

Developing Effective LISTENING SKILLS



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INTRODUCTION

Developing Effective Listening Skills

Why are effective listening skills important? It's simple: most of what we do or don't do (the way we act and respond to others) is based on our understanding of the messages that have been conveyed to us. In practical terms, misunderstanding can cost us time, money, credibility, and even relationships. Conversely, accurately received messages create comfort, confidence, and appreciation in the minds of our customers.

There are three different modes and four different levels of Effective Listening Skills. The three modes, or manners, of listening are Attentive, Responsive, and Active. The four levels of listening are Factual, Perceptive, Emotional, and Mixed. We'll highlight each area to help increase your listening accuracy and reduce the opportunity for misunderstanding.

Most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply.
- Stephen Covey

3 MODES OF LISTENING

Attentive Listening

ATTENTIVE LISTENERS focus on the speaker and work hard to eliminate distractions (such as ambient noise or poor delivery skills).

ATTENTIVE LISTENERS are patient and let the speaker finish their thoughts without interruption. This is a difficult, but essential, skill to master in order to be considered a good listener.

LISTENING MODES

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1. **Attentive** Listening
2. **Responsive** Listening
3. **Active** Listening

Responsive Listening

RESPONSIVE LISTENING demonstrates to the speaker that you're listening and understanding what they're saying while encouraging them to continue talking.

Use **encouraging** responses:

NON-VERBAL RESPONSES

- Smiling
- Appropriate facial expression
- Affirmative nod of the head
- Appropriate eye contact
- Minimizing distractions (turning off cell phones, etc.)
- Taking notes (under-utilized way to broaden the depth of listening)
- Leaning slightly towards the speaker

VERBAL RESPONSES

- “Uh huh”
 - “I see”
 - “Yes”
 - “Really?”
 - Occasionally paraphrasing what you've heard
-

Avoid **discouraging** responses:

- Nervous gestures
- Yawning
- Looking at your watch

Active Listening

ACTIVE LISTENING is probably the **most important listening skill**. It is active because it combines the skills of listening and responding without invalidating the speaker's comments, giving the speaker your personal opinion or advice, or drawing the ownership of the conversation away from the speaker.

An ACTIVE LISTENER monitors the communication of a message for both **content and feeling**. They pay attention to what people say, how they say it, and why they're saying it.

Watch for both nonverbal and verbal indicators:

NONVERBAL INDICATORS

- Tone of voice, vocal inflection, pacing, breathing/not breathing
- Body language (hands, posture, movements)
- Facial expression
- Emotion behind the words

VERBAL INDICATORS

- Use of strong or emotional language (cursing, derogatory comments)

3 MODES OF LISTENING

Active Listening

Once the listener feels they understand the sender's message, they paraphrase it back to the speaker to ensure understanding prior to responding with their own answer or message. The listener's goal is to **first understand** the messenger's thoughts, feelings, and needs and then to **send them back** to the messenger for verification of accuracy before proceeding. When paraphrasing, be sure to use your own words rather than simply parroting back what the messenger said. You can begin paraphrase statements with:

- "It sounds like..."
- "In other words..."
- "So..."

It is important to acknowledge or play back **both the content and the feelings** behind the words. Otherwise, you'll miss critical information that is important to the sender. There's no real order for restating what you've heard. Often, it is what is most noticeable (the content or the feeling behind the words). For example:

- "As you've said, everything is organized and ready (content), and yet you look somewhat overwhelmed by this (feeling)."
- "So, you've recommended that the product be used for the next surgery (content), however you don't seem excited about this change (feeling)."

4 LEVELS OF LISTENING

Listeners typically pay attention to the area of communication they think is most important. However, failure to distinguish between different levels of communication can result in a lost or misinterpreted message.

LISTENING LEVELS

Most conversations cover four primary levels of communication:

- **Factual:** conveyed through an accounting of information and facts
- **Perceptive:** a conveyance of beliefs and thoughts, with or without regard to facts
- **Emotive:** feelings and emotions conveyed through verbal, vocal, or visual channels
- **Mixed:** conveyed through sarcasm, cliché, or humor

4

LEVELS OF LISTENING

Factual, Perceptive, Emotive, Mixed

4 LEVELS OF LISTENING

IDENTIFYING LEVELS OF LISTENING

It is important to identify the level of communication in order to **accurately assess the issue** and respond to the messenger. Inaccurate assessment of the communication level will lead to a misinterpretation of what is being conveyed, resulting in ineffective communication.

What are the different needs or issues to pay attention to in each of the following?

- Your kids just dropped a vase that your wife received as a gift.
- You are lost in New York City.
- Your friend just got promoted to the job you expected.
- You're being deposed in a court case.
- A friend's father has just passed away.

CONVERSATION PROMPTS & PROBES

Clarifying Content

Once you've identified the need or issue being conveyed to you, it is important to **dig a little deeper** to make sure you've hit the heart of the issue. While it is easiest to ask a question, too many questions can begin to feel like an interrogation. The best way to elicit more info, and thereby clarify an issue, is to prompt the speaker using prompts and probes:

- “Tell me more...”
 - “Why do you say that?”
 - “For example?”
 - “How so?”
 - “And?”
- “Then?”
 - “Such as...”
 - “So?”
 - “Because?”

Used in combination with paraphrasing skills, prompts and probes create the best-case scenario – a conversation firmly entrenched in the speaker's court with an abundance of information being conveyed, paraphrased, and clarified.

ISSUE-BASED LISTENING

Amidst the different types of listening and things to watch for during a conversation, learning to decipher a message is a critical skill set to develop. Consider the following, pulled from Microsoft's Interview Questions, to illustrate **how to identify issues in the midst of extended conversation**:

“Imagine you are standing in front of a mirror, facing it. Raise your right hand. Look at your reflection. When you raise your left hand your reflection raises what appears to be his right hand. But when you tilt your head up, your reflection does too, and does not appear to tilt his/her head down. Why is it that the mirror appears to reverse left and right, but not up and down?”

To the untrained ear this sounds complex, if not ridiculous. The trained listener, however, has the capacity to hone in on the issues despite all the extra verbiage.

ISSUE-BASED LISTENING

By simply listening for the specific helper words, such as who, what, when, where, why, how, and other interrogator words such as did, could, should, can, etc., the listener gains insight into the true issue and question behind the issue. In the previous paragraph, none of the helper words occur until the last phrase of the sentence. The word “why” signals the listener that the issue immediately follows. (“Why is it that the mirror reverses left and right, but not up and down?”) **But that is only part of the skill set.**

By synthesizing and briefly conveying the gist of the entire paragraph, and then **adding the paraphrased question** to the end, the listener demonstrates the capacity to understand and define the issue and question through reflective playback.

TIP

Do more than just listen for specific helper words. Synthesize what was said and then add a paraphrased question.

ISSUE-BASED LISTENING

An example using the previous question, a **brief synthesis** of the entire paragraph, could be reduced to:

“When standing in front of a mirror and noticing your reflection...”

The synthesized paragraph is now followed by the **question**, indicated by the word “why.”

“When standing in front of a mirror and noticing your reflection, why is it that the mirror appears to reverse the left and right, but not the up and down?”

Three-Step Process for Issue-Based Listening

- Synthesize the bulk of what you heard
- Play back the gist of it
- Paraphrase the question as indicated by the helper word or interrogator

Benefits of Issue-Based Listening

- Allows time to think
- Demonstrates careful listening
- Conveys understanding of complex information

Free Webinar

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