



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol.2.S.1.,2015



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

THE ROLE OF EFFECTIVE LISTENING TO ENRICH THE COMMUNICATION:
A BRIEF STUDY

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Article Info:

Article Received:30/03/2015

Revised on: 05/04/2015

Accepted on: 08/04/2015

ABSTRACT

Listening is the ability to accurately receive and interpret messages in the communication process. Listening is key to all effective communication, without the ability to listen effectively messages are easily misunderstood – communication breaks down and the sender of the message can easily become frustrated or irritated. Effective listening involves observing body language and noticing inconsistencies between verbal and non-verbal messages. A good listener will listen not only to what is being said, but also to what is left unsaid or only partially said. The listening process is a challenging task consisting of leveling, sharpening and assimilation. Effective listening is ensured only when the listener tries to listen not only with his ears but also with his eyes and mind.

It is obvious that when one listens well, one's perspective, competence, mastery, confidence and objectivity will increase. Listening is so important that many top employers provide listening skills training for their employees. This is not surprising when you consider that good listening skills can lead to: better customer satisfaction, greater productivity with fewer mistakes, increased sharing of information that in turn can lead to more creative and innovative work. Many successful leaders and entrepreneurs credit their success to effective listening skills. Richard Branson frequently quotes listening as one of the main factors behind the success of Virgin. Effective listening is a skill that underpins all positive human relationships, spend some time thinking about and developing our listening skills – they are the building blocks of success. Thus listening is the primary soft skill that enriches the effective communication.

Key words: Establish good Interpersonal relations, prelude to other communication skills and industry expectations, Soft and Employability skills.

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Introduction

Though Francis Bacon did not make a mention of the importance of the art of listening, it is still the primary soft skill without which the other communication skills, namely, speaking, reading and writing, may not be effective and successful. Undoubtedly, listening occupies most of our time. However, listening is not the end of communication. Mere listening to the words of wisdom is of no use unless the listener is guided and benefited by them. Failure to communicate the message properly or effectively or failure to receive the message well may result in a communication gap. Obviously lack of attention or interest for one reason or another is not listening which is a positive quality, but hearing which is a casual thing without focus. In fact effective listening is a dialogue between the speaker and the listener. This process of dialogue includes attending, perceiving, interpreting, assessing and responding.

Thus listening can be defined as the skill of registering and comprehending what others are saying. It involves processing, reconstructing and giving meaning to the data. Therefore listening is an active process whereas hearing is only a passive action. Certain steps motivate and facilitate listening. Unity, coherence and consistency in the speaker's presentation will attract the listener's attention. The listener must identify what he wants in the talk. Effective listening is ensured only when the listener tries to listen not only with his ears but also with his eyes and mind. He must try to block out noises and disturbances. In order to accommodate the maximum content of the speaker's presentation, the listener must expand his span of attention. The habit of note-taking helps a listener to concentrate on the content of the talk.

The proverb that speech is silver but silence is golden, may be changed as speech is silver but silent listening is golden. The power of listening cannot be underestimated. It is said to be a magnetic and creative force. Not listening may alienate people from one another. Not listening may cause ignorance for not paying heed to a source of knowledge. For the discerning, listening is a fountain spring of wisdom. Effective listening helps listeners remember the highlights of the speaker's message.

The listening process is a challenging task consisting of leveling, sharpening and assimilation. On a given topic or issue a listener may not be having a comprehensive or satisfactory level of knowledge. The little knowledge or information that he has may be desultory. After listening to a knowledgeable, well-informed and well-read speaker, the listener's knowledge may stand corrected and updated, and attain a level of acceptability.

Similarly, when a listener is exposed to a fresh spring of knowledge and wisdom, his own wits will be sharpened and his listening effort will be fruitful. In the same way, if one listens purposefully and attentively, one will be able to assimilate one's own new supply or addition of knowledge and improve one's lot.

