling sorry for someone. Instead of sympathy, you pay attention in a caring manner.

When people share something emotionally important, it is likely they trust your credibility, judgment and experience. Therefore:

- You listen with no judgment. You want them to feel heard so you do not jump to conclusions or form opinions.
- You offer them acceptance. Through your willingness to hear them out you empower the speaker to higher self-awareness. By earning the speaker's confidence, you allowing them to communicate more freely.
- You offer heartfelt support and encouragement rather than advice or criticism. When the speaker feels heard, an emotional burden is lifted, which reduces their stress and confusion?
- You offer them silence. Silence enable them hear their own words, so they gain more clarity and are better equipped to find a resolution. Silence is essential.
- You offer them patience. You may pose thoughtful neutral questions but refrain from rushing through the experience or offering solutions.

The empathetic approach to listening serves others and at the same time you become a more loving, compassionate and patient individual. It is neither a natural skill nor an easy skill to master. While there can be times of great joy when you experience this type of interaction, often the speaker is in anguish, angry, in a challenging situation, in the midst of a dilemma, or embarking on something serious. It is often assumed that this type of listening is used more often in therapeutic situations. However, empathic listening is an essential skill for personal and professional interactions because when you take the time to hear people out and exhibit that you understand their point of view or situation, it helps builds trust and credibility which are essential in personal relationships and business settings.

Appreciative Listening

Appreciative listening is not about communicating with others or gathering information. It is your reaction, not the source of the message, which defines appreciative listening. Appreciative listening is about what you to nourish your minds to meet your needs or goals. This kind of listening is characterized by the response of you have to music, a comedy routine, motivating speech or sounds from a forest. The source or meaning of the message is secondary to your approval or enjoyment of the experience.

The Essentials of an Effective Listening Experience

Really effective listening doesn't just happen. It is difficult to really listen if you are not motivated to do so or if you do not fully comprehend the words. It is challenging when you do not interpret the body language of the speaker in connection to the words. Effective listening can presents complex challenges and you may need to push yourself to develop new disciplines, change habits, and fine-tune some underutilized listening abilities.

Undivided Attention

The most basic and powerful way to connect to another person is to listen. Just listen. Perhaps the most important thing you give another person is your attention. Make it your undivided attention. Listening requires discipline – the self-control or discipline to concentrate on the speaker and not interrupt.

Common courtesy dictates these four NO's:

1. Never interrupt or finish a sentence for someone.
2. Do not tune out because you think you know what's coming.
3. Do not change the subject until you're certain the speaker has concluded his or her point.
4. Do not watch the clock.
5. Avoid any behavior that belittles the speaker or message.

attention

- a** : the act or state of applying the mind to something
b : a condition of readiness for such attention involving narrowing or focusing of consciousness and receptivity

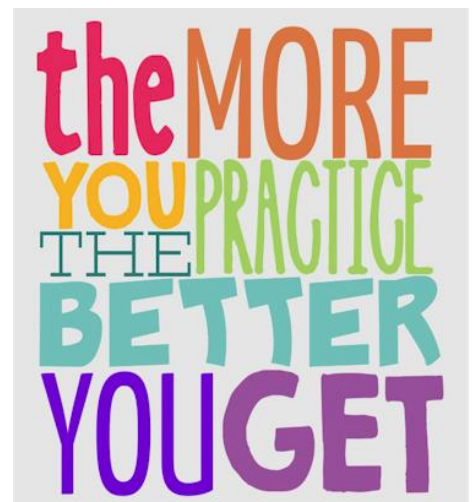
“make it undivided attention”

Fine-Tune Your Underdeveloped Listening Abilities through Practice

Like any other ability, being able to listen attentively and effectively requires practice. Athletes train and work out regularly, musicians practice daily, and you, too, must also work at developing your skills to be a more effective listener

Practice sessions do not have to be long, drawn out affairs, but you must be persistent if your goal is to surpass the majority of the population at their 25% level of listening efficiency.

Think of the practice session as a critical listening event. Your goal is to enter into your practice session prepared, alert, and motivated to concentrate for 100% of the session. Even in practice with no other person in attendance you should establish good listening habits by adopting behaviors and a posture that is respectful and conducive to listening effectively..



Short Sessions: You could start by dedicating ten or fifteen minutes every few days to practice until you feel your skills are proficient to handle longer sessions. Practice listening to podcasts or videos or auditing classes. You should plan to engage in these short practice sessions as if you were about to enter a room to listen to an important message from live speaker only a few steps away:

- Plan ahead by familiarizing yourself with the topic; decide your purpose for listening; and figure out the best approach to utilize.
- Do not limit yourself to familiar speakers, topics, or ones you like. Choose to listen to boring subjects and to second-rate speakers. Pick from serious subjects, comedies, documentaries, even commercials.
- Give yourself a pep talk about behaviors you recognize that could be a deterrent to good listening.
- Eliminate distractions and take notes.

