

# 21

## Listening Skills

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At times we feel that people have not understood us the way we wanted them to. The main reason for this is failure on the part of the listener to listen effectively. Of course, there are also instances where the speaker might not have conveyed the message effectively. Nonetheless, the importance of effective listening cannot be undermined in the communication process. At the same time, speaking effectively is quite important. So, we can say that both speaking and listening skills are necessary for communication to serve its purpose.

Much of our activities involve communication, especially in the work environment in banks. So, these two aspects of communication—namely listening and speaking are particularly essential to us in our work place, where we have to deal with colleagues, superiors and, more importantly, our customers. For want of these two skills, many times problems crop up. These may affect customer relations, which may prove detrimental to the interests of the organisation. In this chapter, we shall concentrate on the techniques to develop listening skills for effective communication.

### 21.1 SIGNIFICANCE OF LISTENING

The ability to listen well is quite as important as the ability to speak well. In communication, however good a transmitter is, it becomes effective only in partnership with a good receiver. It is obvious that unless someone listens, any effort to communicate will be lost. After all, communication involves the negotiation of mutual meanings, which requires two parties.

Listening is a major ingredient of the communication process, and the lack

of this skill is primarily responsible for many of the problems we experience with people. Effective human relations is based heavily on good listening skills. Poor listeners are usually also poor negotiators and are also ineffective in crisis situations.

Effective listening is one of the critical skills related to effective communication. It requires more than merely hearing the speaker. It requires grasping and understanding. It includes active, empathetic and supportive behaviours.

### **Significance of Good Listening**

1. An attentive listener stimulates better speaking by the speaker.
2. A good listener learns more than the indifferent listener.
3. A good listener learns to :
  - (a) distinguish fact from opinion,
  - (b) understand and evaluate inferences and reasoning,
  - (c) detect prejudices, assumptions, attitudes.
4. A good listener can often restructure vague speaking into clearer meaning.

Research has revealed the following facts about listening :

1. Listening skills can be improved by training and instructions.
2. When improvement in listening is achieved, it may not be permanent.
3. There is a distinct difference between speaking rate and listening rate.
4. Generally there is a high correlation between listening and intelligence.
5. One quarter of our waking time is spent on listening.
6. Even if the rate of speaking is increased by as much as 100%, the listening rate does not suffer.



## 21.4 LEVELS OF LISTENING

There are three levels of listening, viz. : (i) Marginal, (ii) Evaluative, and (iii) Projective.

These are discussed below :

**(i) Marginal Listening :** If the pace of speaking of the speaker is slow the listener does a *marginal listening*, which implies that the listener may let his/her mind stray while someone is talking. This in consequence can lead further to a lack of understanding and even an insult shown to the speaker. Many of us have experienced the situation in which, when we are speaking to someone, we realize that the mind of the person listening to us is away from what we are speaking. The person may be hearing the words spoken but the words hardly communicate any sense to him/her.

**(ii) Evaluative Listening :** This occurs when a listener gets some free time to evaluate the speaker's message during the oral communication. When the sender transmits the message to the receiver he/she does not accept the message and the communication ceases. This occurs because the receiver begins to develop a response contrary to the intent of the message. Instead of one idea being transmitted and held by two people, two ideas develop, neither of which is really communicated. If the listener gets too much time to disapprove or approve of what is being said, he/she gets hardly any time to understand it fully. This is particularly true when the speech or message is loaded with emotion, or when it threatens the security, identity or status of the receiver.

**(iii) Projective Listening :** This listening provides the listeners with the greatest potential for effective communication to utilize their time fully. Listeners, with an empathetic gesture attempt to project themselves into the position of the speaker and understand what is implied in the speaker's viewpoint. This kind of listening is called a projective listening. Effective listening must precede any kind of evaluation. Only after understanding what has been said the individuals could equip themselves how to evaluate it or comment on it. A listener could speak for himself or herself only after feeling the speaker accurately. He/she should relate the ideas and feeling to the speaker's satisfaction only after such listening. There is no need for the listener to agree with the statements of the speaker but there is a need for him/her to understand them as the speaker intended. Only through



this process it is possible to frame a reply that will actually respond to the speaker's message. Effective listening is invariably empathetic. It requires an ability to listen to their feelings as well as their words.

