

The Art of Listening

ACTIVE LISTENING is an important skill that is receiving new, long-overdue attention in the corporate world. That is evident from ever-larger budget allocations for such training and the increasing number of scheduled courses and participants.

This month's Training 101 offers two articles about the importance of sharpening one's listening skills. In the first, Richard M. Harris offers seven communication pointers that all better-than-average listeners practice. In the second article, Paul C. Blodgett shares six ways to increase your listening skill.



TURN LISTENING INTO A POWERFUL PRESENCE

BY RICHARD M. HARRIS

THOSE OF US who specialize in training and human resource development know the importance of perfecting listening skills—our own and others'. But often-powerful, unconscious factors combine to keep us from becoming good listeners.

You probably don't have any trouble listening and responding to a subject you like or can relate to. But if you're like most people, you lose focus after a presenter says something that doesn't make sense. You lose patience when someone takes too long to get to the point. And you may lose interest when you find the speaker is boring and the message is irrelevant.

Why is it so hard to control our concentration? How can we stay focused longer? What can be done to strengthen our retention? In short, what does it take to be a great listener?

Let's begin by defining the average listener so that we can better distinguish the excellent listener. A merely adequate listener is someone who slips in and out of focus in a conversation, gets only the gist of what is said, and provides only minimal feedback or response.

Present issues

The better-than-average listener is keenly aware of these important issues:

- ▶ partnership
- ▶ reviewing systematically
- ▶ effort
- ▶ star events
- ▶ empathy
- ▶ neutralizing snap judgments
- ▶ tenacity.

The first letters of those issues spell out "present" (as in, being fully present). Let's look at each one.

Partnership. Listening in conversation is typically viewed as a thought process only. Too many of us are quick to accept, albeit unconsciously, the popular wisdom that a listener's first—and only—priority is to receive a speaker's information accurately. But is listening really only a lonely stroll down a one-way street? What about matters of rapport and relationship in conversation? of feedback and perceived commitment? Surely, conversations succeed best as dialogues not as parallel monologues that may only occasionally intersect.

Everyone has a need to feel fully understood, fully received. That's why appropriate reaction or response is a credential of the committed listener. Remember that feeling you had as a speaker the last time someone affirmed or acknowledged what you said? You felt great! But we tend to be frugal with our feedback, often displaying detached attention with scant involvement. (We may be "in," but not "come to the door.") Eye contact often serves as the only evidence of connection. Is the conventional thinking wrong? No, it has just always

been incomplete.

In today's more team-oriented work environments, a wider perspective is needed to help us collaborate with others for mutual benefit. Conversations take time to pull themselves together (sometimes a connection isn't even made). Withholding our feedback (problem solving?) may leave a trainee feeling uncertain (wondering whether communication took place), a customer deprived interpersonally (missing an expected reaction or response), or a staff member feeling devalued (not worthy of attention).

Connect better by letting more of your listening show. The other person is more likely to open up and offer more useful information. Think of the ramifications of that in training classes, team meetings, and sales interviews.

Reviewing systematically. As listeners, our job is to understand. But it is also to be understanding. In your efforts to understand another person's reality, know the wisdom of taking stock. Now and then, check with the speaker to make sure you both agree on the intended meaning. Too many listeners get caught up in fact-finding and fail to take advantage of that quality-assurance measure. Besides, taking a moment to paraphrase what you heard can give you welcome relief from having to constantly process information.

Consider, for example, the benefits of such summarizing statements in

the following dialogue:

A: "I'm thinking about..., but I don't know if it's the best thing for the department right now."

B: "So you're sort of 'on the fence' and unsure which way to turn...?"

A: "Exactly. I think the idea is good, but getting others to buy in may be a problem."

B: "In other words, you see some merit, but selling others on the idea may be tough."

A: "Yeah. They tend to be bottom-line thinkers and a pretty skeptical bunch."

Restatement takes little time and can even save you some time in the long run. Actively testing your assumptions—on a selective basis—can be a surge forward even when seemingly backtracking. Note, too, that it lets others know that you understand (or are trying to) and that you care.

Effort. Are you a reactive listener? Do you place most of the responsibility for your listening on the shoulders of the speaker? Many people do. They say they will listen, but only if the speaker and message are sufficiently concise, clear, interesting, and relevant. Alas, far too few speakers measure up; there simply may not be enough happening on the verbal level to anchor our ears. Instead, take the initiative and be a proactive listener. Don't count on the speaker. Make a conscious commitment to develop your own skills to cope with distraction and to compensate for speakers' shortfalls.

For starters, recognize the demons of distraction, distortion, and defensiveness. Savvy listeners keep them at bay by grounding themselves in astute observation and response. Pledge to be more observant of, say, team members, and increase both your level and range of responsiveness.

For example, how many of us in conversation notice an expectant face, a surprised or happy look, or a sardonic smile? Try to react and respond more often to what the speaker is expressing. That keeps you in the moment and also helps speakers focus their message. Also work to enlarge your repertoire of appropriate responses, which can make you a more interesting and genuine listener.