As soon as the person finishes speaking:

- Outline on paper what you understood.
- Analyze what made listening easy or more difficult.
- Determine what you could do differently to prepare or remain focused. Did you prepare in advance? How might you be more prepared?

Advance your practice regime by listening to longer sessions, as well difficult or complex material. You can only expand your skills with exposure to multifaceted and complicated material and a variety of speakers who may present challenging topics or listening situations. Careful attention to the details of documentaries, political debates, lengthy lectures, seminars, or any other verbal presentation that requires deeper concentration for longer periods of time are essential in attaining the discipline to listen attentively.

Essential Listening Disciplines and Abilities

Employ the following capabilities in your practice sessions and in your real time listening experiences.

1. Slow Down
2. Choose to be Interested
3. Prepare in Advance
4. Engage with a Speaker with a Receptive Attitude
5. Quiet Your Mind and Hands
6. Relax
7. Encourage the Speaker
8. Prioritize the Important Points
9. Concentrate
10. Be Comfortable with Silence and Respect the Pauses
11. Be Aware of and Understand the Verbal and Non-Verbal Cues
12. Clarify

Discipline to Slow Down

You can start by slowing down. Just because everything around you is happening quickly doesn't mean you have to follow suit. Apply the brakes! When you take more time to direct your attention to people and situations you'll be pleasantly surprised by what you hear and remember.

Discipline to Choose to be Interested

Without interest, it is difficult to focus on the subject. When you are very interested in what is being said, good listening usually happens naturally and it takes little effort to hear the message and understand it. However, attentive listening can be challenging when the subject or the speaker does not motivate you.

To build up interest, when you set aside time for preparation, familiarize yourself with the speaker or the person you are going to meet. Study the necessary background of the subject or the preparatory material before listening begins. Of course, this preparation is critical when you are a student going into a lecture or when you are an entrepreneurs who want to make an impact with a client.

Because speakers vary in how they express themselves or have different purposes for expressing themselves, it is even more important to develop adjunctive listening skills that help you to stay tuned in to any speaker or topic. To maintain interest keep an open mind and keep focused on the why. In situations like this, you need to exercise patience with and empathy for the speaker.

Discipline to Prepare in Advance

Short term preparation might be ensuring you get a good night's rest and eat in advance so you are not hungry. You can carry emergency snacks to satisfy any last minute hunger urges and water for dehydration. In advance of any listening session, you can check that what you need to take notes is easily accessible so you do not interrupt the listening by fumbling about in search of a pen.

Short-term Preparation is your immediate readiness to listen – distractions locked out, pen in hand, mind cleared of unrelated information, comfortably alert, instant focus on the speaker to absorb the message, including verbal and non-verbal cues.

- First, arrive early so you can make any last minute adjustments.
- You can be more involved in listening if you choose a seat front and centre. Where the choice is not yours, you should at least feel or adopt the attitude that you are right there with the speaker. Make yourself comfortable so that you do not lose focus, but maintain a posture that does not restrict breathing or give off signals that that you have zoned out. You want the ability to be able to adjust position to follow the speaker's movements, or engage with more than one speaker.
- Avoid negative mannerisms, like fidgeting, snapping a pencil against a book, talking, or anything else that would be annoying or disruptive for the speaker or other attendees. Long term preparation might involve expanding your vocabulary. Learning new words and their meaning enhances your listening skills as well as your conversational skills and reading comprehension.

Ability to Engage with a Speaker with a Receptive Attitude

It is difficult to really listen if you do not adopt a receptive attitude. You can **choose** to listen. Give yourself a pep talk; make a game of seeing how well you can listen. How often did you attend a function out of a sense of duty and in the end found it enjoyable or profitable? The reason you benefitted is probably that you decided to make the best of the situation.

The opportunity to listen effectively will have passed you by if you allow poor attitude, laziness, bias or listening filters interfere with the value of the message. You cannot evaluate the listening experience or the message until you have heard it, so it is better when you begin with a receptive attitude.

You should listen with the intent to understand, not reply or act. To get into the right frame of mind, you can ask yourself questions like the following:

- Can I stay fully present and listen deeply?
- Can I keep from judging what the other person is saying?
- Can I refrain from offering advice?
- Can I avoid interrupting this person's experience?
- Can I refrain from interjecting my own story?

When it is difficult, you should adopt an attitude that shouts:

I'm so tuned in to this lecture!
Listening will be fun!
I love hearing this person's stories!

