

Listening Effectively



In a Nutshell

Almost everyone sincerely believes that he or she listens effectively. Consequently, very few people think they need to develop their listening skills. But, in fact, listening effectively is something that very few of us do. It's not because listening effectively is so difficult. Most of us have just never developed the habits that would make us effective listeners.

Research has found that by listening effectively, you will get more **information** from the people you manage, you will increase others' **trust** in you, you will **reduce conflict**, you will better understand how to **motivate** others, and you will inspire a higher level of **commitment** in the people you manage.

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You Probably Don't Listen as Effectively as You Think You Do ... and You Probably Don't Know It

A study of over 8,000 people employed in businesses, hospitals, universities, the military and government agencies found that virtually all of the respondents believed that they communicate as effectively or more effectively than their co-workers.¹ (Could everyone be above average?) However, research shows that the average person listens at only about 25% efficiency.² While most people agree that listening effectively is a very important skill, most people don't feel a strong need to improve their own skill level.³

Why Effective Listening Matters

To a large degree, effective leadership is effective listening. A study of managers and employees of a large hospital system found that listening explained 40% of the variance in leadership.⁴ That's a big correlation by social science standards (like $r = .63$).

Effective listening is a way of showing concern for subordinates, and that fosters cohesive bonds, commitment, and **trust**. Effective listening tends to reduce the frequency of interpersonal **conflict** and increases the likelihood that when conflicts emerge they will be resolved with a "win-win" solution. In addition, if you listen to the people you manage, you will learn "what makes them tick." When you know what makes them tick, you will be more effective at motivating them. You can encourage them when they need encouraging, and you will know what kinds of things they value as rewards for a job well done (e.g., public praise, autonomy, challenge, etc.).

What Effective Listening Is

Effective listening is actively absorbing the information given to you by a speaker, showing that you are listening and interested, and providing feedback to the speaker so that he or she knows the message was received. Delivering verbal communication, like writing a newsletter, involves trying to choose the right words and nonverbal cues to convey a message that will be interpreted in the way that you intend. Effective listeners show speakers that they have been heard and understood.

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How the Most Skilled Communicators Respond When Listening

The most skilled communicators match their responses to the situation. In discussions with the people you manage, it helps to differentiate the coaching situations from the counseling situations. **Coaching** is providing advice and information or setting standards to help your employees to improve their skills and their performance. **Counseling** is helping subordinates recognize and address problems involving their emotions, attitudes, motivation, or personalities.

The most common mismatch of response types to situations is the tendency a lot of us have--myself included--to give advice or *deflect* in a situation where counseling is appropriate. When you are counseling, "reflecting" and "probing" are usually more appropriate responses than "advising" or "deflecting."

Reflecting. As mentioned above, when we listen we should show the other party that what they are saying to us is being heard. Since we can think at about four times the speed that speakers can speak, our brains have a lot of capacity that can be used to process the meaning of what's being said. Reflecting is paraphrasing back to the speaker what they said. A lot of us have difficulty with this skill. Reflecting without sounding phony or like a parrot takes creativity and lots of practice.

Reflecting can take other forms than paraphrasing back to someone what was just said. For instance, a listener can summarize what he or she heard and also take the conversation a step further by asking a question for clarification or elaboration.

We often notice when we reflect during a conversation that the meaning we have ascribed to what we've heard was not really what the speaker intended to convey. When speakers hear us reflect, they get a chance to correct any misunderstanding that we have. That proves that this technique does truly clarify communication.

For most of us, it takes a lot of practice before we become natural and effective at reflecting. Our first few efforts may sound forced, phony, patronizing, or as one of my MBA students put it, "moronic." However, that doesn't mean we should give up learning how to reflect. Over time, we can all learn to do it naturally and effectively.

