



The Act of Listening

A great deal of the time spent in human relationships is taken up by listening. But do we really listen comprehensively to what others have to say? Here we look at a much-neglected function, and at how we might better perform it. Plus how we can make it easier to listen to ourselves . . .

□ The eminent novelist and philosopher André Gide once opened a lecture by noting: "All this has been said before, but since nobody listened, it must be said again." Nobody listened . . . how often is this the case, and how often must messages be repeated because they were not heeded in the first place. In business, family and other personal relationships, the failure to listen properly is responsible, at the very least, for an enormous waste of time.

Yet scant attention has been paid in the past to the listening side of communication. Academic courses in communications still tend to place the emphasis on how to speak and write effectively rather than on the effective reception and assimilation of ideas. Recently, though, some large North American companies have started courses in listening skills for their employees. This is mainly because it has been authoritatively estimated that the "listening efficiency" of people working in industry is less than 50 per cent, meaning that only about half of the oral messages passed around in the course of a day's work are fully understood.

Big businesses are naturally concerned about communication because it plays such a key role in their operations. Oral communication especially — to a major extent the fuel of the managerial machinery of a company is the spoken word. Surveys have indicated that the senior officers of major North American corporations spend up to 80 per cent of their working time having discussions, either at meetings, in face-to-face

conversations, or over the telephone. Assuming that they listen more than they talk — and good executives usually do — listening to other people accounts for about half of their business day.

The volume of listening to be done on the job diminishes somewhat on the way down the managerial ladder. Still, listening remains an essential function from the executive suite to the shop floor. It is central to getting things done and it strongly influences morale, which in turn affects productivity. Again and again, the same phrases crop up in surveys of the attitudes of employees towards their superiors. A man who is happy with his boss will say: "He listens to me," or "I can talk to him." Those who are unhappy will say the reverse.

A situation arose in a manufacturing plant in the United States a few years ago which clearly illustrated the consequences of bad listening in industry. The plant had a serious quality control problem which took months — and relatively huge amounts of money — to identify and solve. Then a young tradesman, on the brink of resigning, told the personnel manager he had known what was wrong from the beginning. Why hadn't he said something about it? Well, he said, he had approached both his foreman and the plant engineer, "but they wouldn't listen. I stopped trying to tell them when they made me feel like a jerk."

If this story suggests that listening habits in business (and not only big business) could be improved, it also suggests a prerogative to better

listening in society in general. This is nothing more than a willingness to listen — a disposition that is lacking in people more than they would care to admit. In his novel *Daniel Martin*, John Fowles writes of a man who divides his conversation into two categories: “when you speak, and when you listen to yourself speak.” That may sound extreme, but who doesn’t know a person like him? And who, on occasion, has not indulged in a one-sided conversation himself?

It is almost a cliché in marital disputes that the partners “can’t communicate”. It is certainly a cliché among parents that their offspring “won’t listen to sense”. On the other hand, young people complain that their parents don’t take what they have to say seriously. Clearly, the emotional messages people send out to their intimates are not being adequately received.

The mind darts ahead like a runaway race horse

As Samuel Butler observed, “It takes two people to say a thing — a sayer and a sayee. The one is just as essential to any true saying as the other.” We are all “sayees”, but most of us afford little thought to our performance in this vital role in human affairs. We confuse hearing with listening, believing that, because hearing is a natural function, then listening must be effortless. According to the American speech communications expert Dr. Harrel T. Allen, it is anything but: “Listening is hard work and requires increased energy — your heart speeds up, your blood circulates faster, your temperature goes up.”

So listening is a kind of activity. Those who aspire to be good listeners must turn it from an unconscious activity to a conscious one. What makes a good listener? It all begins with concentration. We listen to other people through a thick screen of physical and psychological distractions which can only be penetrated by deliberately applying the power of the mind.

Physical distractions are often easily enough dealt with, although few people bother to do so — shutting a door or window, moving out of hearing range of other people, cutting off telephone calls. The distractions generated within one’s own head are far more difficult to manage. For the act of listening has a built-in dilemma, which is that the speaker cannot keep pace with the workings of the listener’s mind.

The average rate of speech is about 125 words a minute; the average person thinks at a rate nearly four times faster. With all that slack time at their disposal, people on the listening side of a discussion are likely to be carried away by their own thoughts.

It is said that “the mind wanders” while one person hears another talk; actually it darts ahead and off the track like a runaway race horse. This helps to explain why people jump to conclusions. They anticipate what is going to be said instead of following what is being said in the present. In this regard we might do well to remember the admonishment of a rough-and-ready tycoon as he started a meeting: “Now listen slow.”

It takes a concerted effort of will to deal with some of the other impediments to listening that clog the mind, the more so since they spring from perfectly normal human feelings. For example, everyone’s range of interests has its limits, so we all have a tendency to resist ideas that are of no personal interest to us. It is natural to conclude that complex thoughts outside of our own field of experience are beyond our comprehension, so we make no effort to digest them. And no one is immune to boredom; the first couple of sentences uttered by a dull speaker are enough to make us want to “tune out” all the rest that he says.

It is difficult to suppress the emotional responses to another person’s words triggered by our own attitudes and opinions — difficult, but necessary to good listening. Human nature makes us want to hear only what pleases us, and to reject that which does not. We are therefore prone to listen carefully to ideas which accord with our own point of view, and to discount or mentally argue with those we find disagreeable. To listen effectively,

we have to guard against the tendency to exercise emotional censorship — to blank out or skip over ideas which we would rather not hear.

The medium is the personality of the person doing the talking

In Marshall McLuhan's much-quoted opinion, "the medium is the message." This may be so of the electronic and print media, but it is not so in face-to-face conversations in which the medium is the personality of the individual talking at the time. You might not like that type of person; you might object to his or her appearance or mannerisms; but it is what is being said that counts, not who says it. The same applies to positive emotional responses: you might be so favourably impressed by some personalities that you take what they say for granted, and fail to hone in on the meaning of their words.

At the same time, however, you should listen with more than your ears. People give out non-verbal signals as they talk, as lovers know when they look into each other's eyes. The look on a man's face, his stance, his gestures, his pauses and hesitations, may tell you more about his real message than the words he is saying. By visual observation of his "body language" you may learn how he *feels* about what he is saying, not just what he thinks.

Check up on your conclusions and your grasp of the facts

Part of the difference in the speed of speech and thought mentioned above may be employed by the listener in practising such visual observation. Another part of the extra thinking time afforded by the workings of the mind can be used to mentally summarize and analyze what is said. One way to prevent your mind from leaping ahead of the words being spoken is to periodically check up on your conclusions and your grasp of the facts by asking questions. This clarifies misunderstandings and allows you to digest the other person's thoughts one stage at a time.

The full capacity of the mind may also be brought to bear on the task of listening by training it to scan like radar for key ideas. In this way the listener can get straight to the point when it is his or her turn to talk. Some people have a prodigious capacity for details; but most of us are in danger of becoming confused if we try to remember every detail in a long discussion. Our comprehension is better served by identifying the points that make up the theme of the other person's message and then attempting, through questioning, to make our understanding of them clear.

Needless to say, the responsibility for effective discussion does not rest solely with the listener. The disparity between speaking and thinking puts the onus on the speaker to ensure that his thoughts do not get lost in the gap between words and thoughts. Dr. Jesse Nirenberg, a New York psychologist who spent many years studying listening problems, once made the following suggestions for holding a person's attention:

- Always start with the conclusion — never with a question.
- Do not lead up to your main idea slowly; if you do, the listener's mind might have skipped ahead of you by the time you get to the point.
- Translate what you have to say into potential benefits to the listener whenever possible. People will sit up and take notice if they feel there is something in it for them.
- Repeat your point subtly in the course of your delivery, preferably by citing examples that keep the listener from getting bored.
- Avoid pronouns. "What do you think of this?" should be, "what do you think of (something specific?)" Specifics focus attention.
- Get "feedback" on everything pertinent you have said by intermittently questioning your listener. By asking questions, you pose problems to be solved which obliged the listener to think about the meaning of what you have to say.

Techniques such as these will help you to deliver your thoughts effectively, but only if those thoughts are clear. You must first be sure of what you want to say in your own mind. Whenever the circumstances permit — and admittedly they frequently don't — people who intend to do most of the talking in a discussion should systematically marshal their thoughts beforehand. They can be memorized, or, better still, written down as notes to be referred to in the course of the talk.

Question your use of words before you start to speak

"Unless one is a genius, it is best to aim at being intelligible," wrote Anthony Hope, author of *The Prisoner of Zenda*. It should be evident — but apparently it is not — that people should carefully select the words they say. A language can be extremely deceptive; for instance, there are more than 14,000 meanings for the 500 most commonly used words in English. With this in mind, anyone entering into a serious discussion should ask himself: Do I use slang or professional jargon that may not be generally understood? Do I define my terms sufficiently? Is my phrasing free of ambiguity? Do I resort to euphemisms that take the edge off the meaning of what I have to say?

A message should be as clear as the precision of language can make it. It should also be as complete as the facts allow. A basic rule of good communication is never to over-estimate the amount of knowledge or information the person on the receiving end possesses. Specialists in various subjects are usually surprised to discover how little other people know — or care — about their fields.

A fine line exists, however, between completeness and superfluity. Too many details can turn off the listener's mind. While it is good to subtly repeat your points to make them understood, to repeat them too often and too obviously is to drive your listener off into a state of ennui. People tend to talk at greater length than necessary. We might be wise to emulate the thinking of E. M. Forster when he was asked why he had not published a book in the 20 years since he wrote *A Passage to India*. "Well, I hadn't anything more to say," he replied.

Approaching the process with the intention of making it work

In his estimable book *Language in Thought and Action*, S. I. Hayakawa equates the ability to talk with co-operation, and co-operation with human survival. Any effective discussion — provided that it is not blankly hostile on both sides — demands the co-operation of the listener and the speaker to an equal degree. Both should approach the process with the conscious intention to making it work — of doing their best on either side to achieve a mutual understanding. When this approach is taken, a mood of empathy is automatically established, clearing the way for a responsiveness to one another's human needs.

"This business of conversation is a serious matter," wrote Oliver Wendell Holmes. Indeed it is — more serious than most of us think. In a world suffering from a lack of communication between individuals and groups, in nations, organizations and families, people would communicate better if they spared more thought to listening. All it takes, basically, is an awareness that listening is a difficult and demanding function which demands care and effort, both when we listen and when we talk.