Listening for Understanding

Instructor's Manual

January 2007
Listening for Understanding 2 - 2 1/2 hours

No communication skill is more important than listening. We spend more time listening than doing any other activity except breathing. Unfortunately, we listen with only 25% of our potential. This lesson will give learners several techniques to learn, practice, and perfect. Improved listening skills will help the learner understand someone’s motives without having to be a mind reader. Improved listening skills will avoid many misunderstandings in the workplace as well as at home.

Learners will learn how to recognize attending skills, reflective skills, obstacles to listening, and incongruence between spoken and body language.

Instructional Plan
Administer Pre-test.
Listening for understanding is an attitude. The learner’s effectiveness in personal life and in work depends on the ability to listen. The listener’s purpose is to get a clear picture of what the speaker is saying. This message is revealed through the speaker’s eyes, facial expressions, voice, emotions, and words. The listener’s attentiveness is revealed in the same way. Ask the participants how they can tell when someone is only half-listening. Write their responses on the board or flip chart. Ask: How does it make you feel when someone only pretends to listen? Now ask: How can you tell when someone is really interested in what you are saying and really listening to you? Write their responses on the board or flip chart. Contrast these with their previous responses. Have the learners think of an instance when they were bored or uninterested in what someone was saying. How did they show it or what did they do to try to hide their boredom?

Direct learners’ attention to Worksheet #1 A Self-Evaluation for Active Listening. Have them complete the handout individually. Now discuss their responses as a group.

Display (on the board or flipchart) the terms used in this lesson. These include:

- Attending skills
- Reflective skills
- Incongruence
- Listening obstacles

Ask learners to give a definition for each term. Now refer the learners to Worksheet #2 Listening Skills. Read each section out loud and discuss it. Make sure the learners understand the terms and the skills covered in the sections.
Display Overhead #1 Ways to Improve Your Listening Skills. Refer learners to Worksheet #3 Ways to Improve Your Listening Skills. Go over the points on the overhead. Answer any questions learners may have.

Now have the learners get in groups of three. One participant will be the listener, one will serve as the speaker, and one will be the recorder. The recorder will take notes on the information given by both the speaker and the listener, including verbal and nonverbal cues, how the listener responded to the speaker, how the speaker responded to the listener, and other pluses or minuses of their conversation.

The assignment is for the speaker to tell the listener about a past job. When the speaker is finished, the listener is to summarize what the speaker said.

Reconvene the class and solicit feedback on what happened in each of the groups. Answer any questions at this point.

Now read the following scenario to the participants:

Charles had just moved to a new city. He wanted to open both a savings and a checking account, so he visited a local bank. He talked with Phyllis, a customer service representative, for about thirty minutes. Phyllis started the conversation by saying, “What can I do for you?” While Charles asked questions, Phyllis looked at her watch, out the window, and at her computer screen. She gave Charles only brief answers to his questions. He thanked her and left puzzled.

Ask the learners: What was confusing about Phyllis’ behavior? How could she have been a better listener? What nonverbal signs did she use to indicate that she was not listening? What message was the receiver getting?

In all communication, there is a sender and a receiver. Both parties play roles during an interaction and at different times during the conversation. Even if you stop talking, you continue to send messages. We send messages with words, body language, and the tone, emphasis, and tempo of our voice.

Divide the learners into groups of three. Refer learners to Worksheet #4 Listening Scenarios. Assign each group a scenario. Direct the learners to read over their assigned scenario and discuss the question(s) following it. If a group finishes early, it may choose another scenario to discuss. Each group should select a recorder to report back to the entire class on their conclusions about the scenarios. Once the learners have finished discussing their scenarios, reconvene the large group and have the recorders from each group report back.
Closure

Ask for learner volunteers to summarize the key points of this module. Write them on the board or flip chart. Answer any questions or fill in any missing information.

Administer Post-test.
Listening for Understanding Pre/Post Test (Circle Pre or Post)

1. There are several techniques for improving your listening skills. Reflective skills mean that you check with the speaker to see if you understand his/her meaning. What would Attending skills mean?

2. When the speaker's feelings, body language, or voice expressions do not match the verbal message, this is called: A) Attending skills; B) Reflective skills; C) Incongruence; D) Listening Obstacles. Circle the best answer.

3. If the listener says, "You're wrong. No way! I'll tell you like it is." This is an example of: A) Attending skills; B) Reflective; C) Incongruence; D) Listening obstacles. Circle the best answer.

4. If your boss tells you that if you want to apply for a shift change or a department change you need to let him know right away and you are confused, what kind of questions should you ask? A) Reflective; B) Confusing; C) Clarifying; D) Attentive. Circle the best answer.

5. Give two examples of positive body language that suggest the listener is focused on what the speaker is saying.

6. Give an example of body language that suggests the listener is not focused on what the speaker is saying.

7. Silence indicates passivity. True or False Circle the best answer.

8. Which of the following is not a way to improve your listening skills? A) Focus your attention over the speaker's head; B) Listen without interrupting; C) Use body language; D) Summarize. Circle the best answer.

9. Most people listen with only ____ of their potential.
   A) 10%  B) 50%  C) 5%  D) 25% Circle the best answer.

10. A good listener asks questions: A) Before the presentation; B) After the presentation; C) During the presentation; D) Does not ask questions. Circle the best answer.
Answer Key for Listening for Understanding

1. Attending skills means paying attention to the speaker, listening to the speaker, etc.

2. Incongruence

3. Listening obstacles

4. Clarifying

5. Suggestions: maintaining eye contact, leaning forward, using responsive body motions, asking questions.

6. Suggestions: Looking out the window, restlessness, slouching in the chair, looking bored, etc.

7. False

8. Focus your attention over the speaker's head

9. 25%

10. After the presentation
Worksheet #1 A Self-Evaluation for Active Listening

A Self-Evaluation for Active Listening

What are your listening habits? Take a few minutes to rate yourself. Read each statement below. Circle YES if it is true for you most of the time. Circle NO if it is not true for you most of the time.