In order to make the activity or skill of listening worthwhile and beneficial, care has to be taken of four essentials, namely,

1. Positive attitude
2. Concentration
3. Interaction with the speaker, and
4. Clarification of ideas and thoughts through question- answer sequences.

That is, the learner must accept the speaker and try to fall in line with his logic and content. He must concentrate on the speaker's presentation avoiding obstacles and hindrances. At the same time the listener must participate in the talk and try to understand the point of view of the speaker. This interaction will enliven the listener's participation and enhance his grasp of the subject. Later the listener will get the speaker's ideas and thoughts clarified through question-answer sequences. It is obvious that when one listens well, one's perspective, competence, mastery, confidence and objectivity will increase. Therefore one must listen well by keeping one's mind on what the speaker is saying and not on one's own affairs. Listening must be done not only with one's ears but also with one's mind; by showing interest even when one does not agree with the speaker's ideas and thoughts; and by not trying to listen and do something else at the same time.

The silent but salient soft skill of listening has definite advantages for the listener as well as others. Listening breaks down the barriers between individuals by paving the way for mutual understanding and cooperation. Good listening prevents communication gap and facilitates a fair grasp of the objectives and

priorities of individuals and institutions. Attentive listening prevents the need for repetitions and thus save precious time. Normally, people listen to improve their knowledge, to obtain information, to follow directions, to be able to solve problems, to share experiences and feelings of joy and sorrow, to express opinions, to give judgments, and finally to learn new things.

As the first step in communication, listening has benefits for people belonging to all walks of life. Students, engineers, technologists, administrators, businessmen, managers, executives, medical men and others derive their own benefits from listening. In a workplace as in a classroom, listening is of utmost importance. In an organization, the manager and the staff must listen to each other for the good of their organization and their own benefit. The bitter feelings of an aggrieved employee may be modified if the manager listens to his complaint patiently. The manager must follow an open door policy. He must encourage his employees to air their views on an issue. This will pave way for their good relations and the growth of the organization besides solving the burning problems, if any. Willingness to listen generates mutual respect, understanding and trust.

In an organization, if employers and employees listen to one another, strikes, lockouts and other such activities will decrease, and as a result productivity will increase. Similarly, when people listen to one another, misunderstandings will vanish and in their place, a sense of optimism, faith and confidence will rule the roost. This will benefit all concerned. Good listening promotes memory besides removing miscommunications and misunderstandings. Listening makes employees feel better about themselves. This makes the problems they work on appear to be within the control of the employees. Effective listening to creative opinions promotes cooperative teamwork leading to solution of problems and building of proper office environment. In spite of the multifarious benefits of listening most people remain poor listeners. In schools and colleges scholars are trained in the skills of speaking, reading and writing, but not listening. Listening is taken for granted. In fact, there are no institutes or training programmes to develop proficiency in listening skill. Moreover, people are not patient enough to listen for a span of time. Poor and inefficient listening creates many personal and professional problems. It should be remembered that while hearing is automatic and effortless, listening is a positive intellectual activity. Listening is a vital communication or soft skill. By neglecting it people subject themselves to confusion, misunderstanding, loss of important information and opportunities. It is a disciplined and learned exercise. As one reads and understands using memory and dictionary, one has to understand a spoken message or instruction on the spur of the moment. It may be understood that listening is not a supportive or secondary communicative function.

Some people are disadvantaged by poor listening habits. They pay least attention to the speaker's words but try to argue with him on the basis of half- knowledge. Sometimes the audience rejects the speaker for his personal appearance, dress, and soft voice or reading from notes. What is important is the message but not its form. The listener should not take into account the speaker's pronunciation, accent, dialect and incorrect grammar. All that matters is only the message. The good listener must sift the speech and take or identify the message. A conscious effort is required to grasp the message. A good listener must take into account not only facts and figures but also the hidden messages, the thoughts and feelings of the speaker. At a crucial stage a listener may for a brief minute interrupt the speaker to have a point clarified. Being inquisitive, he may not hesitate to interrupt the speech.