### 21.5. BARRIERS TO ACTIVE LISTENING

Listening requires hard work as it involves concentration. It takes energy to concentrate on listening to what is being said, to concentrate on understanding what has been heard, and to make an objective evaluation of what has been understood. In practice, many listeners fail in a number of ways. The inefficient listeners may :

- (i) Drift, with their attention drifting away from what the speaker is saying.
- (ii) Criticise the speaker or the delivery. Instead of focusing on what the speaker is saying, his or her thoughts and feelings, they may focus on how he or she is saying it. In the process of trying to notice errors in accent, grammar etc., they fail to listen.
- (iii) Counter, constantly trying to find counter-arguments to whatever the speaker is saying.
- (iv) Listen only for facts and not for feelings and emotions, and want to skip the details.
- (v) Get overstimulated when questioning or opposing an idea, and overreacting to certain words and phrases.
- (vi) Filter by excluding from their understanding those parts of the message which do not readily fit with their own frame of reference.
- (vii) Assume in advance that the subject is uninteresting and unimportant.
- (viii) Withdraw attention, start daydreaming.
- (ix) Fake attention, which the speaker can easily see.
- (x) Hear only what they expect to hear, because of preconceived notions about the speaker or the situation.
- (xi) Accept only those communications that are consistent with their existing beliefs.
- (xii) Distort by interpreting the message in ways which are different from the speaker's intentions.
- (xiii) Create distractions, thereby not listening to the speaker fully.
- (xiv) Interrupt unnecessarily, discouraging and irritating the speaker.
- (xv) Allow emotional words to block the message etc.



**EXHIBIT 1****IMPROVING LISTENING ABILITY**

**1. Desire to Listen :** The first step one needs in effective listening is to create a desire to learn and to listen. One should analyze one's own shortcomings consistently as a listener and try to overcome them. One should learn to have a propensity to listen more than to talk.

**2. Resisting Distractions :** In the process of listening there may be many distractions at physical or mental level. Because, we have a pace of thinking faster than that of speaking, our attention begins to wander while we listen to someone. When this happens, we should make a conscious effort to bring our mind back to what is being said. We should be alert to the speaker's message that is transmitted through verbal as well as non-verbal means. We should not be diverted by his or her physical appearance, the delivery or mannerism of the speaker. We should concentrate on the message that the speaker tries to convey.

**3. Focus on the Message :** Skilled listeners focus on listening more to the message than to the matter of listening. Each speech contains a limited number of points. Our adapting to a right manner of listening makes us identify these points which, together, convey the main message of a speech. At the same time, we should also listen to the statements that support the inclination or the intent of the speaker. We should evaluate the evidence of this support in terms of its accuracy, objectivity, relevance and adequacy in the message.

**4. Delay Evaluation and Premature Conclusions :** We should give the speaker adequate time to say by all means. We should not jump to conclusions. First we should try to understand the message, then evaluate it. Premature judgement hampers effective listening. We should try to remove mental or emotional blocks, if any, which prevent us from listening to something or someone. We should remember that a good listener always keeps his mind open to ideas and information and eyes keen to observe how they are uttered.

**5. Taking Notes :** We should know that our perceiving the essence of the speech is not the end of listening. We should also know how to record what we listen. Learning how to take notes to keep track with the speaker's message should be the main thrust of the listener. Also how a listener drives the main thrust of the speaker's message home is also very important. The technique of note-taking is to acquire the main points by writing the key words used by the speaker to communicate his or her message. Taking down notes guides us to become a more attentive and a creative listener.