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ABSTRACT

Research indicates that people spend roughly 45 to 65 percent of their waking moments listening to other persons. To help administrators improve their listening effectiveness, a format to develop a profile of personal listening styles is provided. The strengths and weaknesses of six different listening styles are explored along with ways to overcome bad listening habits. Techniques offered to practice good listening include the following: (1) recognize the speaker's basic purpose; (2) give full attention to the speaker; and (3) concentrate on grasping the speaker's central message and then follow its development. In addition to words, tonality and body language also play an important part in communication. Within the framework of an organization, studies suggest that only 20 to 25 percent of the information issued at the top of the organization filters down to the bottom. Eight reasons for this breakdown are cited. (MLF)

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Listening Effectively

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Said Plutarch: "Know how to listen and you will profit even from those who talk badly." Shakespeare referred to "the disease" of not listening.

Although everyone seems to agree that effective communication is necessarily a two-way street, most of us are far more interested in talking than in listening. And we pay a price for that foible, for the benefits for listening well are numerous and important, as are the penalties for listening poorly.

Did you ever wish there were more hours in a week? Listening well can perhaps add one or two. Listening poorly, on the other hand—inattentiveness—exact penalties. It is said by marriage counselors, for example, to be a major cause of divorce, not to speak of missed opportunities, injuries, law suits.

"I only wish," said Lee Iacocca, "I could find an institute that teaches people how to listen." In a modest way, that is what we are up to here—exploring the business of how to listen.

Let's begin by agreeing on our objectives. The first is to grasp and accept listening's importance. A second is to understand, with the help of a listening "profile," your own personal listening style. The third is to get a rudimentary understanding of the listening process. And the fourth is to

develop approaches to improved effectiveness.

Research indicates that on average, people are engaged in one form or another of communicating for about 70 percent of their waking moments. They spend from 10 to perhaps 15 percent of that time on writing, 20 to 40 percent on speaking, and roughly 45 to 65 percent on listening. Writing is recognized as the most difficult of these forms of communicating, which in part explains why the schools offer formal instruction in it from kindergarten through the sophomore year in college.

Instruction in reading is offered at least through the fifth grade and usually longer, and most students can sign up for a class or two in (public) speaking. But instruction in listening? Until very recently, it was a rare school or college that offered such a course, and any form of special instruction was novel. That seems odd, given the proportion of time that listening occupies in people's lives and the contribution that skillful listening can make to a person's effectiveness.

Consider the results of a study by Ralph Nichols (considered the "Father of Listening" among experts in that subject) into various factors that bear on success in college. Of

the twenty factors he found to be most important, the one with the highest correlation was listening. Second was intelligence.

For communications purposes, the listening process can be said to consist of six elements—receiving sounds, attending to sounds, understanding the speaker's words, analyzing what was said, evaluating the message, and responding.

A sound having been heard, the listener makes a choice—often it is a kind of instinctive reaction—of whether to attend or in effect to tune out. People usually attend to matters that involve novelty, rewards, their pet peeves and passions, and the unusual. Choosing to attend does not, of course, assure understanding what the speaker said. All too often the message the speaker had in mind is not at all what the listener "hears." In part the mixup may result from defective knowledge of phonology, syntax, and semantics. More often, however, meaning is screened or distorted by differing value systems.

In any case, the message having physically been heard (attended), the next step is to analyze it and determine whether it makes sense—not whether one agrees with it but whether it adds up and seems logical. After that comes a decision as to whether to accept the message . . . to in effect agree to consider it. The final step is to rationally decide on an appropriate

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Figure 1

WHAT IS YOUR LISTENING STYLE?

