

Active Listening

OBJECTIVES

You should study the chapter to know

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

INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

LISTENING MODES

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



Active versus Passive Listening

Paying attention

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

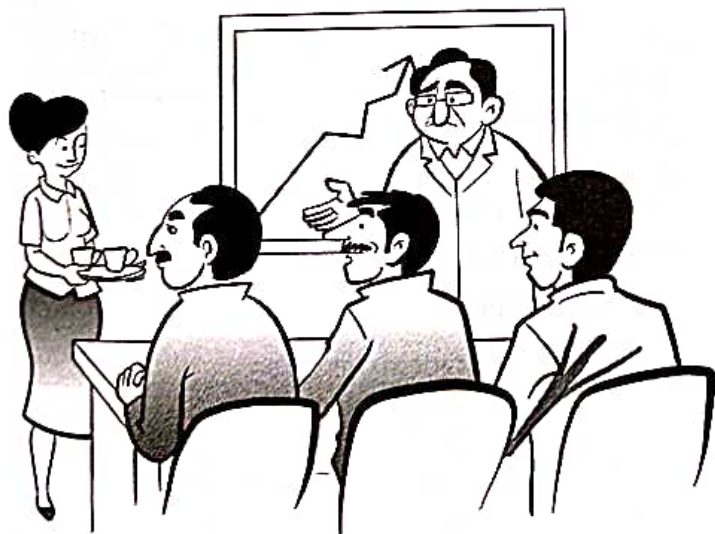
As a Sincere Listener

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

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

Dealing with distractions

In the process of developing active listening skills, one should train oneself to avoid physical distractions and concentrate completely on the message. An attractive face in the room and



sometimes even the fragrance of perfume can act as distractions. However, a careful listener has to exercise a great deal of mental discipline to remain focused on the message conveyed by the speaker.

Often, after a period of continuous listening, people get tired and start losing interest in the message. They have to force themselves hard to stay with the speech and the contents. This usually happens because of 'brain time'. As discussed earlier, our minds have the capacity to understand more than what can be said by an average speaker in a minute. This mismatch coupled with general disinterest leads to a wandering mind. To overcome this difficulty, the listener should try

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

Since a listener's capacity to absorb information is much more than a speaker's ability to talk, a lot of time is available for the listener to evaluate the message. Sometimes a listener focuses on the message in fragments

and is, therefore, unable to take in the entire message. Further, listeners also interrupt the speaker without listening to the complete message. Careful listeners, however, never jump to conclusions about the message unless the speaker has finished. *Effective listening is possible only if the listener patiently listens to the complete speech.*

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

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

—Peter F. Drucker

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

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

TABLE 4.1 Tips for effective listening

Dos	Don'ts
• Be mentally prepared to listen. • Evaluate the speech, not the speaker. • Be unbiased towards the speaker by depersonalizing your feelings. • Fight distractions by blocking off sound sources. • Be open-minded. • Ask questions to clarify and confirm thoughts. • Paraphrase from time to time. • Send appropriate non-verbal signals from time to time	• Pay undue emphasis to the vocabulary, as you can use the context to understand the meaning. • Pay too much attention to the accessories and clothing of the speaker. • Prepare your responses while the speaker is speaking. • Get distracted by outside influences. • Hold preconceptions and prejudices. • Concentrate too hard. • Interrupt too often. • Show boredom even to an uninteresting speaker.

TYPES OF LISTENING

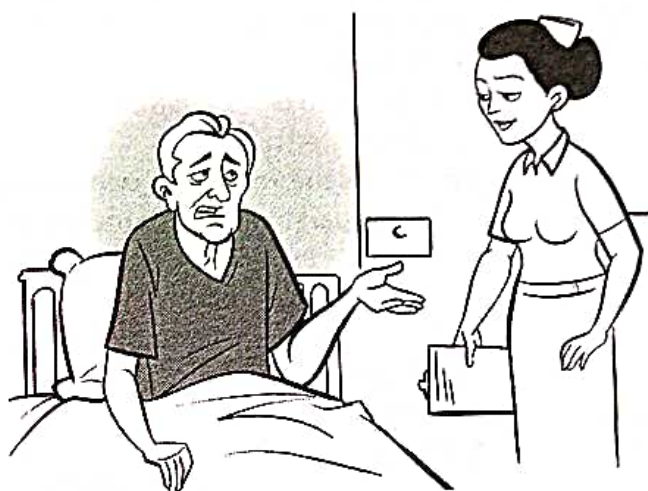
While certain skills are basic and necessary for all types of listening (receiving, attending, and understanding), each type requires some special skills. Before we can fully appreciate the skills and apply the guidelines, we must understand the different types of listening.

Appreciative listening

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

Empathetic listening

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



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

—Egan Gerard (1988)

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

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

Comprehensive listening

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

Critical listening

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