

# COMMUNICATION AND LISTENING SKILLS WORKSHOP

An interactive training and learning program in communication/listening skills

**THE UNIVERSITY OF LOUISVILLE  
OFFICE OF THE OMBUDS**

**Listening is so basic we take it for granted. Unfortunately, most of us think of ourselves as better listeners than we really are.**

**Genuine listening means suspending memory, desire, judgment, and for a few moments at least existing for the other person.**

**Communication is not talking and waiting to talk.**

Tell me...I will listen  
Teach me...I may remember  
Involve me...I will do it

## COMMUNICATION & LISTENING SKILLS WORKSHOP

This workshop is designed to improve communication and listening skills in order to move from win-lose outcomes to win-win results in interpersonal relationships.

Issues to consider in seeking better communication:

- The difference between dialogue and debate or is communication merely talking and waiting to talk?
- Putting aside your personal agenda while another is speaking
- Hearing (understanding) what people mean, not just what they say
- How to get an uncommunicative person to open up and contribute
- What to do with people who get defensive when you try to tell them something
- How to share a difference of opinion without the other person feeling criticized
- Responding to the speaker's feelings instead of imposing your own
- How to get through to someone who never seems to listen
- Establishing credibility so that people pay attention to what you say
- Dealing with rather than avoiding conflict
- Negotiating agreement without giving in
- Separating the person from the problem
- Focusing on interests rather than positions
- Inventing options for mutual gain; it's all about getting what you need.

Participants will learn and practice interest-based communication, moving from divisiveness to synergy, adversarial to collaborative communications, compromise to consensus, threats and solutions to interests and needs, and combativeness to mutual problem solving.

## COMMUNICATION SURVEY QUESTIONS

**1) Never    2) Not Often    3) Sometimes    4) Often    5) Always**

1. When someone makes me angry I deal with them while still angry. \_\_\_\_\_
2. I become impatient with people who do not express their thoughts and opinions clearly. \_\_\_\_\_
3. I can get to the solution of the problem without regard to underlying interests or motivations. \_\_\_\_\_
4. When I'm negotiating with someone I view them as an opponent. \_\_\_\_\_
5. I believe the words I choose in communication with another person conveys most of my message. \_\_\_\_\_
6. When I listen carefully to what someone is saying to me I can predict what their conclusion will be. \_\_\_\_\_
7. When I'm not sure about what someone is saying to me, rather than ask questions, I'll wait to learn more. \_\_\_\_\_
8. When someone gives me instructions and asks, "do you understand," I say "yes" even if I'm not entirely sure. \_\_\_\_\_
9. Effective communication can be achieved simply by taking turns talking. \_\_\_\_\_
10. When I'm locked in an argument with someone I view them as an opponent, and I think in terms of win/lose. \_\_\_\_\_

**For Questions 1-10**

**Add all scores and divide by 10 for the average total score. \_\_\_\_\_**

**1) Never    2) Not Often    3) Sometimes    4) Often    5) Always**

11. When I initiate a discussion of something important to me and want to be sure it makes an impact, I invite the other person to explain their viewpoint before I present mine. \_\_\_\_\_
12. I ask for more information about why a particular demand is being made to explore for underlying interests and ask why a position is important. \_\_\_\_\_
13. I listen fully and affirm that I understand what the other person has said as a sign of respect to the speaker. \_\_\_\_\_
14. When I ask questions for clarification, they tend to be open ended and cannot be answered with a simple “yes” or “no” response. \_\_\_\_\_
15. The best way to get the listening I need is to make the other person feel listened to first. \_\_\_\_\_
16. In negotiations I try to direct the focus away from stated positions and explore for interests and common solutions. \_\_\_\_\_
17. I practice direct communication by using “I” statements, such as, “ I think...,” “I feel...,” “I need....” \_\_\_\_\_
18. I look past a person’s opinion of what solution is necessary to solve the problem to get to their needs and underlying interests. \_\_\_\_\_
19. When someone says something I’m not sure about I ask for clarification. \_\_\_\_
20. I restate the essence of the speaker’s message in my own words as a way of checking on the accuracy of what has been heard. \_\_\_\_\_

**For Questions 11- 20**

**Add all scores and divide by 10 for an average total score. \_\_\_\_\_**

Questions 1 -10 Evaluation:

- 1 - 2.5 -- effective communication skills
- 2.6 - 3.5 – needs improvement
- 3.6 - 5 – destructive communication habits

Questions 11 -20 Evaluation:

- 1 - 2.5 -- very poor communication
- 2.6 - 3.8 – satisfactory
- 3.9 - 5 – effective communication