Mark 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, or 1

6 = most like you, 1 = least like you

L column

- Relaxed
- Mind is often elsewhere
- Seek pleasurable topics
- Prefer social to work talk
- Listen only if interested
- Want variety of content
- Total for L column

I column

- Need main idea first
- Seek to absorb all information
- Attend to every word
- Want the big picture
- Want precise language
- Understand literal meaning
- Total for I column

S column

- Want to know speaker's credentials
- Classify/categorize speakers
- React to speaker's image
- Swayed by speaker's delivery
- Perceive unstated messages
- Judge speakers by their style
- Total for S column

T column

- Intense, alert listener
- Listen for specific information
- Interested in the "how to"
- Interested in data, not feelings
- Want accurate information
- Want structured information
- Total for T column

E column

- Attend to speaker's emotions
- React to nonverbal communication
- Multisensory processor of messages
- People vs. task oriented
- Want to be comfortable in communicating
- Sometimes miss speaker's messages
- Total for E column

N column

- Evaluate speaker's credibility
- Evaluate the content
- Noncritical if agreeing
- Critical if not agreeing
- Want to derive strength from speaker
- Expect supporting evidence
- Total for N column

reaction or response. Is further clarification needed? Does the message call for a reaction? Is it worth reacting to? If so, should the reaction be immediate or would I be wise to mull over the situation for a bit?

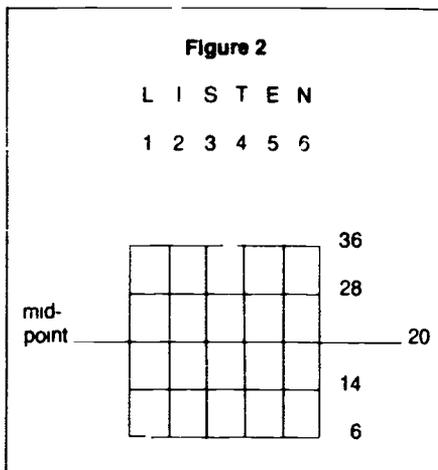
Against that background of some of the nuances of the listening process, let's develop a "profile" of your personal listening style instrument, Figure 1. Figure 1 is not a test. There are no "right" or "wrong" responses to the entries, and there is no "right" or "wrong" listening profile.

In marking off the various items, try to do so from one single, sustained point of view. For the purpose at hand, probably the most useful point of view is that of being at work. Put yourself in an "at work" frame of mind and make every response from that stance. Were you to put yourself in a different situation—attending a meeting of the Rotary Club, for example, or eating dinner with your family—your profile would almost certainly turn out to be different.

Rate each entry from 6 to 1, with 6 being *most like* the way you tend to listen when you are at work and 1 being the *least like* your at-work listening style. Keep in mind that this is NOT a rank ordering within each of the six sections. Rather, each particular item is to be assigned its own individual rating; thus the same number might be given to several items within each section. Work rapidly, and keep your focus fixed on the concept of being at work.

Now total your ratings for each of the six sections (adapted, by the way, from a list developed by Performax Systems) and plot your score on the graph in Figure 2. The result is a rough indication of your listening style, presumably one of the following:

- The *Leisure* listener is one whose mind tends to go to matters more pleasant or intriguing than the subject at hand. Such listeners are usually very relaxed and tune in primarily to matters they like or ap-



and dress of the speaker. They want to know the speaker's background and credentials, and they tend to assign the speaker to a favorable or unfavorable category. To be more effective listeners, Stylistics need to pay more attention to the content of what people say. Among the many strengths of Stylistic listeners is a

prove of. They tend to want variety in whatever they are listening to and to be reluctant to focus very long on any one subject. To become a more effective attender, Leisure listeners need to make a determined effort to stop letting their minds wander and instead maintain an intense focus on the matters at hand. They also need to strive to become more willing to listen to information they find dull or unpleasant, or that makes them uncomfortable.

The Leisure listener is generally a very positive person, finds the good in life, is well liked, and is not very likely to suffer burnout or high blood pressure.

- The *Inclusive* listener takes in everything, the chaff along with the wheat. Despite their capacity to absorb, however, such people need to identify the speaker's main idea before they can listen carefully. The Inclusive listener is good at grasping the literal meaning of the speaker's words and following the speaker's line of reasoning. To heighten their listening effectiveness, Inclusives should strive to avoid getting buried in details and instead concentrate on analyzing and evaluating the messages they are receiving. Inclusive listeners acquire lots of information and tend to have it well structured in their minds.