Types of Listening

1. Informative Listening.

In this type a listener's primary concern is to listen in order to understand the message or instruction. In all human activities people listen to understand the intended message. Listeners derive much of their knowledge from informative listening only. What one learns depends on how well one listens or how one listens. In industries and institutions people listen to new programmes, practices and procedures, and accordingly perform their duties or functions. Sometimes people make speeches, give explanations, narrate events and describe situations. The listeners must make a note of them and register them in their minds or memory. If one is a poor or careless listener, one misses many things and cannot be up-to-date. At times one may lose concentration and fail to take note of a crucial point which is an essential part of one's learning or

life. This is a disastrous loss. Therefore one must listen well for any information which is crucial for progress in life.

Informative listening should take into account certain essential items like vocabulary, concentration and memory. One must possess a fund of vocabulary a fair knowledge of structures of sentences, accent and pronunciation, so as to identify what one is listening to. These things will certainly increase a listener's understanding and knowledge. After all, words are everything. They are the building blocks. One can increase them by conscious effort. Owing to lack of concentration, sometimes people cannot listen well. Concentration is a result of motivation, self-discipline and willingness to learn. If these qualities are present in a person, nothing can divert his attention. This will increase his potentiality for learning through listening.

Listening sharpens a person's understanding and learning. In fact, effective listening registers whatever goes into one's mind and strengthens one's memory. Since mind is the central processing unit and the home of memory, it may be said that memory is the tool that helps a person recall or remember his experiences. Memory functions as a person's knowledge bank. The memory of past experiences and knowledge paves the way to the understanding and resolution of present and future problems. Similarly, the memory of concepts, principles and theories leads us through the labyrinths of the world and life.

2. Attentive Listening.

The goal of the person who listens attentively is to understand and remember the message. He also tries to impress the speaker. The attentive listener surrenders himself to the speaker. His body is positioned towards the speaker and faces the speaker directly. Whenever the speaker makes a point, the attentive listener nods his head and makes an appropriate facial expression. He also maintains an eye contact with the speaker. He takes care to see that he makes no disturbing sounds or noises. He shows interest in what the speaker is saying. He does not ask questions or expresses doubts frequently. Most of the time he keeps silent. After all, if one listens well, one gathers knowledge as well as information. Both wield power and influence.

3. Relationship Listening.

It may render help to others, or improve the relationship between the speaker and the listener. Therapeutic Listening removes an unseemly weight from the mind and heart of the listener. The relationship listener listens for information and also understanding. His body sport, eye contact and his focus on the speaker suggest that he is trying to maintain a close relationship with the speaker. He supports the speaker. He knows when to talk and when to listen. He has enough patience besides confidence in the speaker. He is also empathetic to the speaker, and feels and thinks like the speaker. Empathy promotes effective relationship listening.

4. Appreciative Listening.

A person may listen to an oratorical speech, an argument, a discussion, and even a sonorous song, and appreciate them. The listener must take into consideration the setting, the context, the style and the personality and the deserts of the performer in order to appreciate the performance. The listener must also have a perception of the performance of the listener or performer. Sometimes, since the listener himself is an expert in the item of performance, he will be able to appreciate the performance. Further, if a listener was exposed previously to an item of performance, he will welcome it again. One must possess an aesthetic sense to appreciate a pleasant thing or experience.

5. Critical Listening

It is imperative for people belonging to all walks of life. Students, advocates, business people, scholars, interviewees, participants in discussions, legal judges and adjudicators must lend their ears for critical listening in order to be able to think. Before taking a speaker seriously, the listener must be sure of his expertise in the subject and his trustworthiness or honesty of ideas, thoughts and opinions. An expert speaker must present well-supported and valid arguments which are free from logical errors caused by accident, carelessness, inattention and analytical examination. In addition, sometimes according to their necessity speakers make emotional appeals to listeners for contributions or financial help to the needy and so on.

