Listening

Two of the most powerful communication skills are our ability to listen and to ask questions. These are the tools everyone uses overcome miscommunication problems. Surprisingly, we don't do either of them very well.

Good listening skills are crucial to team building. Supervisors should be doing more listening than talking. Remember the saying, "God gave us two ears and one mouth so we can listen twice as much as we talk."

President Franklin D. Roosevelt used to say that people never really listened to what he said. They only kept quiet out of courtesy. Every once in a while he would test his theory and say something like, "So good to see you. I murdered my grandmother this morning." But he got caught out on one occasion when a woman nodded gravely before replying, "Mr. President, I'm sure she had it coming to her."

Listening is not just a trick or a succession of techniques. It is an attitude, a way in which you relate to the world. To be a good listener, you must make listening a part of the way you live.

Most of us take it for granted that we are good listeners, and that listening just comes naturally to us. In fact, listening is as complicated and strenuous as the other forms of communication—reading, writing, and speaking.

One reason listening is important is that we do so much of it each day. It is our most frequently used communication skill.

Effective listening can help you improve your relationship with other important people, such as your manager, your team members, your employees, your friends, and your family.

Guidelines for Effective Listening

- Concentrate
- Maintain eye contact
- Use your time to anticipate, evaluate (not judge), summarize, and listen between the lines.

Active Listening

To improve your listening skills, use the three steps of Active Listening.

Non-Verbal Messages

Eye contact, an alert expression, head nodding, and a forward lean to the body expresses listening.

Cues or Invitations

These are the phrases like "Uh-huh," "Okay," "Yes," and "Go on," that signal our attention and invite an individual to continue talking.

Clarification of what has been said

We can do this in one of several ways: by asking questions, summarizing what has been said, or paraphrasing the message in your own words.

Constructive Listening

To be an effective team member, it is important to be both a willing and a skilled listener. There are some guidelines for constructive listening:

- When someone has something on his/her mind, allow that person to talk it out without responding with sharp answers or judgment calls about the unreasonableness of the statements.
- Restrain any natural impulse to be curious and avoid asking questions that show bias or are not relevant to the discussion.
- If feelings or emotions become the centre of discussion, don't dismiss them lightly or abruptly. Discouraging the expression of emotional issues can inhibit the team's ability to work things out. They need to be allowed to vent their frustrations.
- Violent and deep-seated negative expressions require understanding rather than judgment.
- Although it may be difficult to be silent, you should speak as little as possible when listening.
- Verbal cues that you are listening, such as an alert facial expression and a slight forward movement, all indicate interest.
- Acceptance doesn't require agreement. It isn't necessary to say "I think you are absolutely right." Possibly the only thing worse to say is, "I think you are absolutely wrong."
- Don't give advice on personal matters. There is an old saying, "A wise man does not need advice; a damn fool will not take it." Let the speaker decide what the best approach is. Your role is to listen and, when appropriate, suggest where the person may find additional help.

(Source: Active Listening by Carl R. Rogers and Richard E. Farson)

Paraphrasing

Why:

- Paraphrasing is a fundamental listening skill. It is the foundation for many other facilitative listening skills, including mirroring, gathering, and drawing people out.
- Paraphrasing has both a calming effect and a clarifying effect. It reassures the speaker that his or her ideas are worth listening to. And it provides the speaker with a chance to hear how his/her ideas are being heard by others.
- Paraphrasing is especially useful on occasions when a speaker's statements are convoluted or confusing. At such times, the paraphrase will help the speaker gauge how well his/her ideas are getting across.
- In sum, paraphrasing is the tool of choice for supporting people to think out loud.

How:

- Use your own words to say what you think the speaker said.
- If the speaker's statement is one or two sentences, use roughly the same number of words when you paraphrase it.
- If the speaker's statement is many sentences long, summarize it.
- Preface your paraphrase with a comment like:
  - “It sounds like what you're saying is... “
  - “This is what I'm hearing you say ... “
  - “Let me see if I understand you... “
- When you have completed the paraphrase, look for the speaker's reaction. Say something like, "Did I get it?" Verbally or nonverbally, s/he will indicate whether or not s/he feels understood. If not, keep asking for clarification until you understand what s/he meant.

How the Listener Controls the Speaker

Communication is important to the whole team: supervisors spend about 75% of their time communicating

The two most powerful communication skills available, other than our non-verbal skills, are our ability to listen and to ask questions. These are the tools everyone uses overcome miscommunication problems. Surprisingly we don’t do either of them very well.

Divide the group into pairs. One partner is to think of the best vacation they have ever had and they are to make some notes so they can tell their partner about it.

While the first partner is preparing, ask the other partner to leave the room with you for some instructions. When you have all of them outside the room, explain to them that they are to

listen to what their partner is saying, but they are to indicate non-verbally that they aren't listening, by not looking the speaker in the eye, by fiddling with their pen, doodling, yawning.

Generally, the speaker will begin an energetic and enthusiastic conversation about their vacation. This will shut down fairly quickly, with the conversation drying up.

Once the exercise is complete, thank the speaker and the listener and ask speakers how they felt.

Feedback received usually includes the following:

- The speaker will usually say they found it difficult to carry on when they did not have eye contact, there was no feedback, or negative feedback, and the person appeared bored.
- For this exercise, the listener will quite likely feel uncomfortable too, as the role he/she has been asked to play is so obviously rude.

Many of us, without thinking much about it, display this type of non-verbal behaviour quite often when employees, children, or our spouse is talking to us.