Probing. In addition to reflecting, the most skilled communicators' responses in counseling situations involve a lot of probing. Probing means asking for additional information. Not all questions you might ask will be effective. Avoid questions that challenge what has been said because that will put the speaker on the defensive (e.g., "How could you have thought that?"). In addition, a question that changes the subject before the current subject is resolved isn't effective communication. Effective probing is nonjudgmental and flows from what was previously said. Good probing questions ask for elaboration, clarification, and repetition (if, for instance, an important question you asked wasn't answered).

Deflecting. Deflecting responses shift the discussion to another topic. When we deflect from what we've been told, rather than acknowledging it, we can unintentionally communicate that we haven't listened and that we aren't interested. Deflecting shows that we're preoccupied with another topic.

Many of us deflect unwittingly by sharing our personal experiences when we should be focusing on the other party. Think about this from the speaker's perspective: When you share a concern with someone and they respond by telling you about themselves, do you feel like they are interested in listening to you? The responder gives you the impression that they aren't even listening, and that they just want to talk about themselves. Sometimes we mention our own experiences as a way of saying that we can relate to the speaker's experiences. Our intention is to say, "You're not alone." But, when we tell our stories we risk sending a message that we aren't listening and don't care. Don't be a *topper*--the kind of person who can tell a story to top any story that they're told. We all know a topper, don't we? In a small way, toppers are trying to communicate that they are superior. That's not supportive!

This is not to say that sharing your experiences is never helpful. On the contrary, mentors often help their protégés by relating their own experiences as a way to reassure their protégés that their concerns are normal and

that their problems are solvable. But, in counseling situations, be careful to use deflecting only at appropriate times.

Speakers may not know that you have heard and understood what they have said if you deflect by moving on to another topic or shifting the focus to yourself or your own experiences. The best listeners keep deflecting to a minimum.

Advising. Did you know that you can offend some people by giving them advice after they've told you about one of their concerns? In fact, Deborah Tannen's research has found that this problem is particularly common between men and women in the workplace.⁵ Women often discuss their problems and concerns with men just as a means of developing interpersonal bonds. It's a way of making conversation that goes a little deeper than small talk (because it's personally revealing), and it can help foster a mutually supportive relationship. When men respond by giving advice, they may believe they are being helpful to their female counterparts. But, when no advice is solicited, providing it is actually a little presumptuous. When you tell someone how they should solve their problems you assume a position of superiority, not mutuality.

Of course, being supportive often involves giving advice. My point is that we should (a) recognize that sometimes people share their problems with us just because they want us to listen, and (b) advising people who tell us about their problems can sometimes be taken as condescending or belittling. Sometimes it's better to just reflect.

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Typical Objections to These Effective Listening Techniques

As I teach these principles to managers on and off campus, I hear a lot of objections to using them. Here are three common objections:

- **Reflecting slows down the conversation and wastes time.** Yes, your time is a valuable resource, and you do want to invest it carefully. Reflecting takes time, but it can save time too. Many times reflecting does more than show the other party that they are being heard; it also serves as a check for accurate understanding and provides an opportunity for clarification. Reflecting takes time, but so does correcting errors due to miscommunication.
- **Reflecting sounds phony/patronizing/moronic.** Skilled listeners know that tactfully showing that you have heard what someone has said by reflecting it back to them requires creativity, and they've had to practice creative paraphrasing and reflecting to become good at it. Yes, the process of learning how to use reflecting can be awkward for people who are inexperienced with it. However, be very careful not to avoid practicing and learning a skill just because you're concerned that you will not immediately be proficient. It's better to develop communication skills over time, despite the possible awkward stage, than to completely avoid developing those skills due to a fear of the initial awkwardness.
- **I don't have time to be the confidante of all my direct reports.** Yes, there is a [time-management](#) issue. It might seem that the best way to use your time is to hear the problems, give advice, and move on. That may or may not be good time management. Think carefully about the consequences of showing your staff that spending time listening to them is not important enough to be a high priority for you. Managers who make listening a high priority develop strong relationships, employee commitment and a support network for themselves.