Critical listeners understand the appeal and appropriately, reciprocate or respond. Critical listeners must keep in mind three things, namely, credibility, logic and psychological appeal.

6. Discriminative listening

The earlier types are to some extent related to discriminative listening. This type of listening results when a person is partly deaf or has his ears affected or infected. Such a person mishears sounds and gets confused. Sometimes speakers mumble words and the listeners cannot make out what those mumbling sounds are. However, one can understand these sounds with the help of non-verbal cues or body language. Thus there are different types of listening and through them one can understand or grasp the message that a speaker intends to give.

Whereas listening constitutes reception and interpretation of speech, hearing is involuntary. It does not require interpretation. What is heard comes and goes, but listening decodes the sound into a meaning and message. Effective listening is a conscious effort and practice like writing and speaking. An active listener does not interrupt the speaker nor does he think of his own interests while others are speaking. He does not try to dominate a debate or discussion. He gives his tongue to a few but his ears to all. On the other hand, a bad listener's mind wanders around. It is neither consistent nor constant. Some bad listeners pretend that they are listening but the fact is to the contrary. Some other people always interrupt the speaker by raising doubts or asking questions only to appear smart. Effective communication results when people listen to one another and understand their ideas, attitudes, feelings and intentions and reciprocate them. When a listener does not verbally respond to the speaker, it is called passive listening. On the other hand, if a listener verbally responds to a speaker, it is active listening.

The silent but salient feature of communication is listening. However, most people are poor listeners. They think that hearing and listening are synonymous. Since the level of their listening is inferior, their understanding or comprehension level is also inferior, ineffective and vague. Obviously, listening is the least mastered and most neglected skill. Even in the area of leadership, listening is very vital, and occupies a pivotal position. In a way it is the key to fostering relationships, decision-making and solving problems. The administrator, the manager, the student, the public servant, all must cultivate the habit and ability of listening well. The processing of listening constitutes three phases, namely, leveling, sharpening, and assimilation. As in agriculture, the ground, that is the mind must be leveled sharpened and kept ready or prepared for assimilation of the inputs so as to be able to yield the desired output. Not all minds can have the same capacity to listen or properly absorb whatever they listen to. Depending upon one's ability, willingness, preparedness or necessity, passive listening, marginal listening, projective listening, sensitive or emphatic listening and active listening may be adopted. That is to say, one may listen without being responsive. One may listen casually only to a few stages or interested in some parts of the text of a speech. One may listen to the text of speech. One may listen to a text of speech only to give shape to one's ideas and project them. One may also listen sensitively so as to understand the text of speech. One may listen with an analytical, positive and dynamic mind so as to enrich one's knowledge, vision and wisdom.

A gainful or fruitful listening lends one a wider perspective or broader outlook. It gives an increased sense of competence and a feeling of achievement. Listening further gives an increased sense of mastery of knowledge creating a feeling of self-confidence. It inculcates greater objectivity or open-mindedness. Listening provides new ideas and approaches. This crucial key to knowledge, vision and wisdom, namely, listening, has its own deterrents, obstacles or distractions, as follows:

Sometimes, owing to the nature of the content, the mindset of the listener, his tastes and attitude, the listener may not find interest in a speech. It is not his "cup of tea".

At times the personal ego of the listener may stand as a deterrent to a speaker's views on a particular topic. Maybe, the speaker's views and ideas are diametrically opposite to those of the listener.

The listener maybe involved with his own private problems, feelings and worries so he cannot pay attention to what the speaker tries to say. Naturally the listener cannot concentrate on the speaker's words.

As a human being the listener may have his own tragedies and failures. He is prone to self pity and despairs. At such times it may not be possible for him to pay heed to what another person says.

The listener may be having his own inhibitions. He may be afraid of exposing his little knowledge or ignorance. Or, perhaps he does not know the language of the speaker. In this situation he cannot try to be attentive to what the speaker says.