1. I allow the other person to finish what s/he is saying before I speak. | YES | NO
2. I pay attention even when I don’t like the speaker. | YES | NO
3. I easily ignore distractions when I am listening. | YES | NO
4. I can easily remember what other people say to me. | YES | NO
5. I ask the speaker questions when I don’t understand something. | YES | NO
6. I look at people when they are talking to me. | YES | NO
7. I don’t do other things when I am listening. | YES | NO
8. I keep listening even when the message is too complicated. | YES | NO
9. I ignore behavior or appearances that bother me and listen to what the speaker is saying. | YES | NO

Your YES answers show that you already have some active listening skills. In other words, you are involved in the communication process. You take responsibility for understanding the speaker’s message.

Your NO answers show that you could use some improvement in some areas of active listening. With practice, you can improve your listening skills.
Worksheet #2 Listening Skills

Listening Skills

Attending Skills

Attending skills are just that: giving attention to the speaker. Responses that show you are listening to the speaker are maintaining eye contact, leaning forward, using responsive body motions, and asking questions. These things show that you are really interested in what the speaker is saying. You should avoid distracting outside noises and daydreaming. You should also provide the speaker with necessary silences for thought. Occasional responses such as “Uh-huh,” “OK,” or “Mmmm” show the speaker that you are listening. To be totally attentive, it is necessary to search for meaning in the speaker’s eyes, body language, and voice tone, as well as his/her words. Look for meaning in the total expression of the speaker.

You are not using attending skills if you interrupt or finish sentences for the speaker, if you are thinking about your response to what the speaker is saying before s/he finished talking, or if you stop paying attention because you disagree with the speaker.

What other clues might help you recognize that a listener is not attending to you? Sometimes it is hard to tell when someone is not listening to you because s/he gives the appearance of listening. So how can you tell if someone is only half-listening?

Reflective Skills

Reflective skills mean that you check with the speaker to see whether you understand his/her meaning. You demonstrate that you are listening by saying back to the person what s/he has said to you. One way to demonstrate reflective listening is by using “say-back.” You say back to the person what s/he has told you. Don’t repeat the speaker word-for-word or parrot him/her, but use your own words to say back what was said. You may reflect content, emotion, or behavior in what you say back. For example, you might start a say-back sentence with “If I understand you correctly, you are saying that...” or “Please correct me if I misunderstood, but you were saying...”

To use reflective skills to make sure you understand the content of what the speaker said, you can restate in your own words the content of the verbal message. If, for example, your spouse tells you about a rough day on the job, you could say back, "Sounds like things didn't go well for you today." This would reflect the content of what the speaker said.
Worksheet #2 Listening Skills (Page 2)

To use reflective skills to understand the behavior of the speaker, you can suggest your own interpretation of the behaviors. You can also ask the speaker to attach a message to the behavior. Try to get in the habit of responding to the behavior. Although behavior has many interpretations, with the help of the speaker, you can gain insight into its meaning. For example, you might notice the body language of the speaker and say, "I see that you are walking rather slowly today. What’s up?" or "I notice that you keep looking at the clock. Is there something you need to do?" These questions reflect the behavior of the speaker.

To use reflective skills to reflect back the emotion of the speaker, you can put yourself in the speaker’s position and ask, "How would I feel if I were in his/her place?" If you feel that the speaker is confused or uncertain about what s/he is saying, you could say, "You look puzzled. Can I clear up the confusion?" or "So, basically you are feeling uncertain about your plans." A statement or questions such as these would indicate that you are reflecting about how the speaker is feeling.

To listen to a speaker with your full attention, you must listen to the words and pay attention to the behavior, body language, emotion, or feelings of the speaker.

In the activity below, mark the following responses as reflecting content (C), behavior (B), or emotion (E). Put your answer in the spaces provided.

_____1. Do you mean that we will get an increase in our pay, but our benefits will stay the same?

_____2. I see that gleam in your eye. Did you get a raise?

_____3. Sounds like you’re dealing with some anxiety about your upcoming performance evaluation.

_____4. When I asked you if you were coming, and you took a few minutes to respond, what did that mean?

_____5. Let’s see. You want me to record the temperatures over the next six hours and then bring the report to your office immediately.

_____6. You keep tapping your pencil on the desk. Are you feeling impatient?
Worksheet #2 (Page 3)

Incongruence

When the feelings, body language, or voice expressions do not match the verbal message, this is called incongruence. The speaker is sending conflicting signals. When you spot incongruence in a speaker's message, you can clear up confusion by pointing this out. Begin by pointing the incongruence out in a friendly, non-threatening manner. If you seem judgmental, the speaker may perceive this as a personal attack and withdraw or react in a defensive or aggressive manner. Some examples of responses from a listener might be, “You say you want to get home early, but your voice sounds hesitant.” Or “On the one hand, you act kindly, but your face looks angry.” You may also ask questions that point out incongruence, such as, “You say you want this assignment, but you have arrived late for our session several times, Is there something that is bringing up resistance in you?”

Reflective listening is effective in many situations because it helps the listener decipher unclear messages, provides instant feedback to the speaker, lets the speaker know that the listener is listening, and keeps the focus on the message. As the listener, you will decide when reflective listening is appropriate and when it is not.

Listening Obstacles

Sometimes there are obstacles to listening that can interfere with listening reflectively or even with being attentive to the speaker. The obstacles or barriers usually stem from the listener’s judgmental thoughts or responses. This can take many forms. When the listener has a judgmental point of view