Guard against hearing what you



expect or want to hear (a challenge for us all). Use paraphrasing and questioning to avoid distorting understanding. Conscientiously clarify meaning to prevent defensive reactions that can block your perception.

Realize that your feedback is crucial for the success of a conversation. Don't hide behind a silent, deadpan demeanor; intake on its own holds little interest for either listeners or speakers. Adopting a more open, inclusive listening style shows your involvement, and keeps you focused externally and not driven by your own internal conversation.

Bear in mind, too, that when speech enters our ears, the words are only a part of the process. The full meaning of the message is found not only in the spoken words, but also in the actions taken to deliver them: voice tone, gesture, and posture. With practice, you will become more attuned to those elements.

Star events. We are all allergic, interpersonally speaking. That is, there is often something in a speaker's behavior—a word or phrase, gesture, facial expression, or style of speaking—that causes us to overreact. If we're not careful, such emotional triggers, or star events, can sidetrack our thinking, and cause us to "lose" the speaker. Star events can stop concentration in its tracks, before it can get past the roadblock and back on course.

Get to know your own personal star events. Discovering what tends to stall your mind and ruffle your emotional feathers will help you take such turbulence in stride. For example, how do you react when someone says to you, "You're not listening!?" What does it do to your mental serenity to hear, "That's a good idea, but..." or "We've always done it that way"? Do you become defensive? Do you feel put down? Do you bristle with irritation?

Strong disagreement, a speech impediment, a racial slur, a mispro-

nounced word, and poor grammar are just a few things that can cause us to lose focus. Don't let them; at those moments when concentration slips, act! Ask an open-ended, clarifying question (such as, "Why do you say that?"). Restate what you think the speaker said: "So you feel if it's not broken, why fix it?" A neutral response can help you cope with swerves of thought and keep the connection. As in basketball when the referee blows the whistle, you have to "reset."

Empathy. People think and they feel. You know that your feelings are real. On some level, you also know that other people's feelings are just as real to them. It's one thing to think along with a speaker and another to feel along. Too often, we approach listening as an intellectual exercise. For all its sophistication, our cerebral style has its off-putting aspects. We need to work with emotion as well. Otherwise, co-workers and key contacts may play it close to the vest because they feel they are inhabiting an emotionless landscape.

How many of us in conversation might think to say something like, "That must be hard" or "That must really make you feel good"? Such responses show sensitivity, and the speaker responds in kind.

Don't think you have to always agree with the expressed feelings to acknowledge that they are registering on your personal Richter scale. But to do that takes both will and skill. We are neither accustomed nor attuned to picking up on the emotions of others; we resonate more readily to the realm of ideas. We all need practice at that. Watch what other listeners do, and observe what they say. That can greatly expand your listening-response repertoire, making you a better listener.

Neutralizing snap judgments. Have you noticed how quick we are to judge others? How much pride we take in being able to size up people in an instant? No, it's not easy to keep an open mind. But it is necessary, and it marks a true leader.

Perhaps the most common—and self-defeating—mistake we make as listeners is to give short shrift to people and their viewpoints. This person

speaks with a lisp. That one has a sizable space between two upper-front teeth. To our judgmental eyes and ears, it is doubtful that they will repay us with listening that has value.

It is normal, too, to react negatively or defensively when presented with a different or "wrong" point of view. More than we like to admit, any challenge to our own pet beliefs or ideas may elicit strong resistance on our part.

Qualities like good, bad, right, and wrong are important categories, but they should be permeable. Make no mistake: Too hasty an assessment undermines our efforts to get needed information from others to accomplish strategic goals.

But we can override our reflexes. We can develop a higher threshold for tolerating differences. That takes discipline and mental toughness. But the payback—in terms of saved time, enhanced productivity, and greater satisfaction—is worth it.

Tenacity. Most listeners keep a safely detached distance from a speaker. That makes tracking difficult. Excellent listeners are proactive participants in a conversation. Not willing to leave responsibility for understanding to a speaker, they strategically pursue meaning by design. They seek to take the full measure of the spoken message and to let that show. That means relating to both cognitive and emotional aspects of the message. They try to connect all of the dots of a speaker's experience. That includes exploring beneath the surface to excavate the deeper meaning (reading between the lines).

The average listener is ambivalent about intervening, often preferring to wait until the other person asks a question or finishes a complete thought. But excellent listeners know that response does not have to be invasive or interruptive. For misplaced etiquette, they substitute a closer reading of the situation and then seize opportunities to bring a speaker closer, engender trust, and achieve a greater flow of information.

Plan to be a more tenacious listener. Recognize the following facts about feedback:

- The fortunes of conversation fluctuate with that of feedback.

- Responsive feedback is a solution to navigating mental potholes and detours (star events) along the road to listening.

- Feedback helps speakers manage their speaking.

As a manager of training, human resources, or sales, you have an important stake in improving the conversation process.

Keep your listening sharp by exercising it. With practice—in doing and observing—those elements will soon become a natural part of you. You can then take pride in knowing that you have elevated yourself from being an average listener to becoming a truly excellent one.

