**Listening Skills**

**Listening is the ability to accurately receive messages in the communication process.**  Listening is key to all effective communication, without the ability to listen effectively messages are easily misunderstood – communication breaks down and the sender of the message can easily become frustrated or irritated.

Listening is so important that many top employers give regular listening skills training for their employees.  This is not surprising when you consider that **good listening skills can lead to: better customer satisfaction, greater productivity with fewer mistakes, increased sharing of information that in turn can lead to more creative and innovative work.**

Good listening skills also have benefits in our personal lives, including: a greater number of friends and social networks, improved self-esteem and confidence, higher grades in academic work and increased health and wellbeing.  Studies have shown that, whereas speaking raises blood pressure, listening brings it down.

**Listening is not the same as hearing/ Hearing vs Listening .**

  Hearing refers to the sounds that you hear, whereas listening requires more than that: it requires focus.  Listening means paying attention not only to the story, but how it is told, the use of language and voice, and how the other person uses his or her body.  In other words, it means being aware of both verbal and non-verbal messages.  Your ability to listen effectively depends on the degree to which you perceive and understand these messages.

“*The most basic and powerful way to connect to another person is to listen.  Just listen.  Perhaps the most important thing we ever give each other is our attention.*” Rachel Naomi Remen

**We spend a lot of our time listening**

Adults spend an average of 70% of their time engaged in some sort of communication, of this an average of 45% is spent listening compared to 30% speaking, 16% reading and 9% writing. (Adler, R. et al. 2001).

Time Spent Communicating
A 'pie in pie' chart to show the significance of listening.
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[**10 Principles of Listening**](http://www.skillsyouneed.co.uk/IPS/Listening_Skills.html)

**A good listener will listen not only to what is being said, but also to what is left unsaid or only partially said.**

Listening involves observing body language and noticing inconsistencies between verbal and non-verbal messages. For example, if someone tells you that they are happy with their life but through gritted teeth or with tears filling their eyes, you should consider that the verbal and non-verbal messages are in conflict, they maybe don't mean what they say.  Listening requires you to concentrate and use your other senses in addition to simply hearing the words spoken.

**Listening is not the same as hearing and in order to listen effectively you need to use more than just your ears.**

**1. Stop Talking**

“*If we were supposed to talk more than we listen, we would have two tongues and one ear.*” Mark Twain.  
Don't talk, listen.  When somebody else is talking listen to what they are saying, do not interrupt, talk over them or finish their sentences for them.  Stop, just listen.  When the other person has finished talking you may need to clarify to ensure you have received their message accurately.

**2. Prepare Yourself to Listen**

Relax.  Focus on the speaker.  Put other things out of mind.  The human mind is easily distracted by other thoughts – what’s for lunch, what time do I need to leave to catch my train, is it going to rain – try to put other thoughts out of mind and concentrate on the messages that are being communicated.

**3. Put the Speaker at Ease**

Help the speaker to feel free to speak.  Remember their needs and concerns.  Nod or use other gestures or words to encourage them to continue.  Maintain eye contact but don’t stare – show you are listening and understanding what is being said.

**4. Remove Distractions**

Focus on what is being said: don’t doodle, shuffle papers, look out the window, pick your fingernails or similar. Avoid unnecessary interruptions.  These behaviours disrupt the listening process and send messages to the speaker that you are bored or distracted.

**5. Empathise**

Try to understand the other person’s point of view.  Look at issues from their perspective.  Let go of preconceived ideas.  By having an open mind we can more fully empathise with the speaker.  If the speaker says something that you disagree with then wait and construct an argument to counter what is said but keep an open mind to the views and opinions of others.  (See our page: [What is Empathy?](http://www.skillsyouneed.co.uk/IPS/empathy.html))

**6. Be Patient**

A pause, even a long pause, does not necessarily mean that the speaker has finished.  Be patient and let the speaker continue in their own time, sometimes it takes time to formulate what to say and how to say it.  Never interrupt or finish a sentence for someone.

**7. Avoid Personal Prejudice**

Try to be impartial.  Don't become irritated and don't let the person’s habits or mannerisms distract you from what they are really saying.  Everybody has a different way of speaking - some people are for example more nervous or shy than others, some have regional accents or make excessive arm movements, some people like to pace whilst talking - others like to sit still.  Focus on what is being said and try to ignore styles of delivery.

