

Session Objectives:

The objective of this session is to understand:

- The importance of listening
- Barriers to effective listening
- Approaches to listening
- How to be a better listener
- What speakers can do to ensure better listening

Importance of listening

Most frequent and important type of on-the-job communication: Almost all working personnel spend almost 30% of their time listening while top executives spend between 65-90% of their time listening. To become a successful manager, a person has to be an active listener first.

Plays a major role in career success: Listening is an important factor, which is also reflected in an individual's ability to argue persuasively after hearing a point. For people in supervisory roles, listening skills are crucial because they should be able to extract ideas from their subordinates by encouraging them to talk freely and openly. Listening skills form a pivotal part of communication. It is not possible to confine these skills to particular roles or professions.

Barriers to effective listening**Physiological Barriers:**

'Physiological barriers', as the name suggests, are connected with the physical and mental abilities of a person. They are barriers created by physical incapacity of a person such as hearing impairment and differential speaking-thinking rate.

- **Hearing impairment:** Some people suffer from hearing deficiencies. If it is detected early, it can be rectified. For others, ineffective listening may be due to auditory processing difficulties such as auditory discrimination, sequencing, or memory problem, which leads to an impression that they are not listening. This should however not be considered as an intentional disregard to what is being said.
- **Speaking-Thinking rate:** The average processing speed of listeners is 500 words/minute while that of speaking is 125 words/minute. This leaves a large time gap between a speaker and a listener. This time-gap should essentially be utilized to explore the speaker's idea. However, what most listeners do is to let their mind wander to other activities or other unfinished tasks that have no relevance whatsoever to the topic conveyed by the speaker.

Environmental Barriers

- **Physical distractions:** Few examples of physical distractions are: stuffy room, noisy machinery, parallel conversations etc. Such distractions make it difficult for an individual to listen attentively.

Example: Working in a hot and humid environment could be a physical distraction

particularly during peak summer, if air-conditioning is not provided.

- **Message Overload:** With multifarious activities taking place simultaneously, it becomes very difficult to concentrate on a single task. As a result, the listening efficiency is reduced.

Attitudinal Barriers

- **Prejudices:** Preconceived attitudes act as a barrier to effective listening.
- **Preoccupation:** At a time when an individual is involved in a particular task, there may be several other disturbing thoughts running parallel in his/her mind. This could prevent an individual from concentrating on his/her current task.
- **Casual attitude:** Very often, people adopt a casual attitude towards listening. Their perception that it does not require concentration and effort acts as an attitudinal barrier to effective listening.
- **Egocentrism:** The belief that one's thoughts are more important than others' ideas, leads to poor listening. This might lead to missing out on important facts that the other person is trying to convey. With this attitude you lose out on opportunities to learn new things.

Poor Listening Habits

Faking attention: On many occasions, people pretend to be listening, so as to avoid offending the speaker. This leads to poor listening.

Example: This is most common in classroom scenario where students pretend to listen to the lecture.

Listening only for facts: In our pursuit to assimilate facts, we often forget to grasp the main ideas. To be an effective listener, one should learn to listen attentively to all details.

Avoiding difficult and uninteresting material: There is a tendency for the receiver to switch off his attention when the message is too complicated or irrelevant to him. Hence, the speaker should choose a topic that will be interesting to the audience or should present it in such a way that it holds the attention of the audience.

Focusing on delivery: Sometimes, we tend to concentrate on how something is being said, rather than what is being said. As a result, we tend to miss out on what is actually being said.

Lack of common experiences

It is difficult to understand what one has not experienced, either directly or indirectly.

Example: If your friend is describing his recent summer camp, it may not sound interesting to you because you have not experienced it. Similarly, a speech about spiritualism is boring and uninteresting to teenagers, whereas elderly people find the same to be interesting.

Approaches to listening

People listen for different reasons. Based on the reason, their approaches to listening may vary. Each one of these approaches is discussed below:

Discriminative listening: This is an attempt to distinguish one sound from all the other sounds. It initially begins with sounds and eventually applies to all other cues like tone, pitch, volume of voice, etc.

Example: Increasing the volume of television when your favorite program is being

broadcast.

Comprehensive listening: Comprehensive listening is an attempt to absorb all the details, i.e., trying to understand the message in totality.

Example: Line managers listen to the instructions given by their superiors attentively, so that they can repeat these instructions to their subordinate staff.

Critical listening: When a decision has to be made based on what a person hears, then it becomes necessary to listen critically. Critical listening involves evaluating the clarity, accuracy, and reliability of the message without getting influenced by emotional appeal in the message.

Example: Shareholders listen critically to speeches in AGM, in order to evaluate the company's performance. Similarly, a judge listens critically to both the parties in a case before taking a decision.