Everyone has a story to tell or words to share. Open-mindedness in listening is characterized by:

- a) Being open to learning something new,
- b) Thinking about why the person is telling you this at this particular moment.
- c) Thinking about the meaning behind the words.

Discipline to Quiet Your Mind and Hands

To be an effective listener requires that you focus on the present. That requires you to quiet your mind and hands to focus on what is being said. That being said, your intentions and receptive attitude set the groundwork for relaxation and being able to quiet your mind.

Ability to Relax

You are a much better listener when you are relaxed. Relaxation and business do mix well. What calms your nerves? Besides a good night's sleep, most of us agree that music and a massage can be very relaxing, but as a student or entrepreneur you might not be able to indulge in such activities before every lecture or business meeting. Relaxation can also come from:

- Allowing enough time between different inputs, so that you do not fall victim to information overload
- Arriving early to become familiarize with the space
- Being prepared to make spur of the moment adjustments that will make the new environment more conducive to listening
- Scheduling enough time so that you do not have to worry about other obligations
- Being comfortable. Wearing comfortable clothing, not feeling too hot or too cold, minimizing or eliminating distractions
- Breathing exercises to release tension from your muscles
- Using positive visualization to transform any nervous energy into enthusiasm
- Smiling. Smiling increases endorphins which replace anxiety with calm and make you feel better while exhibiting confidence and enthusiasm
- Drinking water

Ability to Encourage the Speaker

The best listeners possess the quality of making the speaker feel like the most fascinating person on the planet. They maintain eye contact and let posture and body language convey their involvement. They encourage the speaker to continue by demonstrating strong listening cues (short exclamations, spontaneous applause, a hand to the heart, a thumbs up, smile, etc.) As good listeners, when it is our turn to speak we should make supportive encouraging comments or ask probing questions that demonstrate our interest and genuine desire to know more.

Ability to Prioritize the Important Points

Often the information you need to hear is mixed in with irrelevant stuff. By paying attention to detail and context you can prioritize the information to identify and retain the most important points. For instance, it is inefficient for students to write down everything they hear in a lecture. They must prioritize which information is the most crucial for later use. In sales, entrepreneurs must prioritize which of their clients' questions or concerns deserve immediate attention, which can be addressed in due course, or which require further research.

Ability to Concentrate

Your thoughts move about much faster than speech so listening requires concentration. The foregoing abilities and disciplines will help you concentrate. Still, before you can concentrate on listening there are other things you must do:

- Optimize your environment for listening by eliminating anything that could distract you. This includes that you stop trying to multi-task and that you hit the pause button on your technology.
- Be clear on exactly what you are aiming to accomplish through listening. Stay connected to the why. Get into the habit of asking yourself deliberate questions:
 - What about this listening experience makes it important to me?
 - Who does it affect?
 - How will it makes things better?
- If you have a choice, for the utmost concentration, work with your body's natural ebbs and flows. Your body's energy has its own path and you are naturally more energetic and motivated at specific times of the day.
- The key is to be selective to give full attention to listening.

You certainly do not want to fall asleep when you should be engaged in listening. If you get drowsy or find yourself drifting away during a listening session, you can:

- Change your body position and breathe deeply to concentrate on the speaker
- Take deep breaths to raise blood oxygen levels.
- Stimulate your body's energy flow:
 - Stretch fingers, toes, legs and arms and hands, your neck and face to increase circulation.
 - Rub, scratch, or pinch arms or neck to stimulate the skin,
 - Massage ear lobes (not to gently)
 - Thump the collar bones
 - Tap the centre of the sternum with fingertips (again not to gently).
- Drink water. Dehydration causes fatigue.
- Politely stand up, or even politely leave the room for a breath of fresh air.

For the most part people are able to decide what they want to focus their attention on. Here are two exercise to practice concentrating.

Exercises #1 to practice concentrating:

- Pick any task you want to concentrate on, one that needs your undivided attention.
- Remove obvious distractions, tell others not to disturb you, and get comfortable.
- Set a timer for 20 minutes, then give the task your full attention.
- If your mind wanders, snap yourself back to the task at hand.
- Remind yourself that you need to keep up this level of concentration for only a few more minutes.
- When the 25 minutes is done, take a real 5-minute relaxation break to recharge.
- When you're ready, you can do another 20-25 minutes of intense concentration. This will prepare you for times when you have to listen intently for longer periods of time.

