



Active Listening

... a skill and an art

By Shirley Stetson and Bryant Rollins

How many times have you been in a meeting, intending to listen intently and found your mind wandering off? The person speaking was saying something important and you just took a “mental vacation”. When you left on that vacation the topic being discussed was some routine agenda item you always find dry and uninteresting. Suddenly you hear loud laughter and return to find the group enjoying something you missed totally. You want to ask, “what’s going on?” but that would expose your mental absence, so you just hope nobody noticed. You’ll ask a friend to fill you in later with some innocent query like, “I was so busy taking notes that I missed what all the laughter was about. Can you fill me in?”

The sad fact is that many of us are familiar with such a scenario. Why? Because most of us can think far faster than speakers can talk. The average rate of speech for most Americans is about 125 words per minute. This rate is a snail’s pace for the human brain, which is made up of more than 13 billion cells and operates in such a complicated but efficient way that it rivals if not exceeds modern digital computer speeds. Most psychologists believe that mental images as

well as words flash through our brains at much higher speeds than 125 words per minute. The old saying, “a picture is worth a thousand words” carries a double meaning here. Our brains can take in so much data that most professional speakers realize that if they use visuals with their oral presentations, they can hold an audience’s attention more easily. When we speak in pictures or use descriptive language and “paint a mental picture” for the listener, we can keep more of their interest on what we are trying to communicate, as well.

So, it’s not a surprise to find that if our minds aren’t kept busy or active in the listening process, they go to work on the other things that are still open on our “mental desktops.” After a few minutes of listening to slow, dry talk, if we aren’t being challenged to listen or if we aren’t being entertained by the speaker, we distract ourselves with all the stuff that’s going on internally in our “mind-talk” and go on a mental vacation. Most of us get pretty good at it and don’t even realize we are doing it all the time after a while.

How often have you been in someone’s office and had them say, “keep talking, I’m listening, I’m just multi-tasking” as they

proceed to read in-basket mail or shuffle through documents on their desk. How much are they really taking in of what you're saying? How often in personal relationships have you noticed your friend or partner not listening to you in a similar way? Reading a newspaper while you are trying to relate a story of what happened to you today as you were coming home from work, etc.?

Once we know that our brains receive words at a much faster rate than we speak, it might be logical to just slow down the rate at which we listen to coincide with the 125 words per minute speech rate, but slowing down thought processes seems to be a very difficult thing to do. When we listen we continue thinking at a very fast rate even though the spoken words arrive at a comparably slow rate.

In the act of listening the differential between these two speeds means that our brains work hundreds of words in addition to those we hear, assembling thoughts other than those spoken to us. To phrase it another way, we can listen and still have some spare time for other thinking--simultaneously.

The use or misuse of this "extra" space on our "listening discs" holds the answer to how well a person can concentrate on the spoken word. How many of us have been trained to listen? We've been admonished to listen all our lives by parents and teachers, but learning good listening skills and developing good listening habits takes effort.

Key Improvement Factors

There are two major factors in developing better listening skills.

- 1. Build awareness of factors that affect listening ability.**

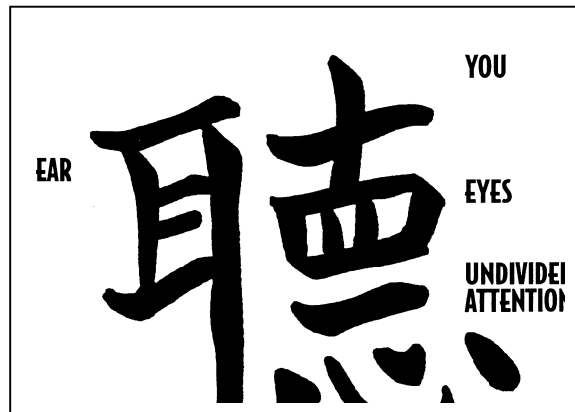
2. Develop the kind of listening experience that can produce good listening habits.

