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Techniques and Strategies to Develop Active Listening Skills: The Armour for Effective Communication across Business Organizations

Abstract

The power and impact of listening is a key aspect of good communication which has been underrated and overlooked by professionals across organizations. Active listening is a soft skill which has received little or no importance in communication cycle. It is as crucial for healthy communication as critical thinking and problem-solving ability. Good listening skill is held in high regard in most organizations and is closely observed and targeted by interviewers as a technique to gauge your interpersonal skills. It speaks volumes about your ability to lead and work in a team and your skills at problem solving with consultation and mutual consensus. To climb the ladder of success in a workplace, active listening plays a vital role because it reflects your ability to build trust, establish a rapport and demonstrates your concern about your team members. Mindful listening indicates your professionalism, transparency and emotional intelligence to deal with diverse views and constructive criticism. When each member gets a patient hearing and is assured that his / her view point matters and is heard, a leader or a manager is able to draw consensus and create an amicable workplace environment. Good listening is indicative of your respect for the speaker and by being “fully present” you take the first step in building a relationship of trust and commitment. Unlike passive listening which is just a little more than hearing, active listening is a two-way communication technique that demands empathy, attention, practice and a lot of conscious effort. The present paper aims to deal with strategies to hone effective listening skills and use them as tools to enhance communication.

Keywords: effective, listening, active, needful, silence, attention, communicative, competence

Introduction



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It has been rightly said that the right to speak comes with the duty to listen. Listening is the most powerful communication tool and the effectiveness of your relationships – personal or professional, is determined by your ability to listen with patience and intent. Positive psychology researchers have emphasized the impact of pleasant interactions on personal well-being and listening -specially active listening.

Listening is not about agreeing or disagreeing, defending or arguing; it is about an art that requires placing attention over talent and giving more importance to 'others' over 'self' .So the intention to listen to others should not be only aimed at formulating a reply to what you are listening to but simply to understand and respect another's point of view. It is natural human desire to be heard, understood, appreciated and stay connected with others. To fulfill this what is needed is not only 'talking to' but also 'listening to' others. Cheung Y.K. states in *The Importance of Teaching Listening in the EFL classroom* that Listening is the conscious processing of auditory stimuli that have been perceived through hearing. (23)

However, listening is not the same as hearing. Hearing may be an accidental, involuntary and effortless process but listening requires a focus and an intent. Hearing is the automatic response of the brain to a sound that requires no effort and at times our mind gets trained to filter and ignore the sounds that we may choose to ignore. Listening, on the other hand requires talent, effort and motivation and cannot be taken granted. Hearing is the physiological process of reacting to sound in one's environment and listening is a focused approach to understand the message being sent by a source. The ability to accurately receive and interpret messages in communication process is the key to effective communication and this relies on your ability to listen effectively. Any breakdown in listening skills leads to misunderstanding between the sender and receiver leading to frustration and irritation.



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Listening enhances the quality of communication and helps to solve problems and resolve conflicts. Good listening shows optimistic attitude and twin participation. Listening may serve a specific purpose – appreciative listening i.e. listening with the aim to enjoy, selective listening i.e. listening to selected information and ignoring the rest; fake listening i.e. pretending that you are listening, casual listening i.e. listening without actually paying attention, patronizing listening i.e. listening with an attitude that you are better than the speaker. In the present paper my focus is on active listening i.e. listening which demonstrates interest and encourages the speaker, where feedback is provided and question are asked.

The Role of Awareness, Reception and Perception in the art of listening well : -

The cycle of effective listening often revolves around the three major components of awareness, reception and perception. Each is vital and incomplete without the other. Awareness implies attentiveness on the part of the listener if he / she intends to maximize the benefits of listening. Being attentive does not limit itself to hearing to what the speaker is saying but to listen with the intention of looking for new ideas. The aim should be directed at reaping benefits of the conversation / speech for both the speaker and the listener. The listener must pay heed to what is being said in order to dig a common area of interest that would be mutually beneficial to both. Equally important in the cycle is reception. Reception implies listening with aim to sift out the main ideas of the speaker. This can be done by paying proper attention and concentration not only to the words being spoken but also to the non verbal cues i.e. meta-language. The tone, voice, sound, gestures, posture, facial expressions, pauses – all convey a meaning and add to the communication that the sender encodes. Effective decoding, with a proper analysis and interpretation ensures proper communication. Thus, listening to what is being said and what is being implied by behavior is crucial to avoid miscommunication. Lastly, we come to perception. Perception completes the art of listening effectively. Perception means the act of proper



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interpretation of what you hear such that it facilitates understanding. Thus it can be safely conducted that listening is an active and not a passive activity.

