



Listening Skills

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

- ✓ Learn what your non-verbal messages are telling others
- ✓ Develop skills to listen actively and empathetically to others

Listening Skills

Asking Questions

Asking Good Questions

Two of the most basic elements of good communication are asking questions and listening to others. Some of us naturally ask a lot of questions, while for others this is a learned skill. We can plan questions prior to meetings or conversations as a way to ensure our questions have thought and depth to them.

There are two kinds of questions: open and closed.

Closed questions are those that can be answered by either “yes” or “no,” or with a specific bit of data, such as your name, date of birth, or occupation. These questions restrict our responses and give us little opportunity to develop our thoughts before answering. As a result, these questions require very little effort on either person’s part. They can be used (intentionally or unintentionally) as a way to close down a conversation.

Closed questions tend to get over-used, in part because they are so easy to work with. They are easy to phrase and we get quick answers. This type of questioning can cause us to make assumptions as we create fuller answers in our minds, and assumptions can be big barriers to good communication.

Open questions, on the other hand, encourage people to talk. These questions are phrased so they cannot be answered with a simple yes or no. Open questions often begin with a variation of the five W’s (who, what, when, where, why), or can ask how.

Open-ended questions can be used to:

- Get information
- Focus conversations
- Solicit opinions
- Gain consensus

The unintentional use of a closed question can often be overcome by simply following it with a short open question. For example:

- "Do you feel that was the right thing to do?"
- "Yes, I do."
- "Can you help me understand why you feel that way?"

Here is an example of a closed question:

- Do you like ice cream?

Replacing it with an open question provides us with more information:

- What's your favorite flavor of ice cream?

The first question will only tell us whether the person likes ice cream or not. That's a closed situation. The second question will let us know a little bit about the person. It could also lead to follow up questions depending on their answer. Questions that are open ended will help us learn more about the people we speak with, establish things that we have in common, develop rapport, and make meaningful connections.

It is possible for you to ask someone an open question and for them to be evasive or try to shut the conversation down. Children are famous for this when a parent says, "What did you learn at school today?" and they reply, "Nothing." One of your team members may come see you after a meeting, and you say, "How'd the meeting go?" and they say, "Fine." If you want to engage them, you'll have to ask a follow up question. Some examples:

- What was the most interesting point raised in the meeting (or at school)?
- What were the challenges that we need to consider?
- What questions did the group ask?

There are several different types of open-ended questions. We can ask **leading questions** to influence how people think ("Don't you just love the way vanilla ice cream smells?"). **Rhetorical questions** are ones that we don't really want an answer to, such as "Do I look like I care?" Rhetorical questions can be used to engage your conversation partner and make them think about the obvious answer. (They may also be something that you blurt out because you are thinking out loud!) A rhetorical question can engage the listener in a persuasive manner as they process your ideas.

Probing questions can also help you to investigate in more detail.

Probing

Many people are better at presenting their own point of view than they are at drawing out information from others. Your role as a good communicator is to draw out information from the individual that will help you understand the issue. A good name for this skill of gathering information from others is probing.

When you probe, you:

- Get others involved and participating. Since probes are designed to produce a response, it's unlikely the other person will remain passive.
- Get important information on the table. People may not volunteer information, or the information they present may not be clear. Your probes help people open up and present or clarify their information.
- Force yourself to listen. Since probes are most effective in a sequence, you have to listen to a person's response.
- Help improve communication on both sides of the table.

There are five ways to probe.

One of the most common ways of probing is to ask an **open question**, such as:

- "Can you describe that more clearly?"
- "Would you give me a specific example of what you mean?"
- "What do you think we should do?"

The difficulty here is that if you ask too many of these probing questions, the other person begins to feel like they are being interrogated. Be thoughtful about what and how you ask. Consider how many probes you really need to offer.

A second, very effective way of probing is a **pause**. Stop talking. Let the other person fill the silence.

A third way is to ask a **reflective or mirroring question**. For example, let's say the person has just said, "What I really want is more variety in my work." You may respond by just reflecting back to them, "Variety?" The reflective question usually provides you with an expanded answer without you needing to ask more questions. Of course, it is best used in conjunction with a pause.

Reflective questions or statements focus on clarifying and summarizing without interrupting the flow of the conversation. They indicate your intent to understand the sender's thoughts and feelings.

A fourth method that is particularly useful to make certain you understand what has just been said is **paraphrasing** in your own words.. An example: "So if I understand you correctly, you..."

You can use this response to show that you want to increase the accuracy of your understanding of what has just been said. You may also want to use it to ensure the sender hears what he has just said. Finally, paraphrasing reassures the sender that you are trying to understand what they are saying.