A certain degree of awareness is initiated just by discussing the necessity for developing the ability to listen with more intention. Then there are further steps that can be taken to continue the developmental journey.

In the Chinese language the character for "to listen" is very beautiful, very graphic and very instructive. It pictures five essential components of the skill of listening:

- 1. The Ear**
- 2. You**
- 3. The Eyes**
- 4. Undivided Attention**
- 5. The Heart**

This ideogram suggests that listening involves me using my ears, my eyes and my heart to focus my *undivided attention* on you while you are speaking. No time for mental vacations in this ACTIVE LISTENING process. There is something powerful going on when you are communicating with me. You are offering me something for my ears, my eyes and my heart to receive. This is precious and implies a possible depth of relationship/communing that I may have missed out on by not giving my full/undivided attention before.



You, the speaker are not the only one involved. I have an investment in the process. My ears, eyes and heart, not just my ears or a part of my brain capacity, are available. Much more of me needs to be active in this process.

If I didn't learn it elsewhere already, in order to be fully present to the gift of your communication, I need to train myself to use the "spare" thinking time efficiently as I listen.

Good Listening Habits

We all know what it feels like to NOT be listened to. The lyrics of a popular song some years ago included these lines: *"Everybody's talking at me. I don't hear a word they're saying, only the echoes of my mind."* While the writer may have intended something else, the message contained in this brief excerpt reflects a contemporary phenomenon – we don't listen well to each other. It's difficult to be a good listener when we like to do so much talking ourselves. Especially if we don't feel heard much of the time. So often we listen to part of what is being said, then begin formulating what we want to say next.

Good listeners regularly engage in four mental processes, each geared to the oral discourse and taking place concurrently with that oral discourse. All four of these processes are neatly coordinated when listening works at its best. They tend to direct a maximum amount of thought to the message being received, leaving a minimum amount of time for "mental vacations" or daydreaming leading you, the listener, away from the speaker's talk. Here are the four processes:

1. The listener concentrates and thinks with the talker trying to understand her or his experience from her or his point of

view. This is active empathetic listening or putting yourself in the other person's shoes. Don't assume what will be said next. That's not your job, and it might not be what you think at all.

2. Be patient and quiet, maintaining an open body posture and eye contact. Employ genuine curiosity while listening, taking mental notes to go back and ask questions for clarification when the speaker has finished. It's helpful to simply nod the speaker onward and stay present to what is being communicated both verbally and non-verbally. You want her or him to see that you are paying careful attention.

3. Periodically, the listener mentally reviews and summarizes the points of the talk completed thus far. Your mental notes and questions are to insure understanding, not to get into a debate.

When the speaker finishes you can do this verbally to check if you were receiving correctly.

4. Throughout the talk, try to "listen between the lines" in search of meaning that is not necessarily being put into spoken words. Pay attention (with your ears, eyes, and heart) to nonverbal communication (facial expressions, gestures, tone of voice, etc.) to see if it adds meaning to the spoken words and to see if there is congruence between what is being spoken and what is being communicated non-verbally. Mentally noticing things like "She is telling me a painful experience, but she is smiling. What's that about?" "He seems to be talking all around the subject. Is he purposely avoiding something? I need to ask him about that when he finishes."

The speed at which we think compared to the speed at which people talk allows plenty of time to accomplish these four mental tasks while we are listening; however they do require practice before they can become part

of the mental agility that makes for good listening. We have to exercise our aural “muscles” to develop good listening power.

Listening for Ideas

Another factor that affects listening ability concerns the reconstruction of orally communicated thoughts once the listener has received them. Some people take great pride in being able to get all the “facts” as they listen. You would think that if a person can get all the facts then they should be able to understand what is trying to be communicated.

Even in the case of people who can aurally assimilate all the facts that they hear, one at a time as they hear them, listening is still likely to be at a low level; they are concerned with the pieces of what they hear and tend to miss the broad areas of the spoken communication.