Understanding the nuances of active listening

Joanne Bond, Executive leadership coach has enumerated techniques to hone the skills of active listening. The first step involves engagement with 'self' i.e. 'self-listening' which enables you to be empathetic towards the 'other'. Ensure there are no filters attached and the person speaking, be it your 'other self' gets an unbiased, unfiltered outpour of what he / she has to communicate. Filters tend to pave the way for miscommunication and the real message is missed in the process. So, remain open to what is said rather than to what you want to hear. Another point stressed by Bond is that active learning is a deliberate and well thought out process that involves training your attention to stay focused, stay with the dialogues and listen deliberately. It calls for a lot of patience to focus and not engage in any other activity. Active listening, according to Bond, is open and empathic. Openness implies remaining open to diverse opinions and stay with the communication and suspend any form of judgment allowing the mind to explore all possibilities and keeping curiosity alive. Empathic listening involves trying to understand what are the experiences, context and emotions that accompany the message being sent forth by the speaker. In short, it explores the 'why' behind the speaker's message. Bond goes on to conclude that active listening enables accuracy and validation and confirms that what you have heard and understood bears authenticity. Recapping, as mentioned earlier, is a tool to reinstate understanding. Adopting these strategies, entrepreneurs can develop a healthy bond with their customers and clients and goes on to build lasting relationships when people feel understood, heard and validated and changes a bumpy ride to a smooth sail.

Techniques to inculcate Active listening habits:



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Edgar Dales cone of experience clearly illustrates that you only remember 25 to 50 percent of what you hear. Whether you listen to obtain information, or to understand, for enjoyment or for learning – if you wish to improve your listening skills, it is good to practice the art of active listening. Active listening involves a conscious trained effort to hear what the other person is saying and trying to read a meaning in the communication. To develop the art of active listening it is important to ward off any and every form of distraction and noise-physical or psychological. Equally important is not to be tempted or swayed into forming counter arguments when the other person is still speaking. The aim of the listener should be to get to the core of the message through attentiveness and without letting boredom seep in. It is a good exercise to keep repeating the key takeaways. This practice helps to reinforce what you hear and avoids filtration of information. It is also important to let the other person know that he / she is not speaking to a brick wall and the message that the sender is trying to communicate is getting across well to the listener and both the sender and receiver are at the same wavelength in the chain of communication. It gives the speaker a confidence to carry on without the fear that he / she may not be understood. A simple nod or acknowledgement through a non-verbal cue sends an indication to the speaker that he / she is being listened to and being heard. This encourages the speaker, even though you may not agree with what he/ she is saying.

To be a mindful and active listener you may practice the following strategies:

Undivided attention: If you really wish to register the gist of the communication that is being conveyed to you, it is of utmost importance to pay keen attention to what the speaker is saying. In a face to face conversation this can be enhanced by having a direct eye contact with the speaker, thereby sending all signals of acknowledgement of all non verbal communication by the speaker. As you engage in mindful listening, keep distracting thoughts at bay and do not try to



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utilize the time to mentally frame a rebuttal – it's okay to listen at times without having to respond to what you hear. Do not let the environmental noises, side conversations, sound of fans, background noise play a spoiler. Keep your attention focused. Talking of body language, it is equally important on both sides – for the speaker and the listener to encode and decode meta communication effectively and to one's advantage. Smiling, nodding and monosyllabic comments like 'yes' uh, 'huh' along with other facial expressions and gestures sends signals of engagement on both sides. Yavuz, F. & Celik, O. in *The Importance of Listening in Communication* claim that social relationships (based on speaking and listening to people who matter) are one of the ten keys of happiness enhancing activities because they foster a sense of belongingness(122).So ,do not compromise when it comes to lending a ear to the listener because *listening is a magnetic and a creative force.*

Feedback Oriented Listening: A good listener must ensure that there is minimum gap between the message encoding by the sender and decoding by the receiver. This cycle can be successfully completed with feedback on the part of the receiver. A lot of factors can play a role in filtering the information we hear or listen to. Unclear assumptions, premature judgments and prejudice and beliefs can greatly distort what we hear. A good listener must cultivate the art to listen for the sake of listening, not judging. A good technique that can help in this is to paraphrase and repeat, mentally or verbally, as the situation allows, whatever the speaker is saying. At points where clarity is needed do not hesitate to ask questions instead of jumping to conclusions. Using phrases like “what do you mean when you say...?” or “Is that what you mean....” or “could you please explain ..” or “sounds like “you are saying....” Or “Am I right in assuming ...”,helps the listener to reaffirm what is being said and avoids unnecessary miscommunication. It is also a good idea to summarize the speaker's comments periodically. Incase the listener feels that he / she is getting emotionally swayed or getting biased in listening, it is advisable to ask for more information to bridge the gap between what is understood and what is intended. Mindful



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listening, it has been rightly said, is an attempt to demonstrate unconditional acceptance and unbiased reflection. So let your listening be motivated with the aim of eliciting a feedback.

Avoid jumping to conclusions: Patience is the key to good, effective, mindful and attentive listening. The terms may sound impressive but are equally difficult to implement and practice in everyday listening. Listening skills require sustained efforts, but they are worth the exercise. A good listener tends to give the speaker a fair and patient hearing and avoids frequent interruptions in speech. Too many questions / interruptions break the flow of thoughts of the speaker and this in turn may frustrate and irritate him / her.

