Listening Skills

Nobody works alone. You will spend a major portion of your workday communicating with others. While this may seem a frustrating distraction from "work," you will get optimal results through working with others as effectively as possible. Approximately half of communication time is spent listening to others. Here are some of the ways you can benefit from listening well:

- Listening might solve the problem for the other person. Giving someone a chance to talk through problems can sometimes clarify their thinking or provide them necessary emotional release.
- Listening helps solve problems and resolve disagreements. When people listen to each other and understand each other's points of view, they are able to resolve their disagreements and reach compromises much more quickly.
- Listening leads to better work and cooperation from others. When people feel you are really interested in them and their problems, their thoughts, and their opinions, they respect not only you but also the organization you represent.
- Listening helps you make better decisions. Through listening, you can draw upon the experience of the people who work with you, and get information you would not otherwise have.
- Listening can help individuals do a better job. By asking questions and listening to people you work with or for, you get suggestions as to how you can do a better job.
- Listening can prevent trouble. When you open a conversation before listening to the other person in the discussion, you risk compromising yourself, making decisions which you later wish you could withdraw, stating criticism you later regret, or committing yourself to actions you can't or won't carry out.
- Listening provides time to think. The average speaking rate is about 125 words per minute (speech speed) and a person's capacity to listen is about 400-600 words a minute (thinking speed). Thus, while you are listening, about 75 percent of your time is free. You can use this extra time to improve your understanding of what is being said, to think up answers, and to make decisions. You can ask questions deliberately to gain time to think.

Many people do not pay careful attention when someone is speaking to them; they miss the benefits of effective listening. In order to listen better, you must focus on what is being said, rather than allowing yourself to be distracted by your environment, or allowing your mind to wander. If you catch yourself wandering, you can refocus quickly and, if necessary, ask the speaker a question that will give him the opportunity to repeat what he just said.

You should also repeat in your mind what is being said, in your own words, and think about it. Select the important from the unimportant. Train yourself to seek the main idea. You can learn to listen effectively by separating the main point from the material that supports it.
Another way to improve your listening skills is to remove listening "blocks" caused by your feelings about the speaker or the subject matter. Something as simple as having a bad day can affect your ability to listen to someone, even though the subject might be very important. While you can't change how you feel on a given day, you can learn to recognize your feelings and consider the feelings of others. You can also isolate any prejudices you might have which distort your thinking. To do this, you must become as objective as possible when listening.

Removing listening blocks caused by feelings is not always easy. Successful communicators take their time when speaking (for example, not answering immediately, especially if angry), recognize their feelings about the speaker, and concentrate on the meaning of what is said. If the speaker is agitated or angry, you must find a way to calm equally emotional responses so that you can listen effectively. You might let the speaker know that you understand how he is feeling, for example, or might temporarily distract the speaker with some other topic that you know will calm him down.

Pay attention to your body language; it speaks as loudly as words.

Here are some poor listening habits, and some ways to overcome them:

1. Thinking the subject is uninteresting

How to overcome - ask yourself "what can I use here?" and find an area of interest. This helps you listen to what is being said, not who is saying it.

2. Thinking about the speaker's delivery

How to overcome - a good listener evaluates content, not delivery. Withhold your judgments until the speaker is finished.

3. Getting overly emotional

How to overcome - a good listener doesn't become overwrought or take another person's emotional outburst personally. Remember that giving someone a chance to talk through problems can sometimes clarify their thinking or provide them necessary emotional release, so give them a chance to finish, and try to comprehend completely. Check your instinct to seal your ears when you get angry or hear something with which you disagree. If you don't understand, assure the speaker that you would sincerely like to, and that you need their help to do so. You might paraphrase, in less emotionally charged language, your understanding of what they said, and ask for clarification where needed. If you are unable to think and speak calmly, it's probably best to postpone the discussion. Tell the speaker that they and their concern are important to you so you would like to postpone discussion to a time when you can devote your full attention to it.
4. Listening only for facts (causes you to miss the main idea)

How to overcome - Speakers usually convey ideas and support them with facts. If you, as a listener, concentrate on these main ideas; you'll be amazed at how well you remember the supporting facts. Keep searching for and screening out worthwhile ideas you can use, even if the subject at first seems dull or the speaker has an unpleasant personality. To be a good listener, keep your mind alert and develop your listening ability by asking yourself questions such as, "Is the speaker saying something new I should know about?" or "Will this idea work?"

5. Attempting to outline (reorganizing using your same, preferred format) everything that is said

How to overcome - a good listener is flexible in note-taking and outlining. Adapt it to the way the speaker organizes the speech, so that it makes sense to you. Note that all speakers do not use the same method of organization.

6. Pretending to listen

How to overcome - Try to participate in the conversation by adding comments and experiences to support points or clarify ideas. At conferences or meetings, ask for more information and offer suggestions. Maintain good eye contact with the speaker. Not only is this polite, but it also improves your attention span and increases the amount you learn. Even maintaining good posture and an attentive facial expression help you and the speaker do your jobs of listening and speaking better.

7. Tolerating or creating distractions

How to overcome - Don't let your mind wander. When distractions occur, consciously block them out. If you are listening to a presentation, do not perform mundane tasks such as cleaning your nails, thumbing through notes, reading other material, or tapping your feet. If you're alone with the speaker, move closer, and interrupt only to clarify a point.

8. Avoiding difficult, expository, or technical material

How to overcome - a good listener seeks to understand difficult, thought-provoking material. Exercise your mind by listening to informative as well as entertaining programs. When a speaker attempts to avoid difficult material, take the opportunity to be helpful by asking tactful, relevant, stimulating questions.
9. Interrupting the speaker

How to overcome - a good listener is courteous and attentive, and allows a speaker to finish speaking before speaking himself. You know how frustrating it can be to make a point to someone if they keep interrupting with their own point, so put yourself in the speaker's shoes. Listen to what the speaker is saying until he or she is done - the end is often a critical part of a speech.

10. Formulating your response before the speaker is finished

How to overcome - a good listener listens through to the end. Your response which was formulated in the early part of the speaker's talk might be answered later in the talk, but you'll probably miss the answer if you are listening to your own thoughts. Even if you do hear the answer, you will have missed everything else the speaker said until then. If you are afraid that you will forget a point you want to make, quickly jot down a note to yourself, then go back to listening to the speaker.