When people talk, they want listeners to understand their ideas. The facts are useful chiefly for constructing the ideas. Grasping ideas is the skill on which good listeners concentrate. Good listeners remember facts only long enough to understand the ideas that are built from them. But then, almost magically, grasping an idea will help the listener remember the supporting facts more effectively than does the person who goes after the facts alone. This listening skill is one which people can build experience leading toward improved aural communication and relationships.

Emotional Filters

Our emotions have great impact on our ability to listen. Figuratively we reach up and mentally turn off what we do not want to hear. *We all do this regularly.* On the other hand, when someone says what we especially want to hear, we open our ears

wide, accepting everything--truths, half truths, or fiction. We might say, then, that our emotions act as aural filters. At times, depending on the intensity of those emotions, they, in effect, cause a form of deafness, while at other times they make listening easy.

If we hear something that opposes our most deeply rooted prejudices, ideas, convictions, mores, or biases, our brains may become over-stimulated, and not in a direction that leads to good listening. We mentally plan a rebuttal to what we hear, formulate a question designed to embarrass the talker, or perhaps simply turn to thoughts that support our own feelings on the subject at hand.

When emotions make listening easy, it usually results from hearing something that supports the deeply rooted inner feelings that we hold. When we hear such support, our mental barriers are dropped and everything is welcomed because we are hearing thoughts that we have harbored for years in support of our inner feelings. It is good to hear someone else think those thoughts, so we enjoy the whole experience.

What can we do about those emotional filters? Just be aware that we all have them and know what our own “hot buttons” are. Then commit to: *Hear the speaker out.* Following are two pointers that often help in training yourself to do this:

1. *Withhold judgment* - This is one of the most important principles of learning, especially learning through the ear. It requires self-control, sometimes more than many of us can muster, but with persistent practice it can be turned into a valuable habit. While listening, the main object is to comprehend the story being told by the talker. Judgments and decisions should be reserved until after the talker has finished. At that time, and only then, review the main ideas and assess them.

2. Hunt for negative evidence -

When we listen, it is human to go on a militant search for evidence which proves us right in what we believe. Seldom do we make a search for evidence to prove ourselves wrong. The latter type of effort is not easy, for behind its application must lie a generous spirit and real breadth of outlook. However, an important part of listening comprehension is found in the search for negative evidence in what we hear. If we make up our minds to seek out the ideas that might prove us wrong, as well as, those that might prove us right, we are less in danger of missing what people have to say.

Active Listening

Even though you may be listening and another person talking, if Active Listening is occurring both of you are actively involved. As the listener it is your responsibility to remain an active participant. That means I might gently stop the speaker from time to time to ask a question for clarification or to restate what I think I've heard. "What I hear you saying is ..." All of these interventions should be non-judgmental. Honest questions, not argumentative questions as a way to get our point across. This type of interactive communication is designed to strengthen or affirm the speaker's points, and it is a way to keep our mind engaged to strengthen our listening.

As Stephen Covey has suggested:
"Seek first to understand; then to be understood."

Benefits in the Workplace

The implications of the improvement of skills in the workplace are enormous. Imagine if bosses really listened to subordinates and valued their input by making substantive changes in the way work gets done? Imagine the improvement between

management and labor when those two groups really listen to each other for understanding instead of positioning and winning at the expense of the "other side?" We sometimes forget we are all on the same side, or are supposed to be.

When people in the workplace fail to hear and understand each other or their customers and partners, the results can be costly. Such things as numbers, dates, places and names are especially easy to confuse, but the most straightforward agreements are often the subject of listening errors, too.

When mistakes are compounded, the resulting cost and efficiency in workplace communications can become serious. Building awareness of the importance of listening among employees on teams can eliminate a large percentage of this type of aural error. When teammates start to notice and give each other feedback in sensitive, respectful ways, the performance of the entire group can begin to rise in synergistic ways. Just by focusing on peoples listening skills.