Wisdom demands that the listener allow the speaker to finish each point before shooting a volley of questions. Unnecessary interruptions at times just to indicate that you are engaged in listening are not taken well by the speaker. It, in turn, prevents complete comprehension of the message being communicated. If at all the act of listening demands counter arguments, it is suggested that you wait for the speaker to put forth his / her argument before presenting the counter views. It is also not wise to pass judgment instantaneously without allowing breathing space to the speaker to settle down. The judgment you pass, should be supported by logical arguments and justification.

Appropriate response mechanisms: -If social relationships are vital for a happy and fulfilling life and a vital element of social interaction is good conversation then we are lost without the skills of active listening, opined Tavitil, Z.M. in *Integrating Listening and Speaking Skills to facilitate English Language Learners' Communicative Competence* (46).

In any and every relationship, be it personal or professional, mutual respect is the edifice that ensures a lasting and long-term relationship. The foremost aspect of active listening is to



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encourage respect and understanding amongst the sender and the receiver. The aim of a good listener should be to gather information and perspective on the issue that the speaker is addressing. Rebuttal or attacking the speaker with verbal hyperboles for the mere sake of responding puts the listener in a sorry position and does not speak highly of him / her as a listener. It is good to be candid, open and honest while responding. It is perfectly desirable to assert your opinions respectfully and not engage in a verbal duel with the speaker no matter how deep the disagreement is.

Responding appropriately and with dignity is not something that you may be born with but it is definitely an art that can be learnt. It requires cultivated practice and focus because you get trained to hear what is really said and develop the expertise to respond with appropriate gestures and words.

Misconceptions associated with listening

Richards, J.C. in *The Language Teaching Matrix* explicitly state that Being mindful means being present in the moment and paying attention to what is happening right now(119).

Listening is a skill that calls for conscious effort and sustained practice. However, there are some common misconceptions associated with the process of listening which tends to make it less effective. The first myth is the self-declaration that you are a good listener. People tend to overestimate their ability to listen well in contrast to others. However, the best way to gauge your competence as a skilled listener is to determine your understanding and comprehension of what you have heard. The output varies from situation to situation, person to person. Simply believing that you are an attentive listener does not make you one because it is a two-way process where winning the satisfaction and trust of the speaker is equally important.



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The second myth associated with listening is that only intelligent people make good listeners. Studies have proven beyond doubt that there is no link between cognitive ability, intelligence and your ability to listen well. It may briefly aid understanding and comprehension, but it is no way a benchmark that people with higher IQ are better listeners. On the contrary, they tend to “tune out” sooner - research has also proved that people with higher emotional quotient are more likely to be better listeners because they tend to be more patient and empathetic.

The third misconception is that listening is not a skill that can be learnt. It is amply evident that listening is not a skill you are born with nor is it something that cannot be acquired. We are trained to listen since we step into the classrooms and as we move on in life we learn to apply our listening skills according to the circumstances we are in. Infact, employers rate this skill very high particularly in management and leadership roles -so it is worth the effort to spend time honing this skill.

A fourth misconception associated with listening is that gender affects our listening ability. It is a stereotypical observation that women place greater value on connection, cooperation and emotional handling of matters whereas men are more factual and rational. The above assumption impacts their ability to listen with these filters on. On the contrary gender plays no role in communication and it is personality driven and the way in messages are interpreted bears no relation to gender. In an interpersonal context active listening aims to minimize the effect of our biases and to practice mindful patience whilst bypassing our own agenda, stated Michel. H. Hoppe in *Active listening: Improve your ability to listen to lead*(89).

The fifth myth that usually plagues effective listening skills is that listening becomes better with age. There is enough research to prove the contrary. Age is no determinant of good listening ability. It is something that comes with sustained and conscious efforts. Experience and



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maturity may play a role but only to a very limited extent. If a person is tuned to be a bad listener- irritant, interfering, short tempered and restless, he / she is likely to carry on that bad habit for a lifetime and age will have little role in the matter.

So, listening effectively is quite similar to good driving. If you learn it right and apply the learning every time you are behind the wheels, you are surely making your best efforts to be a safe and good driver- the same holds true for mindful listening. The key to better communication lies in understanding the thought process to your conversation partner.

Were you formally trained to listen? The answer most likely is 'no'. We are generally inclined to believe that listening is simply hearing the words and sounds around us listening is actually a complex process, a learned skill which requires both emotional and intellectual effort.

We all want to be liked, even if we do not like to admit it. It makes sense. Human evolved as social beings who needed to connect with others to strategize and survive. Research has found that we mimic others with words and gestures, just to show them that we are just like them(Tavil,222)

Takeaway Message: Julian Treasure rightly claims that in our obsession with 'self', in some subconscious ways we are losing our hearing. This is evident in our day to day interactions. Rarely do we attempt to spend half the time to hear than we do to speak. We are terrible and distracted listeners. She coins an interesting acronym RASA (meaning juice or essence in Sanskrit). Rasa stands for "Receive", "appreciate" "summarize" and "ask" which form the four essential traits of effective mindful listening. What we need to recognize is that listening is a vital and powerful growth tool. Krashen, S. in *Second language acquisition: Second language*



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learning asserts that the more sensitivity we show to listen to people, the more they attempt to listen to themselves more carefully and pay attention to their thoughts and feelings. (107).

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