Exercises #2 to practice concentrating

Try this simple experiment to test how staying curious about the object of your attention can prolong your ability to stay focused on it:

- Pick a dot any dot on a piece of paper or wall. Try to focus on that dot. You'll probably find that one of two things will occur. One, you may find your field of vision becomes blurred and you see nothing distinct, or two you may find that you have actually ceased to look at the dot in question and you actually looking at something else nearby.
- The way to remain focused on the dot is to be curious about that particular dot and transform that curiosity into specific questions about it. How big is it? How far away? Is it perfectly rounded or could it be another shape? What shade of color? Is it smooth or bumpy? Why does it have texture? How long has it been there? How did it get there? By thinking about the dot in various ways and associating it with different characteristics you can keep your mind on it for a comparatively longer time.
- Curiosity intersects with focus. The more curious you are about a subject, the greater the stamina of your concentration will be.

Ability to be Comfortable with Silence and Respect the Pauses

You may need to train yourself to get comfortable with silence. Mastering the silence is an important achievement in developing listening skills.

A pause, even a long pause, does not necessarily mean that the speaker has finished. The speaker may need a moment to gather his or her thoughts or emotions and formulate what to say next or to dig deep for a much needed insight. Therefore, it is important to respect any pauses the speaker might need before continuing. Sometimes waiting through the silence gives you a chance to reflect and absorb the message. The speaker might actually be giving you time to reflect on the significance of a statement. Good speakers carefully plan their presentations, they emphasize, repeat and summarize the key points, they pause often to give their listeners time to process important points.



I used to think that silence was awkward. Later, I learned that silence can give people space to think which makes for a much more interesting conversations.

Usually silence makes people uncomfortable and they jump in to fill the quiet with words, often-extraneous words. You can nod encouragement or offer a gesture of understanding, but you should not interrupt unless invited to do so. If you are tempted to speak, you should be mindful of respecting the other person. Tell yourself, “I need to care about hearing and understanding what she has to say more than I care about her hearing me.”

As a good listener you can utilize pauses to process what was said, make good notes, summarize ideas, or anticipate and formulate questions based on the speaker’s message.

- What point is the speaker trying to make?
- What main ideas should I remember?
- How does this information relate to what I already know?
- How does this information relate to what I need to know?

Ability to be Aware of and Understand the Verbal and Non-Verbal Cues

You communicate with other people on many levels. You use your vocal organs to speak, but you communicate with your entire body. What you say and your choice of words is boosted to a different level by the volume, tones, emphasis, nuances of your voice and your body language. An estimated 80% of human communication comes from non-verbal cues – props, facial expressions, posture, gestures, respiration, perspiration, and numerous other body language signals. You derive deeper meaning when you pay attention to and interpret all these communication channels.

More often than not, how another person speaks to you is more impactful than what they say. The expressions and body language tell you important things, such as the real feelings and intentions of the speaker. Unless you take these non-verbal elements into account, you cannot properly understand the conversational use of spoken language.

Maybe one of the most challenging aspects of listening is the ability to link all these pieces of information together to obtain the whole picture.

Non-verbal cues can:

- Reinforce or modify what is said in words
- Convey information about the speakers emotional state
- Define or reinforce the relationship between people
- Provide feedback
- Regulate the flow of information

Therefore, you should concentrate to listen to:

- What is being said - the whole story or message
- The meaning of words and the silences in between.
- How the other person uses language, voice, organization of ideas
- Inflection, passion, attention, silence,
- How the person uses his or her body
- What is left unsaid or partially said
- How the speaker connects to the you or other listeners

There are many different types of non-verbal communication. It takes intense concentration to detect the many cues:

- Body movements (kinesics) – for example, hand gestures or nodding or shaking the head. These are often the easiest element of non-verbal communication for the speaker to control. Therefore you have to detect other nuances of body language to determine if the gesture is sincere or contrived. You have to be careful how you interpret non-verbal communication because some signals, gestures or expressions can be very culture-specific. For example, some cultures do not recognize the nod of the head unless it is accompanied by an utterance indicative of assent or agreement. Another example is the placing of the thumb and forefinger into a circle while raising the other three fingers. In Western cultures, this gesture means “okay”. In Japan, this is reputedly the sign for money, and in Arabic countries, it is a threat.



Posture, or how the speaker stands or sit, whether their arms are crossed, and so on

- Eye contact, the amount of eye contact often determines the level of trust and trustworthiness
- Para-language, the aspects of the voice such as pitch, volume, rhythm, speed of speaking, hesitation noises, and even fluency.
- Closeness or personal space (proxemics), which determines the level of intimacy, and which varies very much by culture
- Facial expressions, including smiling, frowning and blinking, which are very hard to control consciously. Interestingly, the broad facial expressions that show strong emotions, such as fear, anger, and happiness, are the same throughout the world.
- Physiological changes, for example, a person may sweat or blink more when nervous, and heart rate is also likely to increase. These are almost impossible to control consciously and are therefore a very important indicator of mental state.