The last method, most often used as a conversation is winding down, is the **summary question**. Example: "You have tried ignoring the scent of your colleague's cologne, you have talked with him about how it

affects your allergies, and you have tried shutting your door to keep the scent from your workspace. None of these has worked and now you are asking me to intervene. Have I got it right?”

Pushing My Buttons

I’m really nervous about speaking in public.

I am looking for a new car, and I hate car shopping.

I really hate my job.

I think this city is too hot.

I really dislike cooking.

You're not very good at your job.

I don't like the way you speak to me.

I think the report you wrote is terrible.

Your new hair cut isn't flattering.

I wish I didn't have to go to that meeting tomorrow.

Listening Skills

Can You Hear Me?

Example One

Example Two

Example Three

Example Four

Example Five

How Do You Rate Your Listening Ability?

One reason listening is so important is that we do so much of it every day. We know that good communicators spend far more of their time listening than they do talking. Like asking questions, listening is a skill that we can develop. In an age when we are inundated with media messages and portable devices, we can choose to be listening more than people did in the past.

Answer each of the following questions.

Question	Yes	No	Points
1. Do you enjoy listening?			
2. Is it easy for you to listen with interest to a large variety of subjects?			
3. Do your friends seek you out to discuss a problem or decision when they need help?			
4. Does your attention usually stray toward other groups or people entering or leaving the room?			
5. Do you interrupt?			
6. Are you more apt to be thinking ahead to what you will say next rather than weighing what you are being told?			
7. Do you stop listening to everything when you strongly disagree with the speaker on one point?			
8. Do you assume or anticipate regarding the other person's views?			
9. Do you feel you can judge most people quite quickly before hearing them out?			
10. Do you generalize (All old people think... all redheads... all college kids...)?			
11. Do you encourage others to elaborate or clarify points you have			

misunderstood?			
12. Do you listen to what is not said, such as the obvious omission?			
GRAND TOTAL			

Scoring

- Give yourself 2 points if you answered “Yes” for question 1. You enjoy listening as much as you enjoy talking.
- Give yourself 2 points if you answered “No” to questions 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10.
- Give yourself 2 points if you answered “Yes” to questions 2, 3, 11, and 12.

Interpretation

If your score is **20 or more**, you've already developed some strong communication skills. You have the ability to listen to people, understand what they are saying, and communicate your understanding back to them. Use your listening and communication skills to help others.

If your score is between **10 and 18**, you're within the average range. Use this quiz to help you identify where you're doing well and where you would like to do better.

If your score is **less than 10**, it's time to start learning! Use this quiz to help you set some goals. Start with one or two things that you would like to improve on, such as empathizing, paraphrasing, or asking good questions. Then, we'll work on setting an action plan, and you'll be on the road to being a better listener, and a better communicator.

Active Listening Skills

The problem is that listening and hearing are not the same thing. Most of us were fortunate to be born with hearing, but listening is a skill that must be learned and practiced in order to use it successfully. When you **hear** something, sound enters your eardrum, passes through your ear canal, and registers in your brain. **Listening** is what you do with that sound and how you interpret it.

Here are some tips for successful listening:

- Listen intentionally for people's names.
- Listen with interest.
- Try to get rid of your assumptions.
- Listen for what isn't said.

Listening is hard work. When other people are listening to us, they have the same difficulties we do in trying to focus on a message. Our minds wander, noises or thoughts distract us, and we can be thinking about what to do next.

Active listening means that we try to understand things from the speaker's point of view. It includes letting the speaker know that we are listening and that we have understood what was said. This is not the same as **hearing**, which is a physical process, where sound enters the eardrum and messages are passed to the brain. Active listening can be described as an attitude that leads to listening for shared understanding.

When we make a decision to listen for total meaning, we listen for the content of what is being said as well as the attitude behind what is being said. Is the speaker happy, angry, excited, sad...or something else entirely?

Responding to Feelings

The content (the words spoken) is one thing, but the way that people feel really gives full value to the message. Responding to the speaker's feelings adds an extra dimension to listening. Are they disgusted and angry or in love and excited? Perhaps they are ambivalent! These are all feelings that you can reply to in your part of the conversation.

Reading Cues

Really listening means that we are also very conscious of the non-verbal aspects of the conversation.

- What are the speaker's facial expressions, hand gestures, and posture telling us?
- Is their voice loud or shaky?
- Are they stressing certain points?
- Are they mumbling or having difficulty finding the words they want to say?

Demonstration Cues

When you are listening to someone, these techniques will show a speaker that you are paying attention, provided you are genuine in using them.

Physical indicators include making eye contact, nodding your head from time to time, and leaning into the conversation.

