

“Talk wasted if Message falls on deaf ears”



When you give an employee a task to do, it's easy to come away thinking that (s)he has heard and completely understood your instructions. But how well were **you** actually listening? Are you aware of all the things that can prevent you from completely hearing someone's message?

It is said that organisations waste several £m a year due to mistakes caused by ineffective listening. Also, we can spend up to 90% of our time at work listening to others ask questions, give instructions, discuss problems, and outline goals. Being able to listen effectively enables you to gain new and valuable information, which can help you make more effective decisions, complete tasks efficiently, and solve problems. You become a more valuable asset to your organisation, your interpersonal skills are improved, and you are more efficient. You gain the appreciation of your staff and the recognition of your superiors.

The difference between hearing and listening is that hearing is a physical ability while listening is a cognitive action, a conscious act of collecting information and effectively interpreting it. Listening is not a passive activity. It is a process. There are three steps in the listening process:

- 1 **Interpreting the Message:** First, you should be aware of the stumbling blocks to good listening. Emotions play a large part in preventing a speaker's message from getting through to you. Anger, frustration, grief, and hostility can cause you to miss important points of a message. When you are in a highly emotional state, you tend to expect a specific message, or you will filter out information that conflicts with what you want to hear. So you must bring an open mind to the speaker and the message and if the speaker is naturally defensive, (s)he is more likely to let some part of your message go by unnoticed, in an attempt to give the immediate impression of understanding.

Your background, experiences, attitudes, self-concepts, and moods can effect how you listen and interpret a message. You must be willing to listen to other viewpoints.

Pay attention, when listening to the speaker's words. The words chosen can help you understand the speaker's intent. Also, pay attention to the tone of voice. There are 3 types of listening:

- *Comprehensive*: is used to understand the message. You must be open-minded and flexible, so that (s)he can learn from you and use the information effectively. So this involves focusing on the speaker's main points and ideas.
- *Evaluative*: involves identifying flaws in a message. You must take time to evaluate the message and determine if it contains inconsistencies that could later cause problems in achieving goals or carrying out tasks assigned. If you are unsure if the speaker has been listening, ask for your instructions to be paraphrased.
- *Empathetic*: involves, for example, providing emotional support for a speaker. This helps build relationships. This means simply showing interest in the speaker's ideas and concerns. Remain positive in order to maintain open communication.

- 2 **Evaluating the Message**: To evaluate a speaker's message, you need to listen critically and this combines comprehensive, evaluative, and empathetic skills to determine what is fact and what is opinion, and whether you agree or disagree with the message or points in it.

In order to become a critical listener, you must learn to:

- *Recognise the speaker's intention*: If you are uncertain about the speaker's intentions, ask for clarification. Ask yourself if the message is relevant to the situation and is it accurate?

- *Question the speaker's credibility:* This doesn't mean personal criticism or necessarily casting doubt on his/her intentions. It simply means recognising when the speaker is ignoring specific problem areas, uses technical terms to avoid certain issues, or speaks without confidence.
- *Identify the speaker's emotional appeal:* Ask yourself what is the speaker's motivation? Are you being manipulated? Are promises being made that cannot be kept? You must understand what is expected of you. These questions can help you see beyond the speaker's appeal to your emotions.
- *Analyse the speaker's evidence.* Finally, analyse the speaker's evidence to see if the evidence supports the speaker's conclusions? Are the sources reliable? Is the evidence truthful and factual?

3 **Providing Feedback:** The effective listener provides feedback to the speaker in three ways: verbally, through body language, and by way of silence. Offering feedback keeps communication open, enhances the relationship, and demonstrates courtesy.

There are four standards to keep in mind when giving feedback:

- *Be Helpful:* try to give only feedback that is relevant to the subject or the speaker's concerns.
- *Be Specific:* focus on only one aspect of the speaker's message at a time.
- *Be Timely:* offer your feedback as soon as possible. If you wait too long, the speaker will be forced to mentally backtrack, and your feedback will only throw him/her off his/her train of thought.
- *Be Balanced:* look for the positive and negative aspects of the message.

Always ask questions to stimulate and guide the discussion, and to draw the speaker out if necessary. Ask "open-ended" questions when you want to gain detailed information. Ask "probing" questions to get more adequate answers to your questions. Ask "confirmation" questions in order to verify what a speaker has said. And ask "closed-ended" questions when you only want brief, concise responses.

Use body language to show enthusiasm and interest in what is being said. Make eye contact, nod to show you understand, display receptiveness by sitting slightly forward in your chair, and stay relaxed. Do not sit with your arms folded in front of your chest, as if expecting a frontal attack, and try not to sit turned slightly away from the speaker, as if getting ready to bolt from the room. Try it.