**COMMON LISTENING AND COMMUNICATION TRAITS**

It's not wrong to employ these styles and approaches to communication since we do it every day in our casual, professional, and business relationships; however, it is strongly suggested that, in the interest of collaboration, you modify your listening response to not include these as a regular response:

### **Advising, Giving Solutions or Suggestions**

Telling people how to solve a problem or dilemma, giving advice or suggestions, and providing answers and solutions for them prevents them from thinking through the problem, considering alternative solutions, and identifying the real and personal issues comprising the situation, which can result in dependency or resistance. Using words like, "What I would do is..."; "Why don't you..."; "Let me suggest..." can imply a person is not able to identify relevant issues and resolve her own problems. Even people who ask for guidance should be encouraged to attain self-determination; to the extent they are able.

### **Ordering, Directing, Commanding**

Telling a person to do something; giving the person an order or command, or saying, "You must...", "You have to...", or "You will..." can produce fear or active resistance. This invites "testing" and promotes rebellious behavior and retaliation.

### **Moralizing, Preaching, Should, and Ought**

Invoking vague outside authority as accepted fiat and truth, such as "You should..."; "You ought to..." or "It is your responsibility..." creates obligation and feelings of guilt. This can cause a person to be resistive and defend their position even more. When we hear "who says," it can communicate a lack of trust in our sense of responsibility.

### **Warning, Threatening, Promising**

Telling a person what consequences or promises are rewarding or punishing, like “If you don’t then...” or “You’d better, or...” can produce fear or submissiveness. This invites testing of threatened consequences and can result in resentment, anger, and rebellion.

### **Teaching, Lecturing, Giving Logical Arguments**

Trying to influence the person with facts, counter-argument, logic, information, or your personal opinions by saying “Here is why you are wrong...”; “The facts are...” or “Yes, but...” provokes defensive positioning and counter-arguments often motivating the person to attempt the illogical to prove their point.

### **Praising, Agreeing**

Offering a positive evaluation or judgment and agreement with “Well, I think you’re doing a great job!” or “You’re right! That person sounds dreadful” implies high expectations as well as surveillance of the person’s compliance and can be seen as patronizing or as a manipulative effort to encourage desired behavior and can cause anxiety when the person’s perception of self does not match others’ praise.

### **Judging, Criticizing, Disagreeing, Blaming**

Making a negative judgment or evaluation of the person with a statement such as “You are not thinking maturely...” or “You are lazy...” implies incompetence, stupidity, poor judgment and cuts off communication from the person over fear of negative judgment or criticism. This repetitive style can encourage acceptance (“I am bad”) or retaliation (“You’re not so great yourself”).

### **Shaming, Ridiculing, Chastising**

Making the person feel foolish, putting the person into a category, or shaming by saying things like, “Crybaby,” “Okay Mr. Smarty...,” or “Stop whining” can cause someone to feel unworthy, stereotyped, or viewed in a false light. This can have an adverse effect of self-image and often provokes verbal retaliation.

### **Interpreting, Analyzing, Diagnosing**

Telling the person what his or her motives are or analyzing why the person is doing or saying something and communicating that you have him or her figured out can be

threatening and frustrating. “What’s wrong with you is...,” “You’re just tired,” or “You don’t really mean that” can make someone feel trapped, exposed, or not believed and can inhibit communication for fear of distortion or exposure.

### **Withdrawing, Distracting, Humoring, Diverting**

Trying to get the person away from the problem; withdrawing from the problem yourself; distracting the person; kidding the person out of it, or pushing the problem aside by saying such things as, “Let’s talk about more pleasant things” or “Why don’t you try running the world!” can infer a person’s problems are unimportant, petty, or invalid.

Remaining silent or turning away stops openness from a person when he or she is experiencing a difficult or serious situation.

### **Probing, Questioning, Interrogating**

This technique occurs in trying to find reasons, motives, causes or searching for more information to help solve the problem. “Why...,” “Who...,” “What...,” “How...” elicits this type of response, but since answering questions often results in getting subsequent criticism or solutions, people often learn to reply with non-answers, avoidance, half-truths, or lies. Since questions often keep us in the dark as to what the other person is seeking, we may become anxious or fearful about them. We can lose sight of our real concern while answering mundane questions spawned by the other person’s interests.

### **Reassuring, Sympathizing, Consoling, Supporting**

Trying to make the person feel better, talking the person out of their feelings or trying to make the feelings go away denies the strength and relevance of a person’s feelings. “Don’t worry,” “Oh, cheer up!” “It’s not that bad...” causes a person to feel misunderstood and can evoke strong feelings of hostility, and the person can be hearing you say it’s not alright for them to feel bad, in the face of what they are feeling.

