

Listening: Our Most Used Communication Skill

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Listening is the communication skill most of us use the most frequently.

Various studies stress the importance of listening as a communication skill. A typical study points out that many of us spend 70 to 80 percent of our waking hours in some form of communication. Of that time, we spend about 9 percent writing, 16 percent reading, 30 percent speaking, and **45 percent listening**. Studies also confirm that most of us are poor and inefficient listeners.

Why?

Several reasons are likely.

Listening training unavailable

Even though listening is the communication skill we use most frequently, it is also the skill in which we've had the least training. From personal experience, we know we've had much more formal training in other major communication skills — writing, reading, speaking. In fact, very few persons have had any extended formal training in listening.

The same is true of informal training. It's not difficult to find workshops and conferences that provide opportunities to improve our writing and speaking skills. But it is difficult to find similar training programs to sharpen listening skills.

Thought speed greater than speaking speed

Another reason for poor listening skills is that you and I can think faster than someone else can speak. Most of us speak at the rate of about 125 words per minute. However, we have the mental capacity to understand someone speaking at 400 words per minute (if that were possible).

This difference between speaking speed and thought speed means that when we listen to the average speaker, we're using only 25 percent of our mental capacity. We still have 75 percent to do something else with. So, our minds will wander.

This means we need to make a real effort to listen carefully and concentrate more of our mental capacity on the listening act. If we don't concentrate, we soon find that our minds have turned to other ideas.

We are inefficient listeners

Numerous tests confirm that we are inefficient listeners. Studies have shown that immediately after listening to a 10- minute oral presentation, the average listener has heard, understood and retained 50 percent of what was said.

Within 48 hours, that drops off another 50 percent to a final level of **25 percent efficiency**.

In other words, we often comprehend and retain only one fourth of what we hear. We all want to be more than 25 percent efficient. It's not difficult to see the many problems inefficient listeners can create for themselves and others. Poor listening causes us many personal and professional problems.

Listening skill suffers with age

Other studies indicate that our listening skill suffers as we get older. Ralph G. Nichols, long-time professor of rhetoric at the University of Minnesota (now retired), says in his book *Are You Listening?* that "if we define the good listener as one giving full attention to the speaker, first-grade children are the best listeners of all."

Nichols describes an experiment conducted with the cooperation of Minneapolis teachers from first grade through high school. Each teacher involved was asked to interrupt classes and suddenly ask pupils "what were you thinking about?" or "what was I talking about?"

Results were discouraging but informative. The answers of first and second graders showed that more than 90 percent were listening. Percentages dropped in higher grades. In junior high school classes, only 44 percent of the students were listening. In high school classes, the average dropped to 28 percent.

Listening is hard work

Another likely reason for inefficient listening is that it's hard work to listen intently. Have you been forced to listen intently for an extended period of time? Try to remember your feelings. You were probably physically and mentally tired after such a period of concentration.

Ten worst listening habits

Nichols has described in speeches and articles the "10 worst listening habits of American people." He says that listening training is primarily eliminating bad habits and replacing them with good listening habits and skills.

Here are the 10 bad listening habits. You'll recognize some that you have and that you can make an effort to correct.

1. Call the subject matter uninteresting

You go to a meeting, the chairman announces the topic or you see it on a program, and say to yourself, "Gee, how dull can it get anyhow? You'd think they could get a decent speaker on a decent subject."

So you've convinced yourself the topic is uninteresting and you turn to the many other thoughts and concerns you've stored up in your mind for just such an occasion — you start using that unoccupied 75 percent of your mental capacity.

A good listener, on the other hand, might start at the same point but arrives at a different conclusion. The good listener says, "Gee, that sounds like a dull subject and I don't see how it could help me in my work. But I'm here, so I guess I'll pay attention and see what the speaker has to say. Maybe there will be something I can use."

2. Criticize the delivery or appearance of the speaker

Many of us do this on a regular basis. We tend to mentally criticize the speaker for not speaking distinctly, for talking too softly, for reading, for not looking the audience in the eye. We often do the same thing with the speaker's appearance. If speakers aren't dressed as we think they should be, we probably tend not to listen closely or we may immediately classify the speaker as a liberal or conservative, a hippie or a square.

But if we concentrate on what the speaker is saying, we may begin to get the message and we may even get interested. Remember, the message is more important than the form in which it is delivered.

3. Become too stimulated

We may hear a speaker say something with which we disagree. Then we can get so concerned that our train of thought causes us to spend more time developing counter arguments so that we no longer listen to the speaker's additional comments. We are busy formulating questions in our mind to ask the speaker, or we may be thinking of arguments that can be used to rebut the speaker. In cases like this, our listening efficiency drops to nearly zero because of over-stimulation. So, hear the speaker out before you judge him or her.

4. Listen only for facts

Too many of us listen for facts and, while we may recall some isolated facts, we miss the primary thrust or idea the speaker is trying to make. Be sure that your concern for facts doesn't prevent you from hearing the speaker's primary points.

5. Try to outline everything that is being said

Many speakers are so unorganized that their comments really can't be outlined in any logical manner. It's better to listen, in such a case, for the main point. A good listener has many systems of taking notes and selects the best one to fit a speaker.

6. Fake attention

This is probably one of the more common bad listening habits. If you're speaking to a group and suddenly you become aware that most of your audience is sitting with chin in hand staring at you, that is a good signal that attention is being faked. Their eyes are on you but their minds are miles away. We probably have developed our own faking skills to a high point. Let's recognize what we're doing and eliminate faking as a poor listening habit.

7. Tolerate or create distractions

People who whisper in an audience of listeners fall into this category. Some distractions can be corrected (closing a door, turning a radio off) to improve the listening atmosphere.

8. Evade the difficult

We tend to listen to things that are easy to comprehend and avoid things that are more difficult. The principle of least effort will operate in listening if we allow it to do so.

9. Submit to emotional words

We're all aware of the emotional impact of some words. Democrat and Republican are emotional words for some people. So are northern and southern for others. There are hundreds of examples. Don't let emotional words get in the way of hearing what a speaker is really saying.

10. Waste thought power

Nichols' 10th bad listening habit is the one he feels is most important. It is wasting the differential between thought speed and the speed at which most people speak.

Three ways to improve listening skill

Nichols says there are three things that you can do to help yourself stop wasting thought power and become a better listener.

One is to **anticipate the speaker's next point**

If you anticipate correctly, learning has been reinforced. If you anticipate incorrectly, you wonder why and this too helps to increase attention.

Another is to **identify the supporting elements** a speaker uses in building points. By and large, we use only three ways to build points: We explain the point, we get emotional and harangue the point, or we illustrate the point with a factual illustration. A sophisticated listener knows this. He or she spends a little of the differential between thought speed and speaking speed to identify what is being used as point-supporting material. This becomes highly profitable in terms of listening efficiency.

A third way to improve yourself as a listener is to periodically **make mental summaries** as you listen. A good listener takes advantage of short pauses to summarize mentally what has been said. These periodic summaries reinforce learning tremendously.

In summary, most of us are poor listeners for a variety of reasons. We have had little training and few training opportunities exist. We think faster than others speak. Listening is hard work.

We've listed some ways to **improve skills**

to concentrate, to summarize, to avoid faking, and others. Just as important are your attitudes — be positive, concerned, sincere.

It's a challenge to be a good listener. But good listeners get big rewards.

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