You can also give **verbal cues** or use phrases such as "Uh-huh," "Go on," "Really!" and, "Then what?"

You can use **questions** for clarification or **summarizing statements**. Examples:

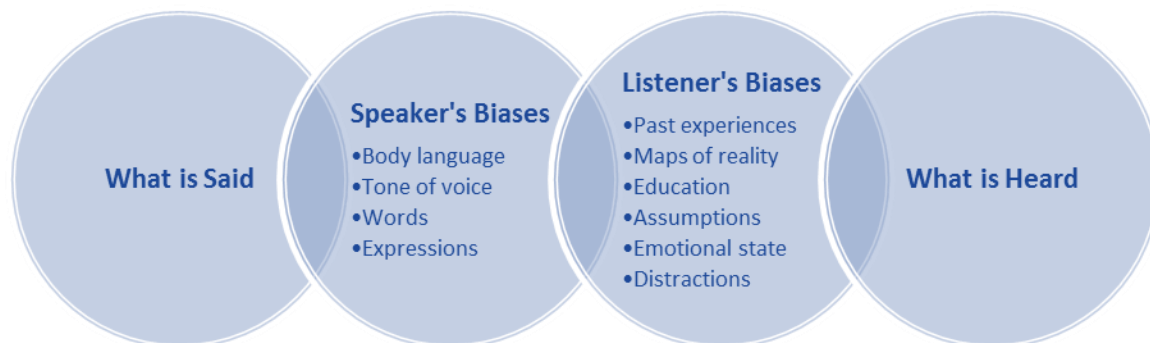
- “Do you mean they were charging \$4.00 for just a cup of coffee?”
- “So after you got a cab, got to the store, and found the right sales clerk, what happened then?”

Tips for Becoming a Better Listener

- **Make a decision to listen.** Close your mind to clutter and noise and look at the person speaking with you. Give them your undivided attention.
- **Don’t interrupt** people. Make it a habit to let them finish what they are saying. Respect that they have thoughts they are processing and speaking about, and wait to ask questions or make comments until they have finished.
- Keep your **eyes** focused on the speaker and your **ears** tuned to their voice. Don’t let your eyes wander around the room, just in case your attention does too.
- Carry a **notebook** or start a conversation file on your computer. Write down all the discussions that you have in a day. Capture the subject, who spoke more (were you listening or doing a lot of the talking?), what you learned in the discussion, as well as the who, what, when, where, why, and how aspects of it. Once you have conducted this exercise 8-10 times, you will be able to see what level your listening skills are currently at.
- Ask a few **questions** throughout the conversation. When you ask, people will know that you are listening to them, and that you are interested in what they have to say. Your ability to summarize and paraphrase will also demonstrate that you heard them.
- When you demonstrate good listening skills, they tend to be **infectious**. If you want people to communicate well at work, you have to set a high example.

What is Said and What is Heard

What we say isn’t always what the other person hears. Our message goes through a complicated system of filters and outside influences before it reaches the recipient. We must always clarify that the person has received the message that we intended to send.



Communication Situations

**What would you do if you were trying to talk to someone...
In a noisy workplace**

Visual distractions

You felt really tired

They had a very strong accent

They were speaking too fast for you to understand, or too slowly or softly

They kept using jargon words or terms you didn't understand

They appeared to be very stressed

They were using emotionally charged words or statements

They were verbally attacking you

Body Language

What Do Our Bodies Say?

In significant (though often misinterpreted) research, **Albert Mehrabian** found that when it came to discussing emotions, only 7% of the speaker's message was communicated by words, and that tone of voice was responsible for about 38% of the meaning and body language about 55%. This means that the words themselves played only a very small part in conveying meaning. In other conversations (not the ones about emotions), we know that tone of voice and body language have a large impact on those messages, too.

(Source: *Silent Messages* by Albert Mehrabian)

We are always sending signals to others, whether we like it or not. Body language combined with vocal tone can override or even cancel the meaning of the words we say. If you want your messages understood, make sure your words and your body are sending congruent signals.

Here are some things to keep in mind about body language:

- Your **eyes, eyebrows, and mouth** send out the signals that can make a world of difference.
- People who smile are happier than those who don't. **Smiling** releases a chemical in your brain that makes you feel good. It's a great way to establish a rapport with listeners.
- **Eye contact** helps you carry your message to each person in the audience. It builds trust.
- Learn to speak with your **hands**. Draw lines in the air, make a point, count on your fingers, and emphasize length and width.
- Work on appearing **sincere and comfortable**.
- Let your **hands** do what they want to do, as long as they don't get in your pockets, fiddle with an object, or make obscene gestures to your audience.
- Your **body posture** affects your emotions and how you feel determines your posture. If you are confident, happy and ready, your body will show it.

