

# Listening is a Cinderella of Relationship - Causes of Poor Listening

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Meenakshi Raman and Prakash Singh (2006), have enumerated the benefits of listening for the leaders and teams.

- a) Listening helps know the organization.
- b) Listening helps in making better policies.
- c) Listening mollifies complaining employees.
- d) Listening is important for the success of the open-door policy.
- e) Listening helps to spot sensitive areas before they become explosive.
- f) Listening forms a bond of respect.
- g) It increases accuracy, confidence and productivity.
- h) Innovative solutions evolve through listening.

Listening helps one get fairly complete information, which is not the case with poor listening. Poor listening acts like a piece of cloth with many holes in it. A problem with more than one dimension can be sorted out only when the information about all the dimensions of the problem is taken. Full understanding of a problem is just one step from solving it. Listening is a tool for understanding, and establishes the missing links of the problem. A solution based on half information would either fail to work or may not last longer.

Listening helps planning for the future and formulating better policies. Listening gives clarity and accuracy about the problem and also gives confidence to those involved. Try this technique of attentive listening on all unresolved issues and see the difference. Listen to all points and all parties to the problem and you would see the solution instantly.

The listener can gather clues about future problems from the way the presenters gesticulate or speak out their minds. A discerning listener not only gets full information about the current problem but also enough signals about the future problems. Due to the full grasp of issues, efforts to solve problems can be launched before the problem becomes too unwieldy if one listens properly.

Listening gives non-verbal clues about the speaker's original intention of the message. An attentive listener makes out the real and complete meaning of what the speaker is communicating. The speaker's tone, facial expressions, gesticulations etc, which the listener can read effortlessly, would either confirm fully or contradict what the former says orally.

Listening establishes bonds of trust and respect. Problems and their solutions depend very much not only on pure facts but also non-factual dimensions like emotions, respect, affection etc. Listening dissolves the defensive attitude of the other party. Active listening spawns respect in the other party and may relent in doubting. Listening makes complaining employees retrospect and soft to the issue and listener. Listening, in a way, reduces tensions. Even when no solution is found, the listeners are empathized with, since they perceive that everything what should be done was done. Besides this, listening motivates the speakers to say good things and take immediate actions on what the listener suggested.

## Causes of Poor Listening

*There are several and varied reasons for poor listening besides lack of awareness that listening is important.*

Dan Bobinski, (Seven Deadly Sins of Not Listening <http://www.hodu.com/not-listening.shtml>) has summed up seven deadly sins that lead to poor listening. Filtering, second-guessing, discounting, relating, rehearsing, forecasting, and placating contribute to poor listening. Filtering refers to listener's acceptance of what is palatable and rejection of what does not suit him. Second-guessing is looking out for hidden motives. Discounting is born of disrespect for the speaker and derides at the content. Relating is imbibing which has references to the listener's experience or background and missing out the rest as useless. Rehearsing is being busy with thinking about what to say when the speaker finishes his point. Forecasting is thinking very much ahead about an idea given by the speaker. Placating is agreeing with what everyone else says in order to avoid conflict, the result of which is missing out understanding.

Listening is an indicator of openness of mind. It prepares the ground for understanding and solving of issues. Listening helps one gather and imbibe a wide array of information. A careful listener has the influence to enlist cooperation of the all those who are part of the problem. No knowledge is added when one talks but listening adds new knowledge. Listening touches hearts. A listener is a part of solution, and never a part of problem. Words have no meaning but people have, which can be understood only when one listens. A witty maxim "A wise man listening to a fool will learn more than a fool listening to a wise man" explains clearly the importance of listening. Provision of two ears and one mouth to a human being symbolically explains the importance of listening as double that of speaking.

The average time spent on listening is 53% while that spent on writing, speaking and reading together 47%. Ironically, all the training programs are usually focused on the latter and almost little on the former though it is critical and occupies a major chunk of communication.

## The Importance of Listening in Organizational Communication

While listening is very important for inter personal relationships or social life, it is more important for all those running the organization while pursuing its goals. Organizations run not only on the rails of information with all diverse dimensions, but also on the emotions and non-rational human angles. Grasp of full range of information and proper treatment of human expectations are possible with best listening only. One would set out on learning best listening skills only when he is convinced about the importance of listening. Now a discussion is attempted on the importance of listening.