Active listening: Active listening, also known as empathic listening, is supportive in nature and encourages the speaker to continue. Active listeners give brief summaries after the speaker finishes his speech. This is done to affirm that they have understood the message delivered by the speaker. Active listeners are alert to all cues: both verbal and emotional.

Example: In a group discussion, the facilitator of the discussion encourages the participants to speak, actively listens to all of them, and winds up the discussion with a brief summary of what the speakers have said.

How to be a better listener

Be motivated to listen: The first prerequisite to be a good listener is to resolve to listen. A person can see for himself a marked improvement in his listening capability if he resolves to listen carefully.

Be prepared to listen: Sometimes, it is necessary that details regarding the subject of speech, the speaker and the relevant details are collected beforehand, before attending the session. This will enable you to concentrate better, while the speech is being delivered.

Example: You are attending a seminar on Bio-informatics and at the end of the seminar you are required to prepare a viability report for your company which is aiming to venture into this business. Since it is a relatively new area for you, you may need to do adequate research about the topic before attending the seminar. This will help you understand and evaluate what is being said at the seminar.

Be objective: Being objective is to listen with an open mind. Listening with an open mind helps a person to understand the subject better, since bias and judgment are kept at bay. To enable yourself to listen with an open mind, it is essential to put aside emotions and prejudices.

Example: Most people are averse to change. Therefore, when change management is being discussed, most employees oppose it without listening to the whole matter.

Be alert to all cues: We have been reading all through, that messages are complete only when the emotional aspect covering the message is also conveyed. Hence, when a speech is delivered, the audience should follow the nonverbal messages in order to understand the message completely.

Make good use of the thinking-speaking time difference: A person who is listening can utilize the time gap that exists between thinking and speaking to mentally summarize and review what the speaker has said. Rather than trying to frame an appropriate response to the message, the receiver must try to focus on what is being said.

Example: A new technology has been introduced in a company and a person is explaining to the managers how to use the same. At this point of time, the managers should concentrate on learning and understanding the new technology rather than thinking about pending tasks.

Use of feedback: Communication can be improved by providing feedback to the speaker. Feedback may be in the form of a query indicating the receiver's inability to understand the message delivered by the speaker or may be a simple expression of opinion. Feedback enables the speaker to ensure that the audience understands what is saying. Feedback should be unambiguous and related to the message being delivered.

Example: Suggestions may be made by employees to improve the production process. Top management should review all such suggestions and feedback that has the potential to make a positive contribution towards improving the productivity should be encouraged.

Practice listening: Most of us turn a deaf ear to whatever is uninteresting or irrelevant to us. One has to make conscious efforts to improve listening skills. To become an effective listener, one has to repeatedly practice listening to speeches and lectures that take conscious efforts to hold the attention.

Use verbal and nonverbal cues to encourage the speaker: A speaker receives encouragement if the audience shows interest in his speech. Both verbal and nonverbal cues can be used by the listeners to convey their interest. Verbal cues can be in the form of remarks such as 'yes', 'I understand', etc. Nonverbal cues can be in the form of maintaining eye contact with the speaker, a slight nod of the head, etc.

Example: Clapping of hands after a singer has performed on stage serves as encouragement to the singer.

What Speakers can do to ensure better listening

So far we have discussed about listening from the perspective of the recipient only. Now we take a look at what speakers themselves can do to encourage better listening.

Try to empathize: To capture the attention of the audience, it is first of all necessary to understand what really keeps the interest of the audience alive. The speaker thus has to put himself in the listener's position and plan his speech accordingly. Relating to the audience also helps in delivering good speeches.

Adjust your delivery: If speeches are delivered in a monotonous tone, the audience will feel bored. The speaker should modulate his voice while delivering the speech. This can be done by emphasizing important points of the speech and using humor appropriately to capture the attention of listeners.

Utilize feedback: While delivering speeches, the speaker should mentally note the verbal and non verbal cues given by the audience. By being receptive and sensitive to the audience's responses, the speaker can make the necessary improvements in his speech so as to communicate his message to the audience in a better manner.

Be clear: It is essential that the speaker understands what he is saying, and why he is saying so. When the speaker himself is not clear about what he wants to say, then, it will be very difficult for him to express it as well.

Be interesting: Speeches should be interesting so as to capture audience's attention. Speeches can be made more interesting by giving examples of ideas and situations familiar to the audience. This will help the audience understand and relate what they hear, to what they already know.

Summary

Listening is the most frequent form of communication. Just as there are various barriers to listening, there are also various approaches. Managers need to develop the crucial skill of active listening to improve work quality and increase productivity in the organization

Conscious efforts are required to improve listening skills, both on the part of the listener as well as on the part of the speaker.