

# Effective listening

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In a monthly marketing meeting, the marketing manager wants 5 of his staffs to conduct a research on market share on 5 different areas. Each staff is assigned a territory. The manager rejects, one month later in the same meeting, one of the 5 reports because the research is on the wrong territory.

If we assume the ability of all staffs is the same, then it is obviously a communication breakdown that causes the wrong research was conducted. The consequence of misunderstanding may be costly to a company. Often when a misunderstanding occurs on the job, it is attributed to a lack of communication, which most of time implies that whoever was delivering the message did not do an effective job. But what about the other side, the listener?

Listening is important in business because it is the communication skill most often used in human interaction (Curtis, Floyd and Winsor 1992, p. 56).

Between 45 and 55 percent of people's communication time will be spent in listening to others (Nichols and Stevens 1957, p. 6, Werner 1975, p. 26).

However, listening is not a skill that most people perform well. Studies show that people do not listen effectively. On an average, people listen only at 25% efficiency (Nichols and Stevens 1957, p. ix).

It is difficult to define listening, but generally it can be defined as " a receiver orientation to the communication process; since communication involves both a source and a receiver, listening consist of the roles receivers play in the communication process" (Floyd 1985, p. 9). Listening is a process that includes hearing, attending to, understanding, evaluating and responding to spoken messages. (Floyd 1985, p. 9)

Our own listening habits have been developed since we were born. Such habits are so well established that we perform them without thinking. But unfortunately, such habits are usually undesirable and lead to poor listening.

There are numbers of reasons for ineffective listening. These do not apply equally to all listeners and the degree to which they do apply will vary from different situation, speaker, topic and so forth, They represent common and important reasons for ineffective listening:

### Rehearsing

Your whole attention is designing and preparing “ what to say next”. You look interested, but your minds are miles away because you are thinking about the next comment.

### Judging

Negatively labeling people can be extremely limiting. Everyone has biases, but it leads to ineffective listening. For example you hear a speaker discuss an idea that you don't like, you might stop paying attention to that speaker says, you might distort the message, and therefore failing to understand it because of prejudgment. As a result, your evaluation of the speaker and /or message could be unfair or in error (Curtis, Floyd and Winsor 1992, p. 59). So, A basic rule of effective listening is to that judgements should only be made after you have heard and evaluated the content of the message (Johnson).

### Identifying

You take everything people tell you and refer it back to your own experience. They may want to tell you about a car's braking system, but that reminds you of your car accident. You launch into your story before they can finish theirs (Johnson).

#### Talking rather than listening

We too often love to hear our own voice and feel that our comments and ideas are always right (Curtis, Floyd and Winsor 1992, p. 58). You are a great problem solver that you do not have to hear more than a few sentences before you begin searching for the right advice. But, while you are coming up with suggestions, you may have missed what is most important. Sometimes, people argue and debate with others who never feel heard because these people are so quick to disagree. In fact these people's main focus is on finding things to disagree with.

#### Filtering

We usually filter out messages and listen only to those topics and materials that we want to hear. We will stop paying attention to those topics that we do not want to hear, such as messages that criticize us. Then we cannot be corrected, and we cannot take suggestions to change (Johnson).

#### Placation

As we have been taught to be nice, pleasant and supportive to others, we seldom criticize others especially when others are telling you things that we want to hear. But too hasty acceptance of messages that tells us what we

like and want to hear can lead to serious problems (Curtis, Floyd and Winsor 1992, p. 60). We may half-listen just enough to get the drift, but not really involved. Instead, we should be careful to pay attention, to comprehend, and then to analyze and evaluate what speakers say (Curtis, Floyd and Winsor 1992, p. 60)

### Distraction

A distraction is anything that pulls your attention away from that which you want, or need, to pay attention to (Curtis, Floyd and Winsor 1992, p. 60). It is difficult to avoid distraction. There may be distraction in the environment and within you – day dreaming. When we dream, we pretend to listen but we actually drift about in our interior fantasies. Instead of disciplining ourselves to truly concentrate on the input, we turn the channel to a more entertaining subject. We may have missed some important points while we are dreaming. It is the major reason for ineffective listening.