Interpreting the Language of Non-Verbal Communication Decoding Body Language

Understanding and interpreting non-verbal signals is akin to learning another language. Yet, it is not a language with a fixed meaning. It is influenced and driven by the context in which it occurs. This includes both the place and the people concerned, as well as the culture. Not all cultures instinctively convey or interpret nonverbal cues the same way, which can cause confusion when people of different backgrounds are trying to communicate. Besides gestures (such as in the example show above) volume or speed of speech can be interpreted differently. In Saudi Arabia, speaking loudly conveys authority and speaking softly conveys submission. Whereas, Western Europeans perceive loudness as brash. Finnish people may speak more slowly than other Europeans, but this does not mean they think or act slowly. Some individuals cannot detect sarcasm without the non-verbal cues, and some cultures do not recognize the nod of the head without an utterance indicative of assent or agreement to accompany it. Therefore, you must be aware and whenever possible prepare in advance to learn the vocal and non-vocal phenomena differences between various cultures.

A lack of non-verbal signals may also be a signal of sorts, suggesting that the speaker is carefully controlling their body language. It could be a sign of intense nervousness or it may mean the person may be trying to hide their true emotions or intentions from you.

Ability to Clarify

Typically, in business meetings, we expect a respectful dialogue between professionals, yet there are also discussions we would rather avoid. For example, it can be uncomfortable to admit that you are not clear on what the other person said. True you may have missed an important point, but it also could be that the speaker was unclear. When you are unsure, it is never wise to lean toward silence, which tends to send the wrong message. The other person might assume you have not listened or that you processed everything with ease. Asking for clarification shows the speaker that you are interested and want to understand. It is a sign of respect.

When you yourself in such a situation, it is imperative that you are able to restate what you understand to ensure that you are in agreement with the speaker so there is no doubt about what needs to happen next.

In certain situations, such as in a classroom or business meeting it is helpful to make notes so you do not forget what is important to clarify.

Let's Listen Attentively and Ethically

Communication Code of Ethics

In 1999, the National Communication Association officially adopted the Credo for Ethical Communication. Ultimately, the NCA Credo for Ethical Communication is a set of beliefs communication scholars have about the ethics of human communication.

National Communication Association Credo for Ethical Communication

"Questions of right and wrong arise whenever people communicate. Ethical communication is fundamental to responsible thinking, decision making, and the development of relationships and communities within and across contexts, cultures, channels, and media. Moreover, ethical communication enhances human worth and dignity by fostering truthfulness, fairness, responsibility, personal integrity, and respect for self and others. We believe that unethical communication threatens the quality of all communication and consequently the well-being of individuals and the society in which we live. Therefore we, the members of the National Communication Association, endorse and are committed to practicing the following principles of ethical communication:

- We advocate truthfulness, accuracy, honesty, and reason as essential to the integrity of communication.
- We endorse freedom of expression, diversity of perspective, and tolerance of dissent to achieve the informed and responsible decision making fundamental to a civil society.
- We strive to understand and respect other communicators before evaluating and responding to their messages.
- We promote access to communication resources and opportunities as necessary to fulfill human potential and contribute to the well-being of families, communities, and society.
- We promote communication climates of caring and mutual understanding that respect the unique needs and characteristics of individual communicators.
- We condemn communication that degrades individuals and humanity through distortion, intimidation, coercion, and violence, and through the expression of intolerance and hatred.
- We are committed to the courageous expression of personal convictions in pursuit of fairness and justice.
- We advocate sharing information, opinions, and feelings when facing significant choices while also respecting privacy and confidentiality.
- We accept responsibility for the short- and long-term consequences of our own communication and expect the same of others.

These principles express the decency with which people should treat each other. It doesn't mean we must accept everything we hear, but ethically, we should refrain from trivializing each other's concerns:

Exercises to Hone your Awareness and Gauge Improvement

Here are some exercises that can be done individually or with a group. These exercises, if done often, are a means of honing your awareness and gauging improvement in your listening ability. We provide exercises for individuals and for groups.

Individual Exercises

Exercise #1: List the qualities of a person with whom you enjoy talking.

Think of people you really enjoy talking with and what qualities draw you to speak with them? If you are not sure, carefully make observations when you communicate with them next time.

Exercise #2: Track One Day's Communication

Choose a day. Keep a list of all the communications that you have on that day. Include every interaction, social connection, meeting, lecture you attend, telephone conversation, etc. For each communication write down:

- The subject of the communication.
- Who talked more - you or the other person?
- What you know after this communication that you didn't know before?

Be completely honest with yourself. These notes will help you think about your listening skills and gauge how well you listen at the moment.

For even better results you can ask another person, like a spouse, friend, or co-worker to accompany you for some of these interactions. After you record your notes about the interaction, ask that person to read what you have written and comment on what they might have witnessed that is the same or different.