- The *Stylistic* listener is the imagemaker. Such listeners are especially affected by the mannerisms

The Inclusive listener takes in everything, the chaff along with the wheat.

highly developed ability to interpret the nonverbal elements of communications.

- *Technical* listeners are keen about processing the information that is being communicated and are good at gathering specific incidental data within a narrow but deep listening range, and then applying this information to a particular task or situation. To become more skillful listeners, Technicals need to broaden their horizons and attend to *all* of the message rather than just the parts of it that serve their immediate purposes. These listeners would also profit by paying more attention to gestures and facial expressions and other nonverbal communication. As a group, Technicals tend to be very accurate and efficient listeners.

- The *Empathic* listener is an especially sensitive listener. Such people are interested in how the speaker feels. They are always on the lookout for unstated messages, and they need to acquire an overall sense of the speaker's values and standards

before they can feel comfortable about receiving the message. To be more effective, this listener needs to focus on the subject at hand, accepting the proposition that the content of the message is just as important as the feelings of the person delivering it. The strengths of the Empathic listener include skill at grasping nonverbal messages, at assessing the motives of the speaker, and at not being fooled by an apparent incongruence between the speaker's verbal and nonverbal messages.

- The *Nonconforming* listener is the "Yes, but . . ." listener. Such listeners carefully analyze and evaluate what is being said, sorting out what they accept and what they reject. They have a tendency to be fast to challenge whoever is speaking and to carefully listen for statements or information that they can use in agreeing or disagreeing with the speaker. Nonconforming listeners would increase their effectiveness by avoiding hasty judgments and by looking for points of agreement early in the speaker's message. They should also keep in mind their proclivity for overprojecting stimuli and assigning a deeper meaning than was intended. Nonconforming listeners tend to be very good at probing, at grasping the significance of data, and at recognizing both strong points and fallacies.

Along with being aware of these Listening styles, it is useful also to think for a moment about listening habits. Make a mental list of the five or six that tend to irritate you the most. The odds are pretty good that somewhere near the top of your list is the way people have of constantly interrupting whoever is speaking. Another is the disinclination of other people to maintain reasonable eye contact. There is the person who is constantly looking at his watch and the one who seems to be making out a grocery list or something, or is constantly completing other people's sentences. About equally obnoxious are people in a conversation who are

always fussing with their hair or their fingernails or tapping a pencil or brushing lint off their clothes. We all get upset with people who keep on reading while we are trying to talk with them, and maybe the world champion irritants are the people who seem to go to meetings for the primary purpose of carrying on their own private, whispered conversations.

Anyone possessed of these noxious habits can make a major contribution to the quality of American life by launching a major effort to abandon them. The way to do so is to tackle one at a time, maybe with the help of a friend. The friend can signal the interrupter when he is interrupting or the lint-picker when she is excavating or the sentence-finisher when he is having one of his seizures.

The fact is that it is possible to become a better listener, though good listening cannot be turned on and off like a light switch. Becoming a more effective listener begins with mapping out a plan and then studiously working on it, every day. As with becoming a better golfer or tennis player, the "trick" is to practice long and often, going over good listening techniques time and time again until they become ingrained. Fortunately the opportunity to work out is available during virtually every waking moment, no special equipment or uniform is required, and fatigue is not really a factor.

As for what to practice, you can begin considering the people you know whom you would recommend to a friend as being good listeners. What do they do that causes you to say that? What is it about the way they conduct themselves that would cause you to rate them over other people? The experts say that first of all, the good listener looks for and recognizes the speaker's basic purpose. By and large, they add, purposes can be put into five categories—Phatic, Therapeutic, Informational, Persuasive, and Entertaining.

Phatic is the term used by Lyman Steil, who conducted a landmark lis-

tening program for the Sperry Corporation, to describe the small talk that gets a conversation started in a relaxed way before coming to grips with the subject at hand; phatic communication is important to establishing an atmosphere of trust and friendliness.