### Fear of difficult

This block applied when we need to listen and understand new materials or subjects that are new, difficult and challenging to us. In such situation, it is difficult to listen (Curtis, Floyd and Winsor 1992, p. 60). We always try to avoid or rationalize these subjects and not to listen. It is mainly due to the fear of failing. People does not like failing and try any methods to avoid it.

There are numbers of ways to avoid failure. We stop paying attention to the subject and spend our time to somewhere else. Then we may tell ourselves, we are not fail to understand the topic, but refused to deal with it.

Rationalization also helps people to avoid failure (Curtis, Floyd and Winsor 1992, p. 60). We usually hold someone else responsible for the consequences of not listening or understanding by saying the material is “ boring”, “ stupid”, “ nothing to do with my daily work” and so forth. But as a result, we still do not understand the material.

Like any other skill, the first step to improve listening is to understand of what you can do or stop doing in order to get better. The second step is to practice the new skill over and over again to make it as your habit.

We have examined the blocks for effective listening. Let us move on to the elements to improve effective listening.

There are 2 major elements to improve effective listening, namely comprehension and Analysis/Evaluation. Comprehension means that you are able to understand the speaker (Curtis, Floyd and Winsor 1992, p. 61). There are some basic ways to improve our ability to understand speakers.

The first step towards more effective listening comprehension is paying increased attention (Curtis, Floyd and Winsor 1992, p. 61). Attention is your focus to the speaker and his/her material and sustaining the focus. Paying long and well enough attention help you to keep these verbal and nonverbal stimuli into your long-term memory. Then you are able to compare the information with new and old materials. Otherwise, information not stored in long term memory will be lost in a second and you are not able to understand the content because you will not remember it (Tyson 1982).

Everyone can increase attention by realizing its importance, avoid common tendency to day dream, fighting the tendency to give in to external and internal distractions, remove distractions if possible or learn to listen over distraction. We have the ability to listen to and understand speech even when there are severe distraction (Moore 1977, p. 239).

The second step to improve your ability to understand speaker is to understand the nature of non-verbal communication. Nonverbal communication is any communication expressed not in words but in body motion, paralanguage (how something is said), proxemics (the use of space), artifacts (physical objects), or environment (Knapp 1980, p. 4-11). It serves a variety of functions that to repeat, contradict, substitute, complement, accent, or regulate verbal communication (Knapp 1978, p. 38). However, it does not mean nonverbal communication is more important than verbal communication. In case nonverbal communication is contradicted to verbal communication, it does not always the case that nonverbal communication is more reliable.

The third step towards more effective listening is to increase your ability to comprehend verbal symbols, or message (Curtis, Floyd and Winsor 1992, p. 63). Although it is the speaker's responsibility to make himself/herself clear and meaningful, communication is a two way process that listener has the same responsibility to understand speaker's materials. This task can be accomplished by (1) increasing the quality and quantity of your experience, (2) learning to use context as a mean of increasing your understanding, (3) keeping your bias away, (4) controlling any fear of failure, (5) improve your

vocabulary (Curtis, Floyd and Winsor 1992, p. 63-64), and (6) feedback to confirm your interpretation.

The next element that helps to improve effective listening is analysis and evaluation. Once you have attended to and understood the speaker, you are ready to analyze and evaluate the message. Analysis is to examine the message in order to learn what the meanings are. Evaluation is the rendering of judgement on message to decide the value of the message. Both analytical and evaluative functions require you to examine a speaker's support and reasoning, such as data, conclusion, reasoning process, examples and statistics.

Effective listening will benefit as well as those who work with you. It breaks up the barriers between people and can understand each other more. In workplace, effective listening minimize the losses of potential revenues which may result from shipping the wrong products to customers. Or from miscommunication objectives and priorities among staffs. Or even from time lost because of having to re-communicate a second or third time to get things straightened out.

To listen effectively, one must be positive, active, prevent affected by blocks we mentioned earlier, paying and sustain enough attention to the speaker, able to analyze after understanding. It is not an easy skill, but it is the most fundamental and powerful skill we need. When someone is willing to stop talking or thinking and begin truly listening to others, all of their interactions become easier, and communication problems are all but eliminated.