EFFECTIVE LISTENING

By Gaurav Misra

"We were given two ears but only one mouth, because listening is twice as hard as talking."

There is a real distinction between merely ***hearing the words*** and really ***listening for the message***. When we listen effectively we understand what the person is thinking and/or feeling from the other person's own perspective. It is as if we were standing in the other person's shoes, seeing through his/her eyes and listening through the person's ears. Our own viewpoint may be different and we may not necessarily agree with the person, but as we listen, we understand from the other's perspective. To listen effectively, we must be actively involved in the communication process, and not just listening passively.

In **Passive Listening** we are genuinely interested in hearing and passively listen. We assume that we heard and understand correctly but stay passive and do not verify it. *Passive listening* is not much different from hearing. For instance, many of us have found ourselves in situations where our minds would drift, we would lose our motivation in listening, and consider the information we hear as "a background noise" or pretend that we're listening just "to be polite." We *think* that we *are* listening, but in fact we are simply letting this information go past our brain.

Active Listening is the single most useful and important listening skill. In active listening we are also genuinely interested in understanding what the other person is thinking, feeling, wanting or what the message means, and we are active in checking out our understanding before we respond with our own new message. We restate or paraphrase our understanding of their message and reflect it back to the sender for verification. This verification or feedback process is what distinguishes active listening and makes it effective. *Active listening* implies listening *with a purpose.* We might listen to *gain information* from the speaker, not just to "fill in the awkward silence." When listening actively, we obtain directions, pay attention to details, solve problems, get to know people, share interests, feelings, emotions, etc. In active listening we *engage* ourselves into the message that we hear, interact with it, *pay attention* to sounds, expressions, intonation, as well as *take note* of what we do *not* understand.

EXAMPLE: Passive listening is mechanical and effortless. It does not require any special effort. You hear what your teacher says and you might be able to tell the difference between major and minor points of the lecture, but that is about it. Lack of enthusiasm and a "careless" attitude during class characterize a student who is a passive listener. Active listeners, on the other hand, really concentrate on the content of the lecture and not on the lecturer or any random distractions in the room or their mind. They do more than focus on facts, figures, and ideas and actively associate the material presented with their own experiences. The content heard at every lecture is converted to something useful and meaningful for the student. You must pay special attention in class because,

unlike when reading a textbook, you only get one chance to hear and understand the information presented to you.

note: *People speak at 100 to 175 words per minute (WPM), but they can listen intelligently at 600 to 800 WPM. Since only a part of our mind is paying attention, it is easy to go into mind drift — thinking about other things while listening to someone. The cure for this is active listening — which involves listening with a* ***purpose.*** *It may be to gain information, obtain directions, understand others, solve problems, share interest, see how another person feels, show support, etc. It requires that the listener attends to the words and the feelings of the sender for understanding.* ***It takes the same amount or more energy than speaking.*** *It requires the receiver to hear the various messages, understand the meaning, and then verify the meaning by offering feedback.*

Here are ***a few traits of active listeners****:*

- Spend more time listening than talking.
- Do not finish the sentences of others.
- Do not answer questions with questions.
- Are aware of biases. We all have them. We need to control them.
- Never daydreams or become preoccupied with their own thoughts when others talk.
- Let the other speakers talk. Do not dominate the conversations.
- Plan responses after the others have finished speaking, NOT while they are speaking.
- Provide feedback, but do not interrupt incessantly.
  - Analyze by looking at all the relevant factors and asking open-ended questions. Walk others through by summarizing.
- Keep conversations on what others say, NOT on what interests them.
- Take brief notes. This forces them to concentrate on what is being said.

Active Listening Steps

1. Make eye contact/Follow speaker – Look the speaker in the eyes. When the speaker is addressing a large group (e.g., during a lecture or presentation), eye contact will not be possible. In this case, follow the speaker's movements.

2. Summarize what the speaker is saying – Summarize every few sentences by stating the main ideas. Take notes, if this is helpful.

3. Make connections – Link what you are hearing to what you already know.

4. Ask and answer questions – Check your understanding of what you're hearing by asking questions about what you are hearing. If you can answer the questions, you understand the material. If you can't answer the questions, you need to ask the speaker for help.

5. Exhibit Affirmative Nods and Appropriate Facial Expressions. The effective listener shows interest in what's being said. How? Through nonverbal signals. Affirmative nods and appropriate facial expressions that signal interest in what's being said, when added to eye contact, convey to the speaker that you're really listening.

6. Avoid Distracting Actions or Gestures. The other side of showing interest avoiding actions that suggest that your mind is somewhere else. When listening don't look at your watch, shuffle papers, play with your pencil, or engage in similar distractions. They make the speaker feel that you're bored or uninterested. Further more, they indicate that you aren't fully attentive and might be missing part of the message that the speaker wants to convey.

7. Paraphrase. Paraphrasing means restating in your own words what the speaker has said. The effective listener uses phrases as "What I hear you saying is ..." or "Do you mean . . . ?" Why rephrase what's already been said? There are two reasons. First, it's an excellent control device to check on whether you're listening carefully. You can't paraphrase accurately if your mind is wandering or if you're thinking about what you're going to say next. Second, it's a control for accuracy. By rephrasing in your own words what the speaker has said and feeding it back to the speaker, you verify the accuracy of your understanding.

8. Avoid Interrupting the Speaker. Let the speaker complete his or her thoughts before you try to respond. Don't try to second-guess where the speaker's thoughts are going. When the speaker is finished, you'll know it.

9. Don't Overtalk. Most of us would rather speak our own ideas than listen to what someone else says. Too many of us listen only because it's the price we have to pay to get people to let us talk. While talking might be more fun and silence might be uncomfortable, you can't talk and listen at the same time. The good listener recognizes this fact and doesn't overtalk.

10. Make Smooth Transitions Between the Roles of Speaker and Listener. As a student sitting in a classroom, you probably find it relatively easy to get into an effective listening frame of mind. Why? Because communication is essentially one-way; the instructor talks and you listen. But in most work situations, you're continually shifting back and forth between the roles of speaker and listener. The effective listener makes transitions smoothly from speaker to listener and back to speaker. From a listening perspective, this means concentrating on what a speaker has to say and practicing not thinking about what you're going to say as soon as you get a chance.

Be a Good Listener !

i. Listen while keeping the eye contact - This shows that you’re interested in listening to what is being said.

ii. Be slow to speak - At times, people speak to take out their frustration. Actually they want a shoulder to count on and a keen ear to listen to them. Listen first and whenever speaking, speak slowly so that the person gets time to solve things at his end.

iii. Be attentive - Learn to listen keenly and let the speaker know that you're actually listening to him. You can speak phrases, like yeah, hmmm, I know, that's true, okay, etc, in between, so as to show your interest.

iv. Show gratitude - Allow the speaker to discern that you feel pleased that he/she opened up with you. If nothing personal was whispered, then let the speaker know that you enjoyed listening to him/her and you actually learnt a lot.

v. Stay in tune - While the conversation is still going on, don't disappear in between just because your mind drifted. Any type of fidgeting and fiddling show that you're not interested in listening. If you're finding it difficult to concentrate, start repeating what is being said to you by the speaker.