You can do this exercise every week or every month to see how your listening skills evolve.

Exercise #3: Participate in an online listening self-assessment.

Browse for web-sites that offer a listening assessment. Complete one or two. Keep the results. After you have practiced and improved your listening skills, repeat the assessments to measure your progress.

Exercises for Two People

Exercise #4 – Two minutes of pure listening

This is not an exercise that includes clarification or asking open-ended questions. It is about engaging with the speaker for two minutes, but saying nothing.

- Block out all distractions that might divert your attention.

- Face each other with no distractions other than a watch or a timer. For two minutes, one of you will speak, answering a prompt while the other listens. If you are the listener, do not respond at all during the two minutes, but feel free to use facial expressions or nod your head while listening. The idea is to listen to the words for the sake of listening, not for the sake of replying. Then, switch roles for another two minutes.

The prompt to use in the exercise: How are you?

- Be attentive to the other person, but relax your gaze. Do not strain your eyes or concentrate too hard. The goal is to be aware of the speaker in a natural and focused way, listening to both the words, the cues, and the silence in between.
- There may be silences while the speaker chooses how to respond to the prompt. During those pauses reflect on the meaning of what you hear. Try to keep your mind from wandering. Be aware that there may be significance behind the pause itself.

Group Exercises

Exercise #5 – Share Experiences of not Being Heard

Individuals think of a time when they felt they weren't listened to at work, home, shopping, doctor, etc. Split into pairs to take turns share experiences. The listener must try and identify 2 things:

- 1) What the person in the story did that demonstrated non-listening
- 2) What impact this had on the speaker. Usually the speaker felt devalued, angry, upset, hurt.

Gather all the ideas. The group can put all the ideas together and develop some principles of good listening.

Exercise #6 – Group Freeze

Everyone quietly mills about the room. One person will elect to freeze in position unexpectedly. As soon as one person notices that someone else has frozen in position they freeze as well. So the effect of one person freezing causes everyone to freeze. Once everyone is completely still, someone decides to begin milling about again until another person chooses to freeze in position and everyone else follows suit. The goal is to see how quickly the group can freeze in position.

This can be made more interesting by having the players make noises as they move around. Noise makes it harder and harder to notice the group stop, and therefore makes the exercise more challenging.

Exercise #6 – Telephone Exercise

Have participants form a line or sit in a circle and choose a starting point.) Whisper two different messages one starting at one end of the line and one starting at the other. It is best to use a message that is written down for later reference.

The first person passes the message to the person next to them and that person relays it to the next. Play music, encourage the participants to giggle or fidget while they wait for the message to reach them. When the messages have been passed to the final person, ask the first recipients if they can remember the message and then the final recipients to recite the message they received.

This exercise enables you to become aware of things that stop you from actively listening and then discuss what you can do to ensure you are really listening.

Exercise #7 Sabotaged Listening

Divide into two groups. Instruct one group of individuals to think of a topic that each one of them will talk about, something that interests them (film, children, sports). Take the other group to another location. Instruct them to listen to their conversation partner, but that they are to stop listening after thirty seconds. They can fidget, get distracted, daydream, as long as they tune the speaker out.

When the two groups are reunited, form pairs, one from each group. One group to listen and one to speak. See what happens when the pre-warned group stops listening. Usually the speakers get frustrated. This exercise can lead to a useful discussion on the impact of listening and how to listen.

Exercise #8 Round Robin exercise

Delegates are given a topic to discuss. One person starts speaking. The trainer or moderator says “stop”. At that point, the next delegate in line must continue the last speaker’s sentence starting with their last few words. Once the group gets the hang of the procedure, the moderator changes the pattern saying stop and pointing to another delegate in the room instead of the next one in line. The random selection of speaking forces all delegates to listen closely because it might be his or her turn next. This is an interesting topic for delegates who work together because it can be used to promote product knowledge, build a sense of achievement and satisfaction.

Difficult Listeners and Talkative People

In the workplace, two difficult situations must be handled with patience and courage.

How to Work with a Person who has Poor Listening Skills

Dealing with a Person who is Over-talking

How to Work with a Person who has Poor Listening Skills

We could speculate for days on the reasons why people do not listen. They may have a lot on their mind and cannot concentrate enough to listen, or maybe they simply have no interest in the topic.

When you find yourself in such a situation you want to refrain from becoming so irritated that you may not listen or communicate well, which exacerbates the situation.

First, you should evaluate your role in this experience:

- Am I indulging in useless talk for the sake of talking?
- Am I talking too much?
- Am I saying something important?
- Am I lecturing?
- Am I repeating myself?
- Am I trying to push an idea on them?
- Am I allowing the other person an opportunity to speak?
- Is my voice and body language sending mixed messages?