**8. Listen to the Tone**

Volume and tone both add to what someone is saying.  A good speaker will use both volume and tone to their advantage to keep an audience attentive; everybody will use pitch, tone and volume of voice in certain situations – let these help you to understand the emphasis of what is being said.  (See our page on [Effective Speaking](http://www.skillsyouneed.co.uk/IPS/effective_speaking.html) for more)

**9. Listen for Ideas – Not Just Words**

You need to get the whole picture, not just isolated bits and pieces.  Maybe one of the most difficult aspects of listening is the ability to link together pieces of information to reveal the ideas of others.   With proper concentration, letting go of distractions, and focus this becomes easier.

**10. Wait and Watch for Non-Verbal Communication**

Gestures, facial expressions, and eye-movements can all be important.  We don’t just listen with our ears but also with our eyes – watch and pick up the additional information being transmitted via non-verbal communication. (See our page on [non-verbal communication](http://www.skillsyouneed.co.uk/IPS/NonVerbal_Communication.html))

Do not jump to conclusions about what you see and hear. You should always seek clarification to ensure that your understanding is correct.

## Levels Of Listening

A number of writers talk about different levels of listening with differing numbers of levels defined and variously described. Here I have described 3 levels of listening which are useful to consider in the context of coaching.

**Level 1 or ‘Internal listening’**  
Here as the listener your focus in on yourself and your own thoughts rather than the speaker. As the speaker is talking you interpret what you hear in terms of what it means to you. This is normal everyday conversation where it is natural as the listener to gather information to help you form opinions and make decisions.

Generally, as a good coach you will not be listening at this level, after all a coaching session isn’t about you, it is about your client and their needs. However, there are times when it may be appropriate for example when you want to establish from your client a convenient time for their next coaching session. In this instance you need to take into account your own availability and make a judgement in order to agree a mutually convenient time.

**Level 2 or ‘Listening to understand’**  
As a listener operating at level 2 you are focusing totally on the speaker, listening to their words, tone of voice and body language and are not distracted by your own thoughts and feelings. As a good coach you will be using this level of listening in your coaching sessions where the purpose of gathering information is solely for the benefit of your client rather than you. By listening at level 2 you can get a real understanding of where the coachee is ‘coming from’, the client will feel understood and the coach’s own thoughts will not influence the coaching session.

**Level 3 or ‘Global Listening’**  
This involves the listener focusing on the speaker and picking up more than what is being said. When coaching, you will be listening to everything available using intuition, picking up emotion and sensing signals from your coachee’s body language. You can gauge the energy of your coach and their emotions as well as picking up what they are not saying. You will understand what they are thinking and feeling, and trusting your own senses can be extremely responsive to the needs of your coachee, knowing what question to ask next.

### 7 BARRIERS TO ACTIVE LISTENING: WHY WE DON’T LISTEN AS WELL AS WE COULD

"As a leader you have to be a really good listener. You need to know your own mind but there is no point in imposing your views on others without some debate. No one has a monopoly on good ideas or good advice. Get out there, listen to people, draw people out, and learn from them."

Effective leaders and influencers master the art of listening, and they understand that people want to be heard.  In our fast-paced world, active and empathetic listening is a rarity, and it's not as simple as it sounds.  Even if we know how to listen, we often don't for a number of reasons.

Next time you talk to someone, watch for the **following seven common listening barriers** that block a good conversation flow and may cause misunderstandings:

**1. We join the conversation with predetermined attitude and assumptions about the other person or the subject matter to be discussed.** Good conversations have the power to create new shared meaning and understanding, but it is only possible if we are open enough to consider those new possibilities.  So many people use conversations just to reiterate their own positions on issues.  Little is gained with such approach.  Instead, join a conversation with an open mind and desire to learn something new.  Listen with curiosity and without bias.

**2. We are so preoccupied with our own thoughts that we are unable to listen attentively.** Maybe, we are distracted by something unrelated to the topic of the conversation, or we are busy developing our own response and miss what’s being said.  It's not easy to pay focused attention to the other person's words.  Our prefrontal cortex, the brain region implicated in planning complex cognitive tasks, decision making, and moderating correct social behavior, is easily overwhelmed.  We can process just about seven pieces of information in our conscious mind at any given moment.  It makes it impossible to attend to several things simultaneously that require our concentration.  We have to train and discipline our mind to listen actively and push any other distracting thoughts aside.