This sort of economy of communication can boost the morale of work groups and help eliminate the need for tedious excess paperwork. In the past, incidents of poor listening frequently gave businesses a real fear of aural communications. As a result, entire workforces were trained to "get it in writing," to "document" the agreement or interaction, even between departments in the same organization, because "you just couldn't trust them." The smallest detail had to be "memo-ed." This process served to slow the work down and have a negative impact on productivity, turning into the tangle we now know as "red tape." We believe that many times less writing and more verbal interaction would be possible – if only we could depend on good listening.

Writing and reading are much slower communication elements than speaking and listening. They require more personnel, more equipment, and often more space than do speaking and listening. Few people ever feel it is safe to throw away a written communication, so filing equipment is needed.

In oral communication there are more human senses at work than in written communication; and if there is good listening, more can often be communicated in one message as well as the establishment of relationship and community. If the listener does not understand, there is the opportunity for discourse and clarification, then and there.

The skill of good listening becomes extremely important when we talk about “upward and downward communication” in organizations. There are many avenues through which management can send messages downward in organizations, but there are few avenues for movement of information in the upward direction. Perhaps the most obvious of the upward avenues is still the human chain of people talking to people. The worker talking to the supervisor who then speaks to the manager who might get the ear of the regional director who may be seeing the vice president at a meeting next week. You know the story. The communication might eventually reach the upper levels of the organization.

This chain has potential, but it seldom works well because it’s full of poor listeners. There can be failure for at least three reasons:

- 1. Without good listeners, people do not talk freely and the flow of communications is seldom set in motion.**

- 2. If the flow should start, only one bad listener is needed to stop its movement toward the top.**

- 3. Even if the flow should continue to the top, the messages are likely to be badly distorted along the way.**

It would be absurd to expect that these upward communication lines could be made to operate without hitches, but there is reason to suggest that they could be improved with better listening. Top management should take the first steps as they rely on human interaction for about 80% of their job information. The higher we go in an organization the more we rely on people to give us what we need to get the daily job done. More and better listening on their part can prime the pumps that start the upward flow of information.

People at all levels in organizations need to feel free to talk to their supervisors and to know they will be met with sympathetic understanding. The notion of “*seek first to understand, and then to be understood*” is all about good listening and is a hard thing for many to do. Too many supervisors say their doors are always open, but when a subordinate enters, they fail to listen. In the face of this failure, their subordinates do not feel free to say what they want to say and withdraw from their supervisors more and more. They fail to talk about important problems that should be aired for both parties’ benefit, never mind the organization’s. When such problems remain unaired, they come back to plague the supervisor who failed to listen well in the first place.

The remedy for this sort of aural failure – and it should be applied when subordinates feel the need to talk – is “active listening.” The listener hears, really working to understand, and later shows understanding by reflecting

back what was heard. Above all, during this process, the listener refrains from firing any thoughts back at the person talking or from indicating any displeasure or disapproval by mannerisms, gestures or facial expressions. Only after the speaker has finished does the listener ask major questions for clarification before reflecting back what was heard to insure the message was received accurately.

Eye contact, nodding to indicate comprehension and encouragement to continue are advised as the speaker is talking. It is not an easy thing to listen someone through, since the listener, in this case the boss, might hear something that challenges dearly held notions and ideas or even be told that those are wrong. To listen in this way for understanding requires more courage than many of us have. But the results of listening this way are usually worth the effort. The person talking has a chance to unburden him or herself. Equally important, the odds are better that the listener can counsel, empathize or act more effectively when the time comes merely because of having heard this person's whole story.

Listening is only one phase of human relations. By itself it will solve no major problems. Yet the past experience of many executives and organizations leaves no doubt, in our opinion, that better listening can lead to a reduction of the human frictions which beset many organizations today. More and better listening skills can be applied to any human interaction. What we learn in the workplace about listening is invaluable in interactions in public and private settings, in groups and in personal relationships, with children and with adults. Good listening is both a skill and an art. One you can practice to greater and greater satisfaction your entire life.

References: The material from this article adapted from the following articles:

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StetsonRollins Consulting, Inc.
P.O. Box 550549 Jacksonville, FL 32255
904-910-5535
www.stetsonrollins.net

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