

Reserve Bank of India
College of Agricultural Banking, Pune

HR & Leadership Channel

Listening Skill¹

‘Man is by nature a social animal’ said Aristotle. What is it that makes man social? Communication. Communication is what glues the family, enables transaction at the marketplace, coordination at the workplace, and debate in the public sphere. Communication is not just about ‘speaking’ or ‘sending data’ (information/opinion/judgment/decisions). In fact, both ‘sending’ and ‘receiving’ (listening) are its inalienable parts.

2. Listening Skill

Listening is a skill. It can be improved through practice. Almost all professions involve listening - some quite intensively (E.g. doctors, judges, pilots, managers, etc.). Further, just as speaking takes toil, listening also entails effort.

3. ‘Hearing’ and ‘Listening’

Listening is more than just hearing.

- Hearing is purely physical act wherein the auditory apparatus of the body registers sound.
- Listening is a mental activity wherein the sound received is processed in the brain – attention is paid on the content, implications, desirable response, etc.

4. Effective Listening – What are the Requirements?

- Focus – Engaging one’s physical, mental, and emotional self in listening.
- Openness – Checking preconceived notions about the speaker/topic. These degrade the effectiveness of listening.

¹ Compiled by Dr. Gautam Prakash, DGM & MoF, CAB, RBI, Pune
The views and opinions expressed in this Knowledge Card are that of the author and not of the RBI or CAB. This Knowledge Card is intended for academic use and classroom discussions.

- Receptivity to both facts and emotions - Ignoring emotions of the speaker can be doubly harmful – one might lose the speaker's trust and also miss important additional information.
- Signalling interest – Non-verbal clues (facial expressions/tone/gestures, etc.), asking probing questions and paraphrasing and summarising can signal interest to the speaker.

5. Empathic Listening (EL)

- EL was developed by psychologist Carl Rogers.
- It is the process of attending to someone so that he/she feels heard in a non-judgmental way.
- The listener's objective is - to help the speaker, who is facing some challenge, to gain better insight.
- It requires the listener to accompany the speaker in his/her moment of sadness/anguish/self-discovery/challenge/joy.
- It can be used both in professional and personal settings, and is especially useful in certain forms of communication (e.g. counselling).

6. Value System embedded in EL

- People are good.
- When people are truly heard, they get insights, often correct.
- Errors in the speaker's assumptions can be pointed out, provided the listener has been practicing EL.
- Honestly sharing own value system, but without imposing them, is permissible.

7. Characteristics of an Empathic Listener

- a. Signals interest.
- b. Motivates the speaker to speak, without fearing being judged.
- c. Does not use pauses to interrupt.
- d. Allows the speaker determine the direction of the conversation.
- e. Intervenes with questions when he/she senses that the speaker is ready for more intense self-analysis.

8. Practice Exercise

In a quiet place, ask a colleague/friend to speak on something (e.g., productivity in office). Then,

- i. As he/she completes a point, paraphrase and seek confirmation.
- ii. When appropriate, ask questions to explore thoughts and feelings.
- iii. Explore what may be leading to the emotions but don't judge on whether the emotions are justified or not.
- iv. Show engagement.
- v. Avoid counter-arguments/rebuttals/solutions, while he/she is speaking.
- vi. Intervene only after seeking permission from him/her.

**

References

- 'Effective Listening Skills' by Abby R. Kratz (1995)
- 'Powerful Communication Skills' by Colleen McKenna (2003)
- 'Listening Skills' by Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT Kanpur (at www.nptel.ac.in)
- 'Characteristics of Effective Listening' by Teaching Commons, Stanford University (<http://teachingcommons.stanford.edu>)
- 'Listening First Aid – Empathetic Approach' by Georgio Billikopf, University of California, Davies (<https://listening.tfnico.com/>)
- 'Active Listening' by Greater Good Science Centre, University of California, Berkeley (<https://ggsc.berkeley.edu>)
