

Listening Skills

LISTENING is only one part of communication. If a person does not listen closely to the communicator, part of the message may be lost. Improving listening skills begins with the desire to do so. Several techniques can improve listening skills. The most important technique for improving effective listening is being prepared.



Objective:



Describe the importance of good listening skills in oral communications, including the techniques for effective listening and the factors that contribute to poor listening.

Key Terms:



active listening
bias
clarifying

direct questioning
focusing
hearing

open-ended questioning
paraphrasing
silence

Are You Listening or Just Hearing?

How well do you think you listen? Do distractions prevent you from really listening? Ask your friends and family members if they think you are a good listener. Who do you think is a good listener? What makes that person a good listener?

GOOD LISTENING SKILLS AND ORAL COMMUNICATION

Listening is only one part of communication, but it is the basis for successful communication. If a person does not listen closely to the communicator, part of the message may be lost. The listener is responsible for making the effort to understand the message. Listening and hearing are not the same.

Hearing

Hearing is the physical process of detecting sound, but it is only the first step of listening. Listening is a conscious mental effort to understand what one is hearing. In general, a person “hears” 70 percent of a message but actually remembers about 50 percent. Listening consumes about 45 percent of the time spent communicating. An effective listener will receive, attend, evaluate, and recall the message.

Active Listening

Active listening is an active process, not a passive one. Good listeners often use various techniques to make sure they understand the message. The following active listening guidelines are frequently used by good listeners:

- ◆ Stop all other activities.
- ◆ Look at the person speaking for verbal and nonverbal messages.
- ◆ Focus your attention on what is being said.
- ◆ Confirm your understanding with paraphrasing, direct questioning, open-ended questioning, clarifying, focusing, and/or silence.
- ◆ Give your opinion after the other party is finished speaking.



FIGURE 1. One active listening technique is to look at the person speaking for verbal and nonverbal messages.

Active listening guidelines include paraphrasing, direct questioning, open-ended questions, clarifying, focusing, and silence.

Paraphrasing

Paraphrasing is restating what has been said.

Direct Questioning

Direct questioning is asking “yes” or “no” questions.

Open-Ended Questions

Open-ended questioning is asking questions that require more than a yes or no answer.

Clarifying

Clarifying is asking the speaker to restate or repeat the message.

Focusing

Focusing is drawing a rambling or wandering speaker back to the main issue.

Silence

Silence is saying nothing, which can show care and respect for the speaker and allow the listener to gather his or her thoughts. This may be a good listening tool during sad talks.

TECHNIQUES FOR EFFECTIVE LISTENING

Improving listening skills begins with the desire to do so. Several techniques can improve listening skills. The most important technique is being prepared, which involves removing or limiting all distractions. The next step is to listen with the intent to understand. You should not worry about how to respond. It is important to pay attention to nonverbal cues that the speaker is sending.

While listening, do your best to control your emotions. This helps prevent confusion. Try to have patience and avoid any arguments. Try to organize the information, if possible, as it is being heard. Listen for organizing words and patterns such as “first,” “next,” and “then.”

FACTORS THAT CONTRIBUTE TO POOR LISTENING

Several factors can lead to poor listening.

Tuning Out

Tuning out occurs when a person hears someone speaking, but he or she is not listening. This can occur when the person who is supposed to be listening is not interested in what the speaker is talking about. Tuning someone out can be done intentionally or unintentionally. Fatigue, distraction, and disinterest can play a role in this situation.

Prejudice or Bias

Prejudice or bias can result in poor listening. If a person does not like what a speaker is saying, it is natural to have difficulty listening. Try to avoid jumping to conclusions. **Bias** is showing partiality to one side or the other, and this makes listening to an opposing perspective difficult.



FIGURE 2. Prejudice or bias can result in poor listening.



DIGGING DEEPER...

UNCOVERING ADDITIONAL FACTS: Active Listening and Conflict Resolution

Have you ever had a disagreement with someone where resolution just seemed impossible? Why? Were you both focused on winning the argument, or did you truly try to understand each other's perspective? Many arguments go unresolved because one or both parties try to win at the expense of the other. Real dialogue between parties can offer a fuller perspective of the situation. While resolution may not be possible in all situations, it certainly increases the likelihood for resolution when both sides have a better understanding of the others' perspective.

Many resources are available on the topic of active listening and conflict resolution. Research three or four online sources and then compile your notes. Prepare a poster board presentation of your findings. The following website may be useful:
<http://www.businesslistening.com/index.php>.

Difficulty Understanding or Hearing

Poor listening can be caused by difficulty understanding a speaker's language or difficulty hearing. Understanding a speaker's language or dialect is imperative to effectively listening to a verbal message. If a language barrier exists, pay attention to body language. If a language barrier persists, attempt to learn common phrases that may be needed in the performance of one's job.

Information Overload

Information overload can lead to poor listening. Too much information can cause the mind to wander. In addition, information that is too complicated may make a listener tune out. Therefore, breaks for questions might help.

Summary:



Listening is only one part of communication, but it is the basis for successful communication. If a person does not listen closely to the communicator, part of the message may be lost. The listener is responsible for making the effort to understand the message. Listening and hearing are not the same.

Improving listening skills begins with the desire to do so. Several techniques can improve listening skills. The most important technique is being prepared by removing or limiting distractions. The next step is to listen with the intent to understand. It is important not to worry about how to respond. Yet it is very important to pay attention to nonverbal cues that the speaker is sending.

Several factors can lead to poor listening. Tuning out occurs when a person hears someone speaking, but he or she is not listening to the speaker. This can occur

when the person who is supposed to be listening is not interested in what the speaker is talking about. This can be done intentionally or unintentionally. Fatigue, distraction, and disinterest can play a role in this situation.

Checking Your Knowledge:



1. Define “open-ended questioning,” and give an example.
2. Compare and contrast hearing and active listening.
3. List three suggestions from the active listening guidelines.
4. What contributes to poor listening?
5. What is bias, and how does it affect listening?

Expanding Your Knowledge:



The next time you are with your friends, quietly observe the listening skills they demonstrate. To what degree did good listening skills or the lack thereof contribute to any disagreements or differences in social outcomes? How could you serve as a listening mediator or advisor the next time the poor dialoguing surfaces?

Web Links:



Ways to Be a Better Listener

<http://www.lifehack.org/articles/communication/5-simple-ways-to-be-a-better-listener.html>

Active Listening

<http://www.mindtools.com/CommSkill/ActiveListening.htm>

The Art of Listening

<http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/unssc/unpan010392.pdf>