One of the most important things you can do with body language is learn how to recognize cues from people that indicate you are making them uncomfortable. Ask yourself if you are doing what you can to make the other person comfortable. Do you fidget, chew gum, click a pen, or check your watch frequently? Are there other things that you do? If so, what message do you think you are sending?

If your conversation partner is doing any of these things while you talk, what could be going on?

- Rocking
- Leg swinging
- Tapping

These are the first signals of tension and indicate that the person feels intruded upon or nervous. If it escalates, these signals are often followed by:

- Intermittent closing of the eyes
- Slight tucking of the chin into the chest
- Shoulder hunching

If you sensitize yourself to these simple cues, over time, people will have the experience of feeling more relaxed, at ease, and open with you (and to you).

Basically, learn to watch for signals, and then adjust your approach. Sometimes just taking one step back, or ceasing talking and getting the other person to talk to you instead, will be all it takes to ease the tension.

The Signals People Send

The chart below can be used as a guide to help you with some of the signals that people send.

Non-Verbal Communication	Interpretation
Facial Expressions	
Frown	Displeasure, unhappiness
Smile	Friendliness, happiness
Raised eyebrows	Disbelief, amazement
Narrowed eyes	Anger
Blushing	Embarrassment
Eye Contact	
Glancing	Lack of interest
Steady	Active listening, interest, seduction
Hand/Arm Gestures	
Pointing finger	Authority, displeasure, lecturing
Folded arms	Not open to change, preparing to speak
Arms at side	Open to suggestions, relaxed
Hands uplifted outward	Disbelief, puzzlement, uncertainty
Body Postures	
Fidgeting, doodling	Boredom
Hands on hips	Anger, defensiveness

Non-Verbal Communication		Interpretation
Shrugging shoulders		Indifference
Squared stance or shoulders		Problem-solving, concern, listening
Biting lip, shifting, jingling money		Nervousness
Sitting on edge of chair		Listening, great concern
Slouching in chair		Boredom, lack of interest
Clothing		
Business dress		Authoritative, conservative
Sloppy attire		Disrespect, lack of responsibility
Casual clothes		Relaxation
Proxemics (Physical Space)		
From physical contact to 18 inches		Intimate space
From 18 inches to 4 feet		Personal space
From 4 feet to 8 feet		Social space
From 8 feet outward		Public space
Voice Characteristics		
Speaking loudly, quickly, and with clipped enunciation		Anger
Monotone and downward inflection		Boredom
High pitch, fast rate, loud volume, and upward inflection		Joy

Non-Verbal Communication	Interpretation
Status Symbols	
Rare or expensive possessions	High status
Prestigious titles	High status

Gestures

We all interpret body language differently, and we can also feel differently about images. We are influenced by past experiences, background, culture, and so on. Our feelings may be colored by our mood, or by memories associated with these images, so we cannot assume that others will interpret our body language correctly.

A **gesture** is a type of non-verbal communication that is communicated through body language, with or without speech. Gestures can be a challenging part of communication. If you travel around the world or work with people from different cultures, you need to be aware of the multiple meanings to some gestures. While finger pointing is tolerated in some societies, it is a serious insult in others. While putting your feet up on a coffee table is a sign of relaxation at home, it can be very offensive to your guests if the bottoms of your feet are directed at someone.

Gestures


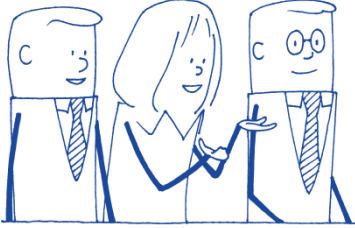
Illustration	What is happening?	How do you feel about it?
		
		





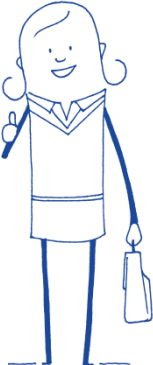

Illustration	What is happening?	How do you feel about it?
		
		
		

Illustration	What is happening?	How do you feel about it?
		
		
		

Emotions

1)		13)	
2)		14)	
3)		15)	
4)		16)	
5)		17)	
6)		18)	
7)		19)	
8)		20)	
9)		21)	
10)		22)	
11)		23)	
12)		24)	

Further Reading:

- ✓ *Boothman, Nicholas. How to Make People Like You in 90 Seconds or Less. Workman Publishing Company, 2000.*
- ✓ *Carnegie, Dale. How to Win Friends and Influence People. Pocket Books, 1998 (Reprint).*