On a given topic, maybe the listener has his own pre-conceived notions, bias or prejudice. He seems to be an indoctrinated person. Nothing can deter him from his obstinate ideas. His mind has been closed and new ideas cannot enter it. His mind has become obstinate and inflexible.

Sometimes, the topic on which somebody is speaking sounds too familiar to a listener. He may look for new points from the speaker or the style of his presentation, but the listener does not pay heed to the speech since it sounds familiar. If the speaker's points are similar to those that the listener already knows, there could be some excuse. But before the entire text of the speech is delivered, the listener takes a negative stand. This is detrimental to his growth.

At times a person is subject to hypertension and tiresomeness owing to heavy or busy office work. On such occasions he cannot concentrate on a speech delivered by a speaker. Obviously, his listening is affected. Yet another impediment to effective listening is possible ill-health or deafness. At such times there is a slump in a listener's ability to listen well. Therefore he loses the message owing to auditory problems. It is not that one listens to a fairly audible voice all the time. Sometimes a speaker's voice may be weak for natural reasons. In such a case he cannot reach the audience sitting on the back seats or at a considerable distance. This can be overcome by occupying a seat at a vantage point and listening attentively.

More often than not, a speaker has to address large gatherings. Naturally, he cannot reach all the audience. Coupled to this, the large gathering becomes unmanageable and this could result in a noise. In a situation like this if the speaker is not provided with a microphone, one must occupy a seat close to the speaker and listen to the speech without losing a point.

Another distraction to gainful listening is outside noises caused by loud speakers, vehicular traffic and the announcements of hawkers. In such a case, steps must be taken to ward off the disturbances by closing the doors and windows from which the noises are coming in. The interested listeners must sit at a place close to the speaker so that he may not miss any point that the speaker makes.

The wheezing fans and occasional shrieking of the audio system may create enough disturbing noise. This may irritate the audience and affect their listening. So care must be taken to decrease the speed of the wheezing fans and to correct the shrieking sound of the audio system, so that the interested listeners may be benefited.

A listener, owing to a lack of training and or exposure, may not be able to follow the diction, pronunciation, accent and intonation. A scholarly listener must practice and train himself in these items. He must be able to grasp the meaning of new words in a given context. If he frequently attends meetings, he can identify the pronunciation, accent and intonation of words and expressions. For the sake of acquiring sufficient knowledge and experience in these items, an interested listener may keep a copy of a good dictionary with him and refer to it whenever a doubt crops up. A good listener must also be a competent speaker and reader.

Another impediment that affects a listener could be a lack of sufficient knowledge of the topic somebody is speaking on. The vocabulary that the speaker uses to explain his topic may be new to the listener. In such a case, the listener must do some exercise. He may take a copy of the material prepared by the speaker and go through it in advance. Later, when he listens to the speech, he may not find it difficult to understand.

Some scholars speak at a great speed without bothering whether or not the listeners are able to follow it. It is similar to trying to enter a train while it is running at a great speed. In such a case, the listener must try to catch and write as many words as possible as uttered by the speaker, and later go through the scribbled notes carefully and provide gap fillers as the listener thinks best. This may help the listener identify the message as intended by the speaker.

Suggestions

In the face of the deterrents and distractions as mentioned above, the listener must try to derive the best out of the text of a speech by adopting the following listening practices:

- (i) The listener must keep his mind on what the speaker is saying, and not on his own affairs.

- (ii) He must listen not only with his ears but also with his mind.
- (iii) He must show interest even when he does not agree with what is being said by the speaker.
- (iv) He must not try to listen and do something else at the same time, since listening needs full attention.
- (v) The listener must also be a good reader and have a background of knowledge and sufficient vocabulary.
- (vi) Focus must be kept on listening practices.
- (vii) Computer Aided language Labs to be installed with good software.

Thus listening is a highly positive, skillful, dynamic and beneficial communicative soft skill and prelude to other communicative skills.

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