A yes to any of these questions, means it is time to be quiet and do something different.

Second you should observe the listener's reactions while you speak to gain a better perspective on how to approach communicating with him or her.

- What is their body language telling you?
- Are they faking attention?
- Do they have eye contact?
- Are they emotionally distracted?
- Are they trying to multi-task at the time?
- Is this person in the habit of not listening?

Emotions like fear, sadness, or prejudice erect barriers to effective communication.

- People who are afraid become defensive and tend to argue.
- A prejudiced person will not make any effort to listen and understand.
- If a listener's senses are not functioning at an optimum level due to an emotion like sadness he or she may not understand or appreciate what is said.
- People who try to multi-task may not even realize how ineffectively they listen.

Approach the Problem

Emotions: When the person is distracted due to emotions, you should opt to be respectful and ask how you can help. Then, taking direction from how they respond, you either choose to do something different in the communication or be polite and withdraw.

Demanding Priorities: If the person is overwhelmed by demanding tasks or waiting clients, that take priority, you might be able to choose another time to communicate with them when they have time to get ready to listen.

Self-Distracted: If they are self-distracted by trying to multi-tasking with their technology it may be bad behavior that requires a sensitive discussion. If non-essential tasks are making them inattentive, you may need to approach this in an entirely different manner, depending on your role as that person's co-worker or supervisor, or friend.

Habit: If this person is in the habit of not listening, instead of fixating on their flaws in communicating, you need to earn their trust and create a safe space for them to express themselves. Once you earn their trust, they may be more apt to care more about your thoughts and ideas.

Help the Person Become a Better Listener

The person may need to work on their listening skills, but instead of becoming irritated, you could help her become a better listener. Here are six things you could do.

- Ask more questions. Anytime you try to explain something in detail, you need to pause and allow the other person time to follow up with comments or questions. Otherwise, the conversation will start to become one-sided.
- Give the other person a chance to talk and say what is on his or her mind. Be patient because you do not know the other person's situation or inclinations. When people are quiet, people tend to talk over them a lot, so they feel like their voice does not matter. If the person you are engaged with has had those kinds of experiences, earning trust and showing patience while giving her or him an individual opportunity to express full thoughts, results in mutual respect and better communication, including listening.
- Focus on creating a meaningful relationship with the person who doesn't listen well. It is challenging to have effective communication with someone if you have not taken the time to build a relationship first. When you genuinely care about the person, her or she will feel much more comfortable talking and listening.

- Carefully choose where to have the next conversation. People can be overwhelmed in conversations that take place on certain subjects or in specific environments. The presence of other people may be intimidating. Some people prefer more privacy and some do not like to engage when one person is sitting and the other is hovering.
- Try to explain things in a way that he/she can understand. Try to communicate on a different level, in a way that makes sense to them. Maybe they just communicate differently than most people. You could ask what you could do to make your communication work better for the both of you.
- Educate yourself on the individual's learning style. Are they a more verbal, visual or tactile learner? By getting to know more about how they learn best, you can communicate in a way that caters to their learning style.

Is Your Boss a Poor Listener?

Listening is a skill and so is making people listen to you. This is especially sensitive if it is your boss or supervisor. You cannot demand attention or be offensive. Yet you want to be honest and you want to be heard and understood by the people who lead you. People say they want to know the truth. Yet, how many people do you know who actually embrace tough feedback? In practice, people generally shun hearing the truth about their performance.

You have probably had a boss or supervisor that goes through the motions of acting like he or she listened but in reality, it has been one-way communication ending in the boss cutting you off with his own thoughts or responded with something like: "Life's not fair" or "You'll get over it".

What to do about it? You can adopt new strategies.

Analyze the Situation

First you should analyze the situation and dynamics of your team without letting your emotions color your perception. Does the supervisor dismiss everyone equally or single out individuals? You should observe the boss at meetings, with other people, with superiors, or clients. Does he or she seem engaged? Does he or she come away with notes or insights from the meeting or is the boss generally inattentive regardless of who is speaking? Can you identify times when the boss did listen attentively? Was it certain times of the day or when there was a lot of activity going on? Was it in a group setting or one-on-one? When and how does the boss listen best?

You should consider the topic and content of the conversation that might affect how the boss listens. Do certain topics make it difficult for the supervisor to converse? Does he or she have trouble concentrating when the subject is highly technical or highly emotional? Does the supervisor become more aggressive or reserved when senior leadership are present? Could his or her listening block be topic-specific or situational-specific? If so, how does your position or approach to conversations relate to that subject matter?