Therapeutic listening usually has to do with helping someone get past a

One hundred percent eye contact is taken as an attempt to intimidate.

hard time. Basically it is a matter of listening nonjudgmentally and giving an upset person an opportunity to express his or her feelings.

Informational listening is responsive to the speaker's wish to share some news or facts about a particular development. Here the listener is concerned with gathering and organizing the message in preparation for analyzing, evaluating, and ultimately responding to it.

Persuasive listening implies an awareness that you are listening to someone who wants to win you to his position, as a consequence of which you attend in an analytical and evaluative manner.

Entertaining listening is the reverse in that no analysis or evaluation is involved but just relaxing and non-critically attending what the speaker has to say.

Good listeners set their own objectives, having concluded that doing so helps them keep pace with the unfolding of the discussion and absorb more. One of the most useful and re-

warding objectives is to adopt the attitude that "As a listener, I will take at least 51 percent of the responsibility for all communications I have with people." That is a sensible reaction to research findings showing that in the communication process, more listeners fail than speakers. The experts say that only about 10 percent of the population can be said to be good listeners on a consistent basis.

As for the characteristics of the people who make up this 10 percent, appropriate eye contact clearly is constructive listening behavior and lack of it is destructive—by our standards. However, that is not the case everywhere in the world. In some cultures eye contact is considered disrespectful. For the typical American, in any event, people feel comfortable with maintaining eye contact for about 40 to 70 percent of the time. One hundred percent eye contact is taken as an attempt to intimidate.

Feedback is basic to good listening. Sometimes a nod of the head or an "uh huh" is sufficient, but in any case some sort of reaction. Good listeners give their full attention to the speaker; they are not just biding their time (perhaps meanwhile humming a tune or impatiently tapping a foot) until they can take over. Good listeners give the speaker full rein and are meticulous in not creating any distractions.

Meanwhile they concentrate first on grasping the speaker's central message or idea and then following its development. Many people prove to be poor listeners because they get so hung up on every little detail that they miss the basic concepts. Good listeners maintain control over their emotions, refusing to let anyone push their "not" button; when that happens, passion tends to replace perspective, and you may start hearing messages that were never intended.

As the conversation or presentation progresses, good listeners will from time to time ask questions—not to pose a challenge but to seek

clarification and to help keep the communication focused. Now and then they may restate the message in their own words and check with the speaker to make sure they and the speaker are on the same wave length.

A frequent cause of poor listening is a mechanical one called the "listener/speaker differential." That term refers to the proposition that while people normally *speak* at from 100 to 150 words per minute, we can listen at a rate of somewhere between 300 and 800 words per minute. In short, the speaking/listening ratio is approximately four to one. Such a difference would seem to suggest that everyone should be a good listener. However, more is involved than just the listening rate. For one thing, people's minds tend to wander. Curiously, one of the main reasons this happens is that, not knowing how to capitalize on all the hours available to us, we tend to get into the habit of simply throwing them away. Good listeners have disciplined themselves to avoid that waste, usually through five approaches: They *visualize*, they *analyze*, they *summarize*, they *take notes*, and they *anticipate*.

In compensating for the speaking/listening differential by *visualizing*, for example, one might picture oneself as being in the speaker's shoes, engaged in the activity the speaker is talking about.

Meanwhile it is a good idea to be constantly *analyzing* what the speaker is saying. Does it make sense? Is it logical? What evidence does the speaker provide? Does the speaker seem to be biased or holding a grudge? Is the communication a matter of fact or of opinion?

Another technique is to maintain a running *summary* of what the speaker is saying. Recapitulate the main ideas, review the supporting details, perhaps ask a clarifying question or raise an alternative concept.

Note-taking can be another good way to put the speaking/listening dif-

ferential to use. To have the means of going back to particular points, and to recapture specific language, is extremely handy. However, there is the risk of concentrating so hard on writing down the words as to miss some of the speaker's main points. An effective way of dealing with this problem is to draw a line down the center

Only 7 percent of a speaker's message is conveyed by the words involved.

of your paper. On the left side, list main ideas. On the right side, jot down supporting details as time permits. If a main idea comes up while you are on the details side, immediately switch to the left column. Fill in the detail side later if you can, but in any event get the main ideas.