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SIX WAYS TO BE A BETTER LISTENER

BY PAUL C. BLODGETT

WHAT IS THE BEST way to get employees, friends, customers, and significant others to feel that you care about what they say? Listen to them! Though that should hardly be surprising, listening is a skill that every one of us could improve.

So, what can you do to improve your listening effectiveness? Here are six ways.

1. Let the other person finish speaking, and encourage him or her to go on. The very best listeners are people who will wait to hear all that you have to say before they respond. They wait, and they let you finish. They don't cut you off. They don't interject. They don't go off on their own tangent. And they don't assume that they know what you are going to say before you say it. Instead, they show you that they want to hear what you have to say—by letting you say it. In addition:
 - Give the person verbal messages that you are following what is being said. For example, use expressions such as, "umm-hmm," "I see," and "Is that right?"
 - Don't get in someone's way by asking excessive questions, giving ad-

vice, or diverting the communication to a topic that you want to talk about.

- Be silent after the person has finished talking. Don't assume there's nothing more to be said. Being silent encourages the speaker to continue.

2. Use your body language to demonstrate that you are listening. According to Steven R. Covey in *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, communication experts estimate that our words represent only 10 percent of our communication. Our sounds represent another 30 percent, and our body language represents 60 percent. Use all of those modes to help people open up to you. Specifically:
 - Face them, look at them, and give them your full, undivided attention. Remember how it feels if someone you are talking to isn't paying attention to you.
 - Maintain comfortable eye contact. Look into their eyes, but don't stare. Look away when it seems natural to do so.
 - Mirror body language. You don't want the other person to have to talk up or down to you. So, if he or she is already sitting, you should sit, too.
 - Use your body movements to encourage communication. For example, nod for understanding, move your arms for enthusiasm, and avoid playing with anything (such as your keys, ears, or watch) with your hands.
 - Encourage communication through the sound of your voice. For example, vary the pitch of your voice so the person can hear your concern, support, and interest in hearing more.
3. Focus on what the person is saying, not on your response. If you really want to hear and understand what someone is saying, you need to pay attention to what they are saying. Though that may sound simple, it is often hard because we allow ourselves to think about other things while we are listening. And what we often pay attention to is our response. Here's how to do better:
 - Mentally paraphrase what people are saying.
 - Consider what is new to you. What are you learning? What is interesting?
 - Don't assume you know what people are going to say next.
 - Check your understanding. Are people saying what you assume they

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are, or are they really saying something else?

4. Put your tendency to evaluate on hold. When we judge and approve or disapprove of what people are saying, we close the door to really hearing them. We often make assumptions, jump to conclusions, and quit listening mentally. Instead, do the following:

- ▶ When listening, try not to judge or evaluate what the other person is saying. The more you evaluate, the more you become blinded by your own point of view and the less you really listen. For example, if you conclude that an idea is ridiculous even before you finish hearing it, you are less apt to hear everything that a speaker has to say because your mind is already coming up with reasons the idea won't work.

- ▶ Try to understand what a person is saying from his or her point of view. Try to keep an open mind about what is being said. There are as many points of view as there are people.

- ▶ Understand that our tendency to evaluate becomes worse when we become involved emotionally. So, be aware of your feelings and emotions. Make an extra effort not to let your emotions impair your ability to listen. Know that one of the quickest ways to ruin effective communication—by shutting it down or provoking a defensive response—is to make a negative, judgmental statement about the person who is speaking.

5. Try to see things from the speaker's perspective. Go beyond the content of the words. A good listener will do more than listen to the words; he or she will also try to understand "where the speaker is coming from." A good listener knows that the words we use, even when carefully chosen, often represent little more than a rough attempt to communicate what we really mean. To guard against that:

- ▶ Recognize that the speaker is coming from a different perspective than

yours; try to understand it.

- ▶ Ask yourself what the person is feeling. Is he or she afraid, hurt, angry, or upset?

- ▶ Ask yourself what the person really means to say.

- ▶ Ask yourself how the person perceives things. Remember that people see many things different from the way you do.

6. Let a speaker know you hear and understand. But to be a really good listener, you need to do more than just hear and understand. You need to make the person *feel* heard and understood. Paraphrasing, clarifying, and summarizing what is said are ways to accomplish that. Don't take over the conversation; just try to confirm that you understand. For example, try repeating one of the person's key words. Notice the difference that makes in helping him or her feel heard and understood. The following tips are adapted from *People Skills*, a book on interpersonal communication by Robert Bolton:

- ▶ Reflect some of the content of what a speaker says. To *reflect* means to paraphrase back to a speaker the essence of what was said, felt, or meant. For example, "So, you had to start over from scratch."

- ▶ Reflect a speaker's meaning. Can you restate more concisely the essence of what he or she meant to say? For example, "They ruined it, didn't they?"

- ▶ Reflect a speaker's feelings. What do you think a speaker feels or felt about what he or she is telling you? For example, "That must have been agonizing."

- ▶ Ask necessary clarification and follow-up questions. For example, "What did that involve?"

- ▶ Consider summarizing the overall message. For example, "What a pain!"

If you practice those six ways, you will demonstrate that you hear, care, and understand. And who knows? You just may have saved an employee's day, a friendship, a customer, or a marriage.

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