Practicing This Management Skill

Fortunately for those of us who want to develop our listening skills, we get lots of opportunities. To develop your listening skills, plan to use the response type that you think you need to emphasize (e.g., reflecting) and plan to avoid using the response types that you want to de-emphasize (e.g., advising). Then, after you have a conversation, evaluate how effective you were at giving good responses as a listener. Identify what went well and where the opportunities for improvement are. Think about what that challenges to being an effective listener were and how you can deal with those challenges more effectively next time.

Monday mornings are a perfect time to practice your effective listening. Just start a conversation with a co-worker or employee by saying, "How was your weekend?" From there, just probe and reflect. In ten minutes, you can actually get to know the other person a little better and show that you're interested in them.

Kids seem to be willing to let us practice our effective listening. Seems like if you ask kids questions, reflect their answers back to them and probe a little further, they really open up. It's like you're their new best friend because you've shown an interest in them. They'll forgive us if we sound a little patronizing--they're used to it.

Making a tape recording of a conversation, if you can find a willing partner, can also help you evaluate your performance. With a tape of a conversation, you can examine each response you give in detail, without relying on your memory.

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Notes

1. Haney, W. V. (1979). *Communication and interpersonal relations*. Homewood, IL: Irwin.
2. Husman, R. C., Lahiff, J. M., & Penrose, J. M. (1988). *Business communication: Strategies and skills*. Chicago: Dryden Press.
3. Spitzberg, B. H. (1994). The dark side of (in)competence. In W.R. Cupach & B. H. Spitzberg (Eds.), *The dark side of interpersonal communication*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
4. Kramer, R. (1997). *Leading by listening: An empirical test of Carl Rogers's theory of human relationship using interpersonal assessments of leaders by followers*. Doctoral dissertation, The George Washington University.
5. Tannen, D. (1995). *Talking from 9 to 5: Women and men in the workplace: Language sex and power*. New York: Avon.

Additional Sources and References

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- Whetten, D. A., & Cameron, K. S. (2002). *Developing management skills*, (5th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

About the Photo

George W. Bush (news - web sites) listens to a young member of the audience during the White House Tee-Ball game between the Bolling Air Force Base Cardinals and the Cherry Point Marine Corps Air Station Devil Dogs on the South Lawn of the White House in Washington. (AFP/Brendan Smialowski).

About the Newsletter and Subscriptions

LeaderLetter is written by Dr. Scott Williams, Department of Management, [Raj Sojn College of Business](#), Wright State University, Dayton, Ohio. It is a supplement to my MBA 751 - Managing People in Organizations class. It is intended to reinforce the course concepts and maintain communication among my former MBA 751 students, but anyone is welcome to subscribe. In addition, subscribers are welcome to forward this newsletter to anyone who they believe would have an interest in it. To [subscribe](#), simply send an e-mail message to me requesting subscription. Of course, subscriptions to the newsletter are free. To [unsubscribe](#), e-mail a reply indicating that you would like to unsubscribe.

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E-mail Your Comments

Whether you are one of my former students or not, I invite you to share any insights or concerns you have regarding the topic of this newsletter or any other topic relating to management skills. Please [e-mail](#) them to me. Our interactions have been invaluable. **I learn a lot from *LeaderLetter* subscribers!** Let's keep the conversation going.

A Good, Clean Joke

SIGNS FOUND IN KITCHENS:

- I clean house every other day. Today is the other day!
- So this isn't Home Sweet Home.... Adjust!
- Ring bell for maid service. If no answer, do it yourself!

- If you write in the dust, please don't date it!
- A clean kitchen is the sign of a wasted life.
- I came. I saw. I decided to order take out.
- If you don't like my standards of cooking, lower your standards.
- Apology. Although you'll find our house a mess, come in, sit down, converse. It doesn't always look like this. Some days it's even worse.
- A messy kitchen is a happy kitchen, and this kitchen is delirious.
- If we are what we eat, then I'm easy, fast and cheap.
- A balanced diet is a cookie in each hand.
- Help keep the kitchen clean. Eat out.
- My next house will have no kitchen - just vending machines

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RAJ SOIN
College of Business
WRIGHT STATE
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