COMMUNICATION IS NOT MERELY TALKING  
AND WAITING TO TALK

- As much as 80% of the message you hope you convey is nonverbal. About 7% of communication is in the words, with 38% in tone of voice, and 55% by body language. Your expression is the most important thing you wear.
- You should assure that the next message you send will be misunderstood. Sometimes the most important thing in communication is to hear what isn't being said. One thought driven home is better than three left on base.
- You should not worry about being clear; you should worry about being understood. Good communication skills are mutual respect skills, and each person should show respect for the other as well as respect for self. You can demonstrate respect by listening fully and affirming that you understand what that person means and you respect yourself when you assert or propose your own legitimate self interest without aggression. To have a complete communication, each person must both get and give.
- You are communicating when you are with someone, whether you mean it or not.
- A particular word means exactly what you mean it to but something different to the listener. The connotations or variety of meanings in words can confuse the message.
- With anyone with whom you interact regularly, there will develop a personal language or shorthand references and special terms and private meanings, in which case the conventional meaning of words may be changed as you develop a unique language.
- Most people employ words to hide meaning, not reveal it.
- We listen at 125-250 words per minute but think at 1000-3000 words per minute.
- To listen is also to communicate, and there are two emotional factors that affect most conversations, (1) how you feel about the other person's ideas and (2) what you believe the other person feels about your ideas. Once you understand the role emotions play in communications, you will be able to place yourself in the other person's shoes. That old cliché means you have empathy, a quality that can be cultivated by developing genuine interest in other people.
- Genuine listening ability is one of the few true forms of competitive advantage.

## COMMUNICATION TIPS

A primary purpose of communication is to influence the attitudes and behaviors of those we address.



To achieve precision and effectiveness in communication:

- A message must be **conveyed**
- The message must be **received**
- There must be a **response**
- Each message must be **understood**

A. To **convey** a message:

- Point of view must be expressed clearly, simply, and effectively
- Refrain from assumptions (do not commit assumicide)
- Think as an intellectual but speak as a common person
- Consider the mode of conveyance (oral, written, or some combination)
- Be mindful of semantics and acronyms
- Remove “you know” and other fillers from your speech

B. To **receive** a message:

- There are good reasons for not listening well...the speed of average human speech may vary from 150 to 175 words per minute.
- We fall into the listening gap of daydreaming, rebutting, responding too soon, or boredom

#### BARRIERS TO COMMUNICATION

- Language- vocabulary, ambiguity, jargon, rambling
- Psychological- emotion, assumption, mood
- Structure- distance, time, method, equipment
- Situational- noise, discomfort, intrusions

#### COMMUNICATOR'S WEAKNESS

- Inappropriate tone or approach
- Unskilled
- Lack of information
- Poor listening
- Lack of preparation
- Prejudice
- Sending solutions/conclusions

#### METHODS TO REMOVE MESSAGE BARRIERS

- Approach with a positive attitude
- Keep your emotions in check
- Maintain your concentration
- Find something to get interested in
- Relax and don't hurry

- Change perspectives
- Use active listening

#### ACTIVE LISTENING POINTS OF CONCERN

- Be aware of inherent difficulties in listening
- Most words have more than one meaning (there are 14,000 different meanings to 500 most commonly used words in the English language alone)
- Messages must be decoded for their intended meaning. We often soften the message just to be polite
- Listen to the person as well as the message

#### ACTIVE LISTENING TRAITS

- Analyze what's being said
- Separate the relevant from the irrelevant
- Test your understanding of what you hear
- Consider the implications
- Anticipate but do not prejudice the speaker

#### ACTIVE LISTENING SKILLS

- Clarify
  1. What has this person told me?
  2. Are there any vague or inexact parts of the message? If so, what are they?
  3. How can I express this so the speaker will clarify it?
  4. Listen and observe to see how useful the clarification is.
- Paraphrase
  1. What has the other person said?
  2. What is the content of the message? What is she trying to tell me?
  3. How can I restate the main message and rephrase it?
  4. Listen and see if the speaker confirms your response.
- Summarize
  1. What have we talked about so far?
  2. Are there any apparent themes or patterns? Is there anything that keeps resurfacing in the discussion?
  3. How can I sum up the patterns or themes of our conversation?
  4. Listen and see if others confirm your summary response or not.

#### C. To **respond** to a message:

- Remember proper etiquette in responding:
  - Watch monopolizing the conversation
  - Don't change the subject prematurely

- Be careful of stepping on other's sentences
- Hold your temper...outbursts are rarely useful in negotiation
- Silence is powerful
- Ask a question, turning the discussion back to the other party
- Allow the other party a method to save face

D. To **understand** a message:

Did you say what I think you said, or did I think I heard what I thought you were going to say?