A final suggestion for capitalizing on the speaking/listening differential is to try to *anticipate* what the speaker is going to say. If you are correct, you learn by repetition. If your anticipation is off the target, you learn by comparison and contrast. Either way, you come out ahead.

Moving from the speaking/listening differential to nonverbal listening, Albert Mehrabian, author of *Silent Messages*, suggests that only 7 percent of a speaker's message is conveyed by the words involved, with the remainder coming from paralanguage.

About 38 percent, he says, comes from tonality—not what speakers literally say but how they say it. De-

pending on the tonality, a parent can convey a wide variety of messages to a child simply by saying the child's name, ranging from anger and disgust to love and approval.

With 7 percent of a message being communicated by words and 38 percent by tonality, Mehrabian postulates that the remaining 55 percent is conveyed by body language. The way one stands or looks or gestures can variously express confidence, friendliness, hostility, enthusiasm, weakness, and half a hundred other messages. At any rate, while Mehrabian's percentages may be out of kilter—that is a matter of debate—he conveys a useful observation: That speakers should be aware that as they talk, they are being "heard" in three different ways. Thus it is important—particularly when a presentation or speech is involved—that their manner of dress and facial expressions and gestures, and the tones they use, fit in with the words they speak. Otherwise their listeners will feel confused and bewildered, at least at the subconscious level.

As for communicating on the telephone, the experts say that paralanguage—in this case tonality alone—still dominates over regular language, being responsible for conveying about 84 percent of what the listener "hears."

Having considered listening from the point of view of the individual, let's briefly look at it within the framework of an organization, such as a school. Communications within a school inevitably flow both upward and downward, but administrators tend to be cut off from so much of the upward flow that they often are among the most poorly informed members of the staff. That happens for several reasons, among them the fact that employees tend to pass along only what they think the boss wants to know or that makes the employee look good, and that they often feel that the less they tell anyone the better.

The situation with regard to the downward flow of information is a

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shade better, but still bleak. Studies suggest that only 20 to 25 percent of the information issued at the top of the organization filters down to the bottom. As for the reasons for this breakdown, Performax Systems suggests the following eight as being particularly important:

- *Communication overload.* Too often the amount of information fed into the system is more than people can handle.
- *Lack of openness and trust within the organization.* The issue here is whether the environment tends to stimulate competition or cooperation. A cooperative environment encourages the flow of information, a competitive one creates barricades.
- *Unclear organizational goals.* Inter-organizational communication falters when the staff does not understand what the school is trying to ac-

complish or whether their goals and the school's are in conflict.

- *Language.* This not only a matter of knowing English but of the use of terminology or lingo that the employees do not comprehend. As Archie Bunker complained to his long-suffering wife, "Of course you don't understand me, Edith. I'm speaking in English, and you're listening in Dingbat."

- *Short-circuiting.* Distractions of one kind or another, interruptions, the introduction of irrelevant matters—such things take a toll in the flow of information. A certain amount of this sort of thing is doubtless inevitable, but to at least some extent it can be curbed.

- *Cultural differences.* People from differing cultures have differing customs and mores—in the matter of eye contact, for example—and the good communicators in the organization are alert to this fact.

- *Timing.* People going through a major crisis—a death in the family, for instance, or perhaps a divorce—are not likely to be good listeners, and communication with them might profitably be deferred.

- *Perception.* Some studies suggest that as much as 70 to 90 percent of a message may be distorted or

misinterpreted by differences in individual standards, beliefs, values, attitudes, and experiences.

As such a list suggests, communicating effectively—receiving and issuing messages that are mutually understood—is by no means easy. We recognize that a challenge is involved when we are called on to give a speech, or when we set out to write a paper. But listening? Listening seems so automatic and "natural" that we tend to ignore the fact that some of us do it better than others. The fact is that we can all learn to be better listeners.

What it takes is awareness of good and bad listening habits, practice, and perhaps above all this: A determination to be the kind of listener who takes at least 51 percent of the communicating responsibility.

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