There are many reasons for the boss's poor listening, some of which might be:

- Lack of effective listening skills

- Unsure of the management role or unclear authority
- Overwhelmed by the work or people
- Inexperienced
- Poor people skills
- Avoids tough conversations
- Situational shyness
- Close-minded and judgmental
- Too arrogant to realize the value of the information

Develop a Strategy Based on Your Assessment

Part of your role is to support your leadership, so figuring out how to productively communicate with your manager must be strategic because you want to set the tone for success. Make sure you understand how decisions are made in the organization, and get to know who the resident experts are in particular subjects. This may reduce the need to get responses directly from the manager who never listens well.

- **Choose what is important for leadership to hear.** You probably do not want to inundate the boss with every suggestion or complaint. Using your earlier assessment you have to determine what you want leadership to hear – what is most relevant or important that the boss hears from you and responds to?
- **Set up the kind of meeting that will be most conducive to achieving the end result.** Knowing when and how and with whom the boss will listen best, you can set up the conversation in a place and time that makes for the least distractions, so that he or she can focus on the details of the conversation. What can you anticipate so the boss does not zone out during the conversation? By the end of the day, that manager may have little time or energy to concentrate. You want quality time with your leadership when you have an important message to deliver and decisions must be made.
- **Know their why.** It is important to understand what drives a leader, so you can prime information to align with his or her concerns and business agenda. Starting and centering the argument or presentation with one of those primary motivators or interest areas grabs the manager's attention right from the beginning.
- **Prepare the information.** Your presentation or argument should be concise and clear in a language this particular manager understands. Because leaders tend to skim through information, it is important to put the most relevant information at the very beginning. You may have to consult with resident experts on particular subjects to ensure you are not duplicating efforts or missing important things the manager needs. You want to make it easy for the boss to understand and sign off on exactly what you need. If more than one manager is in attendance the presentation may have to be presented in two formats. You want each manager to intellectually digest the finer points, but not get hung up on irrelevant minutiae.

- **Create alternative strategies when necessary.** Do you know or understand the kinds of demands placed on your leadership. If your manager is pulled in too many directions he or she may be too busy to focus attention where you need it. Having an alternate solution will be helpful. You could practice some investigatory skills by conversing with resident experts in the organization, and from that use your problem solving prowess to come up with solutions prior to or instead of seeking the supervisor's input. Part of learning how to do a job well is that you learn how to navigate the institutional obstacles that come along with the position. That includes the strategy for getting leadership to listen effectively.

When leaders experience cognitive overload you may need to take other measures:

- Use attention grabbers – state the context and expectations at the very beginning to seize their attention.
- Communicate the most relevant points in the beginning – leaders tend to skim through information.
- Summarize the key points concisely – poor listeners are likely to miss out on the key points of discussion.
- Seek feedback and follow-up – mentioning the need for input or feedback at the beginning of the presentation will send the message to the boss that he or she should pay attention.
- Follow-up with a post discussion email makes communication act as a reminder and refresh the manager's memory around key points.

When post discussion feedback and follow-up emails are the norm manager and supervisors will be more inclined to listen the next time.

Dealing with a Person who is Over-talking

Compulsive talkers can drive you crazy and make it nearly impossible to get work done or interfere with you taking a break to relax. You probably find it difficult to listen and dread the next time. In a social setting, it is easier to politely excuse yourself, but in the workplace this is much more difficult, especially if a coworker monopolizes a meeting with endless chatter or a manager keeps you late by telling never-ending stories. When this kind of problem become burdensome, you should not ignore it. Addressing the problem rather than letting it simmer allows you to move past it.

Listen First: When a person is looking for attention, being a good listener and some caring interaction may fulfill her needs and make it easier to cut the conversation short.

Polite Interruption: This is your best choice, especially when you have a busy schedule and need your energy and concentration. When a conversation is frivolous or repetitious, and you are preoccupied by a busy schedule or nagging deadline you may become so irritated or distracted you may not listen anyway. A polite interrupt is better for both parties. How do you do that? If you find yourself in conversation with someone who is over-talking, do not hesitate to interrupt after a polite period of time.

- Say, "I'm busy." The other person may not realize that they are interfering or bothersome, so if you take a moment to explain your time limitations that may be enough for them to walk away.

- Propose another time for the conversation. Proposing another time to talk works to delay the conversation to a more convenient time. It is highly possible the other person will have found someone else to vent to in the meantime and, if the conversation was not important, could forget about it entirely.
- If the relationship is close enough, privately take the person aside and explain the issue. People do not talk simply to be nasty. Often people who talk a lot do not even realize how they come across to others. A gentle reminder might be helpful.

Walk away: When you have addressed the issue in gentle polite ways and nothing seems to work, you should not feel bad about walking away.