

## **Hone Listening Skills To Boost Your Career**

**By Eugene Raudsepp**

Good listening is crucial to effective communication and career success. Studies show, however, that only about 10% of us listen properly. Most of us don't know how to listen intelligently, systematically and purposefully.

Think about your most recent conversations at work. If you remember what you said better than what you heard, you've probably developed some bad listening habits. Instead of really listening, you let your mind wander while others were talking. You were thinking about what you were going to say before the others had finished.

Faulty listening habits can cause misunderstandings several times a day in a busy office. Indeed, many serious mistakes and organizational mix-ups stem from someone not hearing instructions. Poor listening can cause snafus such as missing important appointments, misunderstanding directions, misinterpreting valuable suggestions or addressing the wrong problems.

There is little doubt that poor listening habits have stymied many managerial careers. According to several estimates, about 45% of a manager's typical day is spent listening. Some managers believe they earn up to 60% of their salaries by listening.

The higher the manager is on the corporate ladder, the more time she spends listening to others. Interestingly, most executive-appraisal studies find that managers who are rated most efficient by subordinates invariably are good listeners.

In job interviews, many candidates fail to impress managers because they listen so poorly. Recruiting managers regard good listening skills as crucial and use feedback to determine how well candidates listen. Answering questions incorrectly, or failing to grasp an interviewer's point, will sound the death knell on job offers.

### **Mastering the Art**

Becoming aware of deficient listening skills, coupled with a conscious effort at overcoming them, will help you to master the art of listening. The

following guidelines are useful in improving listening awareness and efficiency:

- **Increase your listening skills.** Interrupting and finishing a speaker's sentences often damage communication. Deliberately try to inhibit your temptation to interrupt. Make sure the speaker has finished conveying the message before you speak.

By your actions, show the speaker you are genuinely interested and want to listen. If you aren't sure of the whole message, ask the speaker to repeat or clarify it. Constantly evaluate your own understanding of the message.

The most effective way to break the interrupting habit is to apologize every time you interrupt. After a few apologies, you'll think twice before jumping in while a person is speaking.

- **Take time to listen.** The speaker is apt to feel rushed if you indicate your listening time is limited. Many people think aloud and grope toward their meaning. Frequently, initial statements only vaguely approximate what a person means. For the speaker to open up and crystallize the meaning, you must convey that you have time to talk freely.

Don't rationalize that you're too busy to listen. Instead, set aside whatever you're doing. This will reassure the speaker that he doesn't have to talk faster or abbreviate the message. It will also help you to concentrate on what's being said.

- **Give your full attention.** You'll act like a good listener if you're alert, look the speaker in the eye and lean forward. Radiate interest by nodding your head or raising your eyebrows, and offer encouragement with comments and questions such as, "Is that what you had in mind?" and "Check my understanding, but I think you're telling me . . ." followed by a paraphrase of the speaker's remarks.
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- **Adapt your thought speed.** You can think three to four times faster than a person can talk, which is a major reason for poor concentration. Impatient with the speaker's slow progress, your mind wanders off until you hear something that interests you. Then you realize you've missed something, and you don't really understand what the person is

asking. When the temptation to take brief mental excursions becomes irresistible -- this frequently happens while listening to long-winded speakers -- your listening efficiency drops to near zero.

To use your thinking speed to advantage, keep analyzing what the speaker's saying as he talks. Mentally sum up what's been said. Weigh the evidence by considering whether the facts are accurate and the viewpoints are objective, or whether the speaker is only trying to prove a point.

- **Don't overreact to the delivery.** If you become too involved in a person's speech style, you'll lose track of the message. Force yourself to concentrate on the message instead of the speaker's accent or style of speaking, speech impediment or disorganized thought pattern. Ask yourself: "What is he or she saying that I need to know?"
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- **Listen between the lines.** Concentrate not only on what's being said but also on the attitudes, needs and motives behind the words. Remember that the speaker's words may not always contain the entire message. The changing tones and volume of the speaker's voice may have meaning. So may facial expressions, gestures and body movements. Being alert to nonverbal cues increases your total comprehension of the message.

For example, sometimes the message and auditory and behavioral cues differ considerably. Although the speaker says he's excited about an idea or project, his lack of spontaneous movement, wandering or downcast eyes, unanimated tone of voice, masked face or hunched posture may indicate he feels differently.

Relying on words alone is like trying to work a jigsaw puzzle with many pieces missing. You get the general idea but there are gaps you can't fill.

- **Don't become distracted.** Poor listeners are distracted by sounds, objects and people, such as a police siren, a telephone ringing or a person passing in the hallway. Good listeners position themselves to avoid distractions or concentrate harder on what the speaker is saying.