*Listening well is as powerful a means of communication and influence as to talk well.*

*- John Marshall*



Similarly, Prof. Mathukutty has identified nine contributors to poor listening. They are

- 1) inadequate language
- 2) difficult physical conditions like external disturbances
- 3) non-serious listening
- 4) lack of interest
- 5) antipathy towards speaker
- 6) over-enthusiasm for speaker
- 7) lack of confidence
- 8) impatience
- 9) strong convictions about the topic

Prof. Asha Kaul has mentioned eight deterrents to listening process. Lack of interest, ego, preoccupation with self, shuttling between past and present, fear, preconceived notions, feeling that he already knows (familiarity trap), and stress.

We will discuss the most prominent reasons for poor listening in the following paragraphs.

**Mismatch between thought speed and speaking speed:**

A mind (of any human being while he is listening) can process 400 words per minute whereas a human being can speak only about 125 words only. During this free time gap available to the listener's mind, it wanders away into other topics since it has idle capacity and get distracted from the speaker's topic. This is one of the reasons why the mind wanders fast from one subject to the other.

**Lack of awareness:** While there are various and numerous training programs conducted for reading, writing and speaking, no training program is ever conducted for listening, which on an average constitutes more than reading writing and speaking put together in total communication time.

**Mistaken belief that others would expect you to solve their problems:** It is an erroneous belief that others would speak to us only in expectation of some contribution and would solicit us to solve their problem. But a few may solicit some help but the majority want to share their feelings, achievement, grief, information etc. It is better to listen with an open mind than turn a deaf ear.

**Installation of filters:** Communications come from different angles with different

kinds of inputs. An individual neither has the capacity to absorb all nor is it useful to take everything that comes. Hence, an individual innately sets up filters in his mind to attend to some and disregard some by sifting through the information that comes. In the process of disregarding the presumably useless matter, he may turn ear to some useful information also.

Secondly, the filter has another form when the listener thinks that he knows the topic and nothing much is left to learn from the speaker. This condition is known as closed-mindedness. In this condition also, the listener fails to get what is communicated. In such situation, he would only engage his mind in forming criticism or to deny the speaker's opinions or framing his argument as opposed to that of the speaker. It is how he misses the point.

Thirdly, the speaker may already have an opinion about the speaker. This condition is known as premature evaluation. If it is a negative opinion, he would close his mind and miss the point. If he has a highly positive opinion, he may show over-enthusiasm to confirm his impression and thus may miss the point.

Fourthly, some individuals have a low opinion about them and take any input as an attack on their weaknesses. They would not allow the information to come and remain busy in defending themselves.

**Distraction:** The listener is distracted from the topic due to external disturbances, poor public address systems, disinterested co-audience etc. Certain personal factors like disturbing situation in the family etc also would distract the listener. All these distractions are attributed to 'noise' surrounding the listener.

**Lack of interest:** If the listener has no interest in the topic or the speaker, he cannot listen.

**Inadequate language:** The inadequate language of either the speaker or the listener would hinder the listening process. The language of the speaker should match that of the listener.

**Bad listening habits:** Listener fails to get the point of the speaker as a result of his poor listening habits. These habits also constitute barriers to listening. If the barriers to listening,

some of which have been discussed in the preceding, are person-specific and if an individual practices them continuously, they become habits. A brief mention of them is made here.

- 1) Labeling the topic as uninteresting just by getting to know the title of the topic drives a person away from the important points.
- 2) If the delivery is found to be poor, one may jump to the conclusion that the topic is not worthy of listening.
- 3) If one gets over-stimulated and angry about one or a few disagreeable points, he would miss the rest of the topic.
- 4) Some persons concentrate only on facts and but not the principles that underlie such facts.
- 5) One habit of listening is looking for logical order in the presentation. But some speakers don't appear to be orderly though they make strong points, which may be missed out if one is too concerned about the order.
- 6) Some individuals pretend attention, though their minds are elsewhere and thus missing the points.
- 7) Some listeners tend to create or tolerate distractions, which will not allow him to get the meaning intended.
- 8) Some persons try to follow the easy points and evade the difficult ones, which may actually connect the whole.
- 9) The attitude of criticizing the speaker or his delivery obstructs the listening and understanding.
- 10) Some people wait to catch and attack the speaker when the speaker's views are contrary to those of the listeners.
- 11) Another similar habit is that some people are busy rehearsing what they have to say without listening to what is being communicated by the speaker.

All the aforementioned barriers present themselves along the stages of the process of listening. Familiarity with the stages of listening and the concomitant pitfalls would help one get over them while listening.

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