**3. We are completing the other person’s thoughts and jumping to conclusions.** How often do we hear something and say to ourselves:  "Oh, I know where she is going with it."  We attribute ideas, motivation, and intentions to others that they may not have.  This leads to misunderstandings.  This is especially true if we have known the conversation participants for a long time.  We feel like we know what they will say.  Patience pays off in conversations.  Let the others finish their thoughts and don’t assume you already know what they are going to say.

**4. We engage in selective listening.** It occurs when we listen only to what we want to hear.  We like to be right, and our minds like consistency.  We don’t feel comfortable when something upsets our belief system.  It's easier to ignore that information. The downside is that we can't learn from others or collaborate effectively.  To overcome the habit of selective listening, paraphrase or mirror back what you hear to ensure you understand other points of view.  Engage in conversations with people who you know will disagree with you and learn to discuss your disagreements respectfully.  Encourage different opinions with the intention of considering them thoroughly and learning from them.

**5. We feel too tired, anxious, or angry to listen actively.** Our brains run on glucose.  The glucose levels drop when we are tired, so we no longer have the energy to think clearly.  When we experience strong negative emotions, as when we are angry or under stress, the glucose goes from the prefrontal cortex to the amygdala in the limbic system of the brain, responsible for the emotional control and memory of our emotional reactions.  The amygdala triggers the "fight or flight" mode.  As a result, our mind "freezes," and we  either launch verbal attacks or withdraw from the dialogue.  Strong feelings and emotions affect our listening, reasoning and judgment.  If the parties feel overwhelmed, a better strategy is to take a break from the conversation.

**6. We don't pay enough attention to body language and supersegmentals, such as intonation, rate of speech, emphasis, or tone.** We can focus not only on what's being said, but also on what's not being said.  The supersegmentals and body language give away clues about people’s emotions, feelings, stress levels that provide additional information that may not be expressed in words.  To be an active listener, you have to be a good observer too.

**7. We are in a hurry.** We don't have time to listen and can't wait for the other people to finish their thoughts so that we could get on with our business. People will sense that you don't really want to listen to them.  If you find yourself

**BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE LISTENING**  
**A) Physiological Barriers**   
1) Hearing Problems – hearing deficiencies, auditory-processing difficulties like auditory discrimination, sequencing, memory  
2) Rapid Thought – the brain is able to process at 500 wpm, but people speak at 125 wpm, leaving a lot of free time to drift  
  
**B) Environmental Barriers**1) Physical Distractions  
2) Problems in the Communication Channel – face-time is far more accurate than any other type  
3) Message Overload – coping with a deluge of information   
  
**C) Attitudinal Barriers**1) Preoccupation – what else do you have to think about?  
2) Egocentrism – “My opinion is worth more”; rates lower on the social attractiveness scale; “Nobody ever listened himself out of a job.”  
3) Fear of Appearing Ignorant  
**D) Faulty Assumptions**1) Assuming that Effective Communication is the Sender’s Responsibility – both speaker and listener share the burden

of reaching an understanding  
2) Assuming that Listening is Passive – can be hard work, you may nee to ask questions or paraphrase the statements to ensure your understanding  
3) Assuming that Talking has more Advantages than Listening – “Big people monopolize the listening, small people monopolize the talking.”  
  
**E) Sociocultural Differences**1) Cultural Differences  
(a) Accents – the assumption that anyone with an accent is less intelligent, the “noise” of misunderstanding due to accents  
(b) Time – the amount of time that is spent listening varies culturally  
(c) Silence – the length of silences also varies culturally  
  
2) Gender Differences  
(a) Women listen for relational subtext, men for content  
(b) Women interpret listening noises – “uh huh, mmm” – to signify they are listening, men use them to signify agreement  
(c) Men & women listen for different reasons  
(d) “All else being equal, women are not as likely to be listened to as men, regardless of how they speak or what they say.”always trying to control the pace of conversations, talk too fast, or urge others to get to the point, try to consciously slow yourself down.  Find a better time to talk.  A conversation is not a race to the finish line.