Factors causing misunderstandings:

- High hopes
- Muddled message
- Missing message

Seek feedback

- "What should we do about this?"
- "How will you handle this?"
- "What is the order of priorities?"
- "What is your view?"

#### RECEIVER'S WEAKNESS

- reluctant to receive
- not paying attention
- lack of familiarity with the subject
- prejudice

**"Meant"** does not necessarily mean **"Said"**...think about the message that is to be conveyed and then say what you think and feel.

**"Said"** does not necessarily mean **"Heard"**...if there are stimuli to detract from good listening what you said may not have been heard.

**"Hear"** does not necessarily mean to **"Understand"**...be attentive to the limitations of the listener and be aware that the subject may not have the same weight or interest level.

**"Understand"** does not necessarily mean to **"Agree"**...even though understood the other party may hold a different opinion and require more data to have a change of mind.

**"Agree"** does not necessarily mean to **"Keep the Promise"**...hurried consent may doom the outcome if memory loss or misunderstanding later occurs.

**"Keep the Promise"** does not necessarily mean **"To Execute"**...not every intention ends up happening so be sure to have controls and safeguards in place.

**"To Execute"** does not necessarily mean to **"Make the Change Happen"**...be prepared to remind others what was expected by the mutually agreed-upon resolution.

#### ACTIVE LISTENING FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

### *SHOWING RESPECT TO THE SPEAKER (ATTENDING SKILLS)*

1. Look at the speaker and always keep the other person in view, so you can observe reactions and body language and generally maintain eye contact with the speaker.
2. Show that you are interested in what the speaker is saying. Encourage by unobtrusive use of “yes”, “I see”, “uh hum”. Use positive body cues at appropriate points, such as nods, smiles, note taking, furrowed brow, etc.
3. Most of the time lean slightly forward toward the speaker. Keep an open, relaxed posture and keep physical movement to a minimum.
4. Engage the speaker by looking for opportunities to subtly mirror his/her cues. Do not mimic, but look for ways to be congruent. For example, if he/she speaks slowly, match the cadence.
5. Draw the speaker out. Say something like, “I’d like to hear a little more about that, could you elaborate?”
6. Try to listen to what is being said...what’s missing that you might expect to hear in these circumstances.
7. Observe how things are said... the emotions, the attitudes behind the words, may be more important than what is actually said. Look beyond the mere words of the speaker uses and remember the importance of tone of voice and body language and posture.
8. Say little yourself...You cannot listen while you are talking.
9. Show that you are listening and interested by asking questions, and giving feedback, re-framing and summarizing. Be careful, however, in the early stages to not interrupt the speaker’s flow.

### *ASKING QUESTIONS*

Questions serve three basic purposes:

- To show you are listening, especially in the early, trust building stage;
- To gather and organize information, particularly in the problem identification and solving stage, and;
- To express in question form what otherwise might be an academic statement, for example, “Are you sure this can be done?”.

Generally, questions should be open-ended, not close-ended. Close-ended questions can be answered “yes” or “no”, or with a specific answer like “eight” or “November”. Close-ended questions may encourage the answerer to stop talking. While open-ended questions cannot be answered so simply, they encourage the speaker to talk and explain in complete sentences. Open-ended questions are good because they invite a person to open up and tell his/her story.

## *FEEDING BACK, REFRAMING, AND SUMMARIZING*

When the speaker pauses it is an opportunity to confirm that you have been listening and that you understand by FEEDING BACK what you have heard or observed to the speaker. It is also a way to check that your perception of what you think you heard or observed is accurate, as well as a way to validate for the speaker what he/she is feeling.

To feed back, repeat or paraphrase what the speaker has said or displayed as unspoken feelings. Sometimes, repeating the last couple of words of a speaker will encourage him/her to continue, but you do not want to parrot the speaker's actual words and sound like a mimic. Paraphrase instead but be conscious of particular words that seem important to the speaker and use them, if appropriate, in your paraphrasing.

REFRAMING is a special way of feeding back, and is one of the listener's most important tools. It is restating what a party has said to capture the essence, removing negative overtones, and move the process forward. Reframing also is a way to translate a positional statement into a statement of interests or needs. An example of this is a manager or supervisor angrily saying, "He's so irresponsible, I can't rely on him to do the work I assign on schedule." Simple **feedback** might be, "so it really bothers you if he isn't on schedule," while a **re-framed** response would be, "so being on schedule and following instructions is important to you". Either response may be appropriate although the difference is subtle.

SUMMARIES are part of more feedback, but sometimes you may want to focus particularly on a summary. At major transitions, such as after one person has told his version of how the matter in discussion is viewed, the listener may want to summarize pertinent and major points of interest or concern.

## MANAGING THE FLOW OF COMUNICATION

Stick to the speaker's subject. You may want to go somewhere else, but give the speaker time to finish. Don't be too quick to move on when the speaker repeats things. Remember, repetition may indicate (1) that the subject is very important to the speaker, and (2) that the speaker needs to feel that you've really heard him/her on the subject. This is a cue that you should feedback what the speaker is saying. If repetition continues, ask if there is anything else as important that needs mentioning. Be comfortable with silence. People will talk when they have to, and silence can be a powerful tool in emotional dynamics.

## INTERESTS AS UNDERLYING MOTIVATIONS

### *UNDERSTANDING POSITIONS VERSUS INTERESTS*

*POSITIONS*: Parties who are in disagreement often think and talk in terms of positions, which are statements or demands framed as solutions. They often involve incomplete information, hidden agendas, low levels of disclosure, threats, and bluffing. Parties

locked in positional bargaining see the other negotiator as an opponent, are hard on people and problems, and think in terms of win/lose.

*INTERESTS:* Underneath the arguments of positions are found interests, which are much broader than positions. They include such things as needs, concerns, and hopes. Interest based negotiation focuses on satisfying as many interests or needs as possible for all negotiators. It is a problem solving process used to reach an integrated solution rather than distributing awards in a win/lose manner. All negotiators interests must be addressed for an agreement to be reached, and they are cooperative problem-solvers rather than opponents.

*A GOOD COMMUNICATOR'S ROLE:* Is to try to direct the focus away from stated positions and explore what the parties are really interested in and locate common solutions. From the perspective of the parties it is the difference between listening to respond and listening to understand.

### **How to Identify Interests:**

Interests are needs that a negotiator wants satisfied or met. They are:

*Substantive*...content needs such as money, time, goods, or resources;

*Procedural*...specific types of behavior or the way something should be done;

*Relationship*...needs that refer to how one feels, how one is treated, or conditions for an ongoing relationship (emotional).

- Ask for more information about why a particular demand is being made to explore for underlying interests, and ask why a position is important;
- Make a list of all parties interests as they surface during the conversation and conduct trial and error hypothesis testing to identify interests;
- Reframe the problem as a search for a means to satisfy interests rather than a way to persuade the other party to agree to a position (solution);
- Reframe the problem to emphasize commonality of interests or the possibility of joint gain;
- Ask for principles by which to evaluate positions offered;
- Do not respond to positions with counter positions;
- Verbalize and make interests explicit;
- Look for general principles behind positions to which all parties can agree;
- Ignore positions and keep talking;

## **PROBLEM SOLVING QUESTIONS**

**CLARIFYING QUESTIONS (BROAD STATEMENTS)**...used to identify interests and underlying concerns

- What will having that do for you?
- How is that useful?
- How would that affect your life?
- What is that good for?

**PROBING QUESTIONS (NARROWING STATEMENTS)**...used to identify options that reflect interests

- What is a good way to accomplish that?
- How can that need of yours be satisfied?
- What specifically do you mean by that?
- In what other ways can that be done?

Generally, questions should be open-ended, not close-ended, which are inquiries that can be answered with a simple “yes” or “no” answer, which limits the response. Open-ended questions cannot be answered that simply and encourage the speaker to offer and explain more information. Open-ended questions invite the speaker to tell a story and express opinions and feelings.

### QUESTIONING TECHNIQUES

**OPEN**...asks for general information. “Would you tell me how that works?” or “Would you describe your responsibilities in more detail?”

#### ADVANTAGES

- Gives interviewee freedom to structure an answer
- Useful when you’re not sure what you are looking for
- Offers an opportunity to glimpse the person’s feelings

#### LIMITATIONS

- Can be time consuming if you’re in a hurry
- You lose control over what information is offered
- Interviewee may not be comfortable expounding

**CLOSED**...restricts response with simple answers such as “yes”, “no”

#### ADVANTAGES

- Saves time and can ask many questions in a short time
- Maximizes control over information offered
- Useful when answers require no further explanation

### LIMITATIONS

- Limits the amount of information that can be obtained
- Makes it easy to deceive
- Can make you feel as though you are being interrogated

**PROBING**...following up on an answer to gain additional information. “Tell me more about this please.”; “Could you elaborate on that?”

### ADVANTAGES

- Focuses on exactly what you want to know
- Can resolve apparent inconsistencies
- Can determine when the interviewee is giving evasive answers
- Clarifies responses to expose true feelings

### LIMITATIONS

- Requires careful listening and placement of questions
- You may not have wanted to hear the answers

### “I” Statements

Principled negotiations is communication between people that separate the problem from the person and focus on interests not positions, while inventing options for mutual gains using objective criteria. The use of statements that identify your perceptions and acknowledging your feelings can encourage productive communications and lead to principled negotiations. Practice “I” messages with the information below:

A co-worker you trust, respect, and consider a friend has taken credit for your idea and you must speak with this person since the issue is consuming you.

Jack, when you \_\_\_\_\_  
I feel \_\_\_\_\_  
because \_\_\_\_\_ and I  
need \_\_\_\_\_



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Your significant other is running twenty minutes late for an important business function in a social gathering with your supervisors and upper management attending and you are becoming anxious and nervous.

Jackie, I feel \_\_\_\_\_  
when you \_\_\_\_\_  
because \_\_\_\_\_ and I  
would like \_\_\_\_\_

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An important customer has said something offensive in your presence and has a pattern of this kind of statement of a sexual nature, which you find very uncomfortable.

Mr. Jackson, when you say \_\_\_\_\_  
I feel \_\_\_\_\_  
because \_\_\_\_\_ and I  
need \_\_\_\_\_

## WHAT WE HAVE HERE IS A FAILURE TO COMMUNICATE

Listening is so important, yet we take it for granted, and most of us think we are better listeners than we really are. Our lack of training begins in school where the average student spends half or more of her communication time in listening, followed by speaking, reading, and then writing in that order, however, the time spent teaching each subject is exactly reversed. We have not been taught to listen, but we think we know how to do it. When the communication process breaks down, we might assume the other person didn't say what he meant or didn't hear what we were saying. Good communication means having the impact you meant to have, but every message must pass through a filter of the speaker's clarity of expression and the listener's ability to comprehend what was said. Immediately after listening to someone speak, we usually can recall only half of what we heard and remember only about 20% of that, within two days. Also, we have different listening styles, which can complicate effective communication.

Some of us are people oriented in our listening, while others may be more attentive to action, time, or content. A time oriented listener wants to get to the point as soon as possible and may not be as interested in aspects of conversation a people oriented listener would offer, like what people were wearing, the flower arrangement on the table, or how the food tasted. An action oriented listener wants to know the bottom line, while the content listener is willing to explain all sides of the issue and analyze different views. The breakdown in communication occurs when different styles of listening interfere with delivering the message. Not only do we tune out a person who wants us to listen to the message in a style we feel uncomfortable communicating in, we miss the content and, sometimes, establish a pattern of misunderstanding. That's not a problem if you're speaking with a stranger at a party, but when we get stuck in a listening style, which causes communication failure with coworkers, a spouse, supervisors, or family members, relationships can be damaged. We are gregarious by nature, and we need to feel that others care, and being listened to spells the difference between feeling accepted and feeling isolated. Many women appear to be people oriented in listening preference, while men tend to be action oriented, which is one reason some men do not appear to be good listeners when their wives are talking. This also can account for women believing men are insensitive. We don't usually stop to examine patterns of misunderstandings in our relationships, because we're stuck in our own point of view. Listening is an art by which we use empathy to reach across the space between us. Passive attention does not work, because listening is an active process. We spend about 45% of our time listening, and, in that, it often takes a deliberate effort to suspend our own needs and reactions.

In our society, listening is essential to the survival and development of the individual, and, since we learn our culture largely through listening, we learn to think by listening, we learn to relate by listening, and we learn about ourselves by listening. Listening is not only physiological but also a process of recognizing, interpreting, and understanding the message being sent. There is a difference between listening to respond and listening to understand. Effective communication is not something that is just acquired, it is a set of practiced skills; skills that can be lost if not practiced and honed on a consistent basis. Effective listening requires attention, appreciation, and affirmation. You begin the process by turning to the speaker, paying attention to what he has to say, and placing no barriers between you. Let the other person know that you are interested in what he has to say by inviting him to say what's on his mind, what his opinion is, or how he feels about the issue under consideration and give him your full attention. Anytime you demonstrate a willingness to listen with a minimum of defensiveness, criticism, or impatience, you are giving the gift of understanding and earning the right to have it reciprocated. It is regretful that we are distracted, preoccupied, or forgetful about 75% of the time, yet it is reputed that we have learned about 85% of what we know by listening. Not only could we be more productive, we could have enriched relationships. Being listened to means we are taken seriously, that our ideas and feelings are known, that what we say matters, and that we are accepted.

Active listening to enhance communication is a powerful advantage that requires effort and thought. Only 2% of us have had any formal educational experience with listening, so most of us have had on the job training or trial and error experience. To be a good

listener is not easy, but it is a top skill needed for success in business or any activity involving others. Effective listening is emerging as one of the important remedies for relationship angst, stress at work, mental or emotional discomfort, and much of what disrupts our busy and distracted modern lives. Nature has given us many barriers to effective listening, not the least is that we listen at 125-250 words per minute but think at 1000-3000 words per minute. Suspending that thinking in order to hear out the other person enables you to understand what she thinks, helps make her feel understood, and clears the way for her to be more willing to listen to you. Just making an effort to look like a good listener is a psychological boost that assists in capturing the whole message - the attitude, the motivation, and the feelings behind the words. Communication is much more than talking and waiting to talk.

### **HOW TO SHOW YOU VALUE THE SPEAKER**

As friends, associates, parents, mentors, or neighbors we are often asked to listen. When we listen well we show value for the speaker, and this can be highly appreciated and reflective in response. Here are some communication tips to help with valid listening.

- **Concentrate...**clear your mind and find ways to remove distractions. Valuing the speaker means filtering out the noise within your head, noise in the background, ignoring your human condition, screening out thoughts of tonight or tomorrow, and finding some way to get comfortable, because listening well can be hard work for most of us; it takes practice and, sometimes, a strong will to force out all other thoughts and imagery.
- **Give unequivocal attention to the speaker...**this means unambiguous, not doubted, total and complete, and the only way this will be demonstrated is if it really is unequivocal. Through eye contact and other body language you are communicating that you are sincerely interested in what the speaker is saying. Sometimes it is appropriate to sit up and lean forward, on the edge of your chair, to show you care; and sometimes it may be a more relaxed but attentive posture that will make it easier for the person to speak. Let the warmth in your heart shine through your eyes.
- **Don't anticipate what the speaker means...**and don't finish sentences for the speaker, because valuing the speaker means trusting his ability to express himself adequately and fully on his own. To anticipate what the speaker is attempting to say or finishing sentences or thoughts is subtle degradation masked as help. Be patient and allow the speaker to set the pace; if you rush this you may stifle the real message.

- **Test the message and not the messenger...**repeat back or paraphrase what you believe you have understood. Amazingly, you may be surprised that you did not fully grasp the important content of what was conveyed, especially with people you know well. We sometimes get lazy and fill in the blanks as second nature, because we think we have heard it all before; when we act that way we can devalue the speaker. Why not engage in every discussion with an open mind and clarify the message through gentle questioning.
- **Respect cultural differences and boundaries...**there are cultural differences in talking and listening and especially gender differences. Follow the lead of the speaker and patiently work to pattern the cues offered. For instance, if the speaker is a woman, value her by being willing to listen to her talk about people rather than things; to listen to her convey feelings and details; and to allow her to feel connected to you. Some people talk a lot but say little, others speak little but say plenty; each speaker is unique, and you take them as you find them, so don't stereotype and be attentive to their particular traits.
- **Develop the fine art of empathy...**empathy means the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another without having the feelings, thoughts, and experience fully communicated in an objectively explicit manner. It means making an honest effort to understand where the other person is coming from, not necessarily joining in those feelings because two people are allowed to have different feelings, but recognizing the other's feelings.
- **Try not to interrupt...**to interrupt someone devalues them as a person, when that interruption is to serve or expose the needs of the listener. Allow the speaker to finish and complete the message or thought without editorial comments or reference to your experiences.
- **Focus on feelings and not grammar or vocabulary...**especially with young people or close friends, we might have the urge to teach by correcting grammar or explaining a new word. This can interrupt the flow of the message and moves the communication to a level of intellect, when valuing the speaker means listening for the feelings behind the words.
- **Work...**if you are really listening to someone you are working hard, and it's not a passive activity. This is a complex skill to attune to words and feelings and absorb nonverbal communication as well. It takes practice to do this; listening skills are learned behaviors and must be practiced. Many of us think we are better listeners than we really are.
- **Silence is truly golden...**sometimes the way you can most value the speaker is with silence. This recognizes the profound message you have just received

and accepted. Productive communication is not talking and waiting to talk. Allow a period of silence to show contemplation of the speaker's message.

### **Six Steps to Becoming a Better Listener**

Climb the LADDER:

**L:** Look at the person speaking to you

**A:** Ask questions

**D:** Don't interrupt

**D:** Don't change the subject

**E:** Empathize

**R:** Respond verbally & non-verbally

Most people listen with only 25% efficiency.

After a ten minute oral presentation,  
the average listener hears, receives,  
comprehends, and retains  
only 50% of the message.

Within 48 hours we forget half of  
that again, so we retain only 25%  
of what we originally heard.

Only 7% of communication is conveyed in words alone, with 38% in tone of voice and 55% by body language. Almost 70% of our workday is spent in verbal communication.

Listening is not only physiological but also a process of recognizing, interpreting,

and understanding the message being sent. There is a difference between listening to respond and listening to understand. Effective communication isn't something that is just acquired, it is a set of practiced skills; skills that can be lost if not practiced and honed on a consistent basis.

Our lack of training is compounded when we start school. The average student spends 50% or more of his/her communication time in listening, followed by speaking, reading, and then writing; however, the time spent teaching each subject is exactly reversed.

Since listening is a learned skill, it can be retrained. Hearing is the autonomic or involuntary reaction of the nervous system and senses. Listening is a voluntary act that requires concentration and willingness.

## MYTHS ABOUT LISTENING

We think we are better listeners than we actually are and don't often learn or practice good listening skills. We take it for granted that listening is easy and believe everybody can do it without effort. Our lack of training is compounded when we start school; the average student spends 50% or more of communication time in listening, followed by speaking, reading, and then writing...however, the time spent teaching each subject is exactly reversed. Here are some myths about listening.

- **Everybody knows how to listen...**many hear but fewer understand, and there is a difference between listening to respond and listening to understand. Listening is a learned skill to take sensory input to meaningful information, and sometimes that involves non-verbal information and messages.

- **Sending messages is more important than receiving them...**almost 70% of our workday is spent in verbal communication. You should not worry about being clear; you should be concerned about being understood. Good communication skills are mutual respect skills, and each person should show respect for the other as well as respect for self. You can demonstrate respect by listening fully and affirming that you understand what that person means. You are communicating when you are with someone, whether you mean it or not. Most people employ words to hide meaning, not reveal it.
- **Listening is easy and passive...**a particular word means exactly what you mean it to but something different to the listener. The connotations or variety of meanings in words can confuse the message. Effective listening is an active and energetic process that requires alertness and thought. Most people will not really listen or pay attention to your point of view until they become convinced you have heard and appreciate theirs.
- **Hearing and listening are the same thing...**listening is not only physiological but also a process of recognizing, interpreting, and understanding the message being sent. Hearing is sensory and involuntary, while listening requires commitment, perception, and is a willful act.
- **An effective speaker commands audience attention...**communication is a partnership and without the listener's consent constructive communication does not occur. Most people listen with 25% efficiency; after a 10 minute oral presentation, the average listener hears, receives, comprehends, and retains only 50% of the message; within 48 hours we forget half of that again, so we retain only 25% of what we originally heard.
- **Communication is the sender's responsibility...**to listen is also to communicate, and there are two emotional factors that effect most conversations, (1) how you feel about the other person's ideas, and (2) what you believe the other person feels about your ideas. Once you understand the role emotions play in communications, you will be able to place yourself in the other person's shoes, meaning you have empathy, a quality that can be cultivated by developing genuine interest in other people. Being listened to marks the difference between feeling accepted and feeling isolated.
- **Listening is done with our ears...**as much as 80% of the message you hope to convey is nonverbal. About 7% of communication is in the words, with 38% in tone of voice, and 55% by body language. As a holistic process, true listening takes in data and information from all our senses. We listen at about 125-250

words per minute but think at 1000-3000 words per minute. Most of the listening process occurs in the brain; after understanding, perception, analysis, and evaluation are essential.

- **Listening skills are practiced not learned...**genuine listening ability is one of the few true forms of competitive advantage. We must both relearn positive and active listening skills and practice those traits to be effective. In our society, listening is essential to the development and survival of the individual. We learn our culture largely through listening; we learn to think by listening; we learn to love by listening; and we learn about ourselves by listening.
- **Listening ability comes from maturity...**”listen or thy tongue will keep thee deaf.”

GOOD COMMUNICATION SKILLS ARE MUTUAL RESPECT SKILLS, AND EACH PERSON SHOULD SHOW RESPECT FOR THE OTHER AS WELL AS RESPECT FOR SELF. YOU CAN DEMONSTRATE THIS RESPECT BY LISTENING FULLY AND AFFIRMING THAT YOU GET WHAT THAT PERSON MEANS, AND YOU RESPECT YOURSELF WHEN YOU ASSERT OR GIVE YOUR OWN AUTHENTIC SELF-INTEREST WITHOUT AGGRESSION. TO HAVE A COMPLETE AND SATISFYING COMMUNICATION EACH PERSON MUST BOTH GET AND GIVE.