

## Listening: A Vital Communication Component

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***Effective communication is one of the most essential requirements for success of any organization. If the communication is not proper, there can be a situation where much of the true message is lost and totally different version is heard at the other end. Social psychologists estimate that normally 40 to 60% of loss of meaning takes place in the transmission of messages from the sender to the receiver. Good listening plays an important role in effective communication. This article emphasizes effective listening as a vital component. Barriers to effective listening like environmental distractions, psychological variations, peripheral listening, etc., are also discussed. It also covers Carl Roger's 'client centred' therapy covering listening orientation and reflective technique. Only effective verbal communication and empathic listening foster interpersonal relations.***

**I**nterpersonal situations consume more than three-fourth's of the time of people in organizations; this simply implies that the root cause of many of the organizational problems is poor communication. Effective communication is an essential requirement for organizational success at practically every level. No doubt, all of us have been communicating with others, ever since we landed on this planet; but the actual process of transmitting information from one to another is getting more complex by each passing day, ironically despite the advent of communication systems. The reason is, the easier the communication, the cavalier is our attitude towards sources of error. In no communication process, the intended message reaches the receiver in its totality. Social psychologists estimate that normally 40 to 60% of loss of meaning takes place in the transmission of messages from sender to receiver. There can be situations where most of the true message is lost and a totally different version is heard at the other end, this being very common in a cross-cultural scenario, though people of same culture are no exception to this. Consider a case where an employee might say that he won't make it to work the following day because of sickness, of which he was rather fed up, probably expecting some sympathy from coworkers and the boss. Now this could be heard as, indifference, lack of consideration and may be, many other such emotions. Good communication, by no means, is a simple process, and it is critical to understand this and make a conscientious endeavor to counter the potential sources of error so that true and intended meaning reaches the receiver.

It is equally important to understand that majority of communication is non-verbal which actually plays a bigger role in conveying or receiving intended message than the verbal part. Research indicates that a message is made up of 7% words, 38% voice tonality and 55% body language, which mainly consists of non-verbal signals like feelings, attitudes, values, expressions observed visually.

### **Effective Listening: A Virtual Communication**

There is no effective communication without proper listening. Improving one's ability to receive a message is an essential part of developing good communication skills. To that extent, listening can even be labeled as our primary communication function while on face-to-face mode. Effective listening goes a long way in improving interpersonal relations because people feel regarded and respected. Knowing how to listen carefully is crucial in today's competitive business

environment—only this can reveal unseen problems, throw up opportunities and trends leading to highly creative solutions. Successful professionals know for sure that listening helps them build solid working relationships and getting along well with them itself is the single-most important determinant of success. Despite this, very few of us know how to listen, and we absorb only a small percentage of what is actually said. Studies indicate that we tend to get wrapped up mostly in our own thoughts and emotions while in the act of listening.

“We spend years learning how to read, write and speak”, says Stephen Covey author of *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. “But we hardly get training in listening”.

### **Barriers to Effective Listening**

Despite its importance, very few people master the art of effective listening. Most of us tend to fall prey to our own worries, pressures and emotions and fail to concentrate on what is being said or implied. Yet, another set of people can be found at workplace who are very fond of their own voice engaging themselves more in talking and telling than in listening and learning. By far, these are the most difficult people to work with. Nonetheless it is worth examining some of the principal obstacles to listening.

- **Environmental Distractions:** Loud noises, physical movements, and changes in intensity of light can prevent a listener from his main task of listening to another person's point of view.
- **Physiological Variations:** Normally, speaking rate is much lower than the listening rate (1:3 or even 4) and the listener tends to switch off and let his mind wander.
- **Peripheral Listening:** Many listeners pay attention to facts and figures only without understanding the implications, emotional overtones or the underlying meanings.
- **Selective Listening:** Listeners continue to be in the act only if they like what is being said and tune out for the rest.
- **Listener's Own Zone:** Many a time, listeners create their own zone of worries, preoccupations, family or career problems, including the concern 'about

the impression' he would make on the speaker, and this forces them to remain totally distracted from the act of listening.

- **Talk and Talk:** Tendency to quickly evaluate others, donning an advisory role, makes people indulge more in talking than in listening. This is a serious hindrance to the process of listening.

Now the aim of listening is not just to absorb and sit back. It is an active skill that needs to be learned, practised and perfected over a period of time for further follow up.

### **Listening with Empathy**

Carl Roger's 'Client Centred' therapy may sound very clinical and therapeutic but this skill can be very useful in many work situations one comes across on a daily basis. There are two broad areas in client-centred listening—*Listening orientation* and *Reflective technique*.

#### **Listening Orientation**

In a clinical set-up, a doctor solves more than half the problem of a patient firstly by simply and patiently listening and then by reassuring him of his recovery. To that extent, the doctor has to orient himself towards listening and situation would be no different in a business scenario too. Carl Rogers calls this as "the therapist's hypothesis" which emphasizes more on the self-capacity of the speaker in solving his own problems than on the skills of the listener/helper in mitigating them. This is analogous to a medical doctor's advice to a patient to observe certain precautions in dealing with his problem more effectively. Listening orientation thus becomes more specific with its four components *empathy*, *acceptance*, *congruence*, and *concreteness*.

- **Empathy:** Listener makes a sincere effort to enter into the thoughts and feelings of the speaker and expresses his responses verbally and nonverbally through messages like "I follow you", "I understand", "I am with you", and "Don't worry", etc. This will lay a bridge of trust between the parties and a more open communication follows. Empathic listening is a skill that is pretty difficult to develop, as we generally tend to be judgmental and

advisory. But 'empathy' is so powerful a force that nurturing the art of empathic understanding is well worth the effort.

- **Acceptance:** This is yet another method of ensuring more open communications. Listener could show due regard and respect for the individuality of the speaker, just as a parent prizes his child as a person regardless of his behavior. Also, every parent accepts his child unconditionally, so should be the case with the listener too. Thus, there will be little or no scope for defensive behaviors on the part of the speaker.
- **Congruence:** A congruent listener is generally candid which, in turn, evokes candor in the other person. To that extent congruence is a trifle inconsistent with empathy and acceptance, though all three of them may not occur at the same time. This is a process of being very natural and human in the art of listening.
- **Concreteness:** This means focusing on specifics rather than on vague generalities. Concrete listener responds in terms of 'You' and 'I' replacing 'they' and 'some or most people', and this will encourage the other party to be equally specific.

A skillful listener tries to understand as to how the other party is experiencing the interaction and makes a sincere effort to address to the needs of the other, rather than simply following the bookish procedures.

### **Reflection: Yet Another Technique**

In reflection, the listener tries to clarify what the other person is saying which makes the whole communication process effective and more meaningful. Further, it reassures the other that some one is keenly listening to him or her. Reflective responses contribute to the development of four components of listening orientation discussed above and vice versa, that is to say, both the techniques are complementary, and mutually supportive and reinforcing. Reflection is a selective process leaving the listener with a particular choice of things to do after deciding to listen from the other's frame of reference. Listener may choose to:

- Respond to personal statements rather than impersonal ones, thus developing a more realistic and active approach to solve problems.

- Respond to rather than leading the other, in the sense, reacting from other's frame of reference to what he is actually saying rather than what the listener wants the other to say or explore. Even the questions could be responsive rather than leading like "why" may be replaced by "that's interesting", "can you tell me more about it".
- Respond to feelings, not just to the content, because feelings emerge in the emotional tone, while the content deals with the actual substance of the message of the speaker. By responding to feelings, one conveys an innate desire to understand the problem in terms of its emotional relevance to the speaker and not just in terms of its factual content. This way the speaker feels 'deeply understood'.

Reflective listening helps listener in gaining more information, by treading into unexplored areas. It strengthens the relationship between the parties concerned and of all, the speaker learns to help himself more, than to seek it from elsewhere. However, the listener should avoid stereotyped responses, frequent repeating of speaker's words or pretension of understanding.

### **Active Listening**

In any business situation, ineffective or improper listening is extraordinarily costly. Listening mistakes lead to poor interpersonal relations, reprocessing letters or orders, rescheduling appointments, recalling products, etc. A major component of effective listening is to be an *active listener*.

The active listener listens carefully with the sole objective of helping the speaker. This process also involves summarizing what one actually listened to, condensing the contents and then giving a suitable feedback to the other. It is time consuming and one needs to pay attention to the other person on three different levels, viz., mind, emotion and body. The mind chooses the words to convey the facts, while our body language and emotions indicate our true feelings. Listening has always been and shall continue to remain critical to our effectiveness as managers and there is a strong need to curb our tendency to often resort to selective listening. Active listeners almost guarantee their attention, commitment and availability to the speaker both verbally and non-verbally.

## **Developing Listening Skills**

In a work environment, there would be good number of occasions when one needs to solicit and draw information from others, for example, while interviewing people, solving work-related problems, giving decisions or evaluating performance of workers, etc. Defensiveness is yet another source of problem in communications. A skillful listener maneuvers his way through this maze of self-protectionism and, yet retains his supportive role by following certain simple steps while listening.

- Very little or no talk at all (1:5).
- Total involvement in the process. Fight distractions.
- Respond with genuine concern and empathy.
- Be least judgmental or evaluative.
- Focus on and react to the feelings and the content and not on the person.
- Listen to what is being implied too; observe body language.
- Be supportive and reassuring throughout the process.
- Let the speaker run his own course: Don't control.
- Comprehend, summarize, give feedback and decide on specific follow up.

## **Conclusion**

Sound interpersonal relations are highly essential for organizational effectiveness and success. These relationships are developed and maintained by free flow of information through well-laid-down communication channels. No communication is complete without proper receiving or listening at the other end. A person's behavior at workplace is going to become a vital aspect of organized human endeavor which ultimately deals with developing harmonious work relationships. Interpersonal relations are concerned with how individuals react to stimuli and with one another, with the work environment and with their individual needs. Only effective verbal communications and empathic listening foster these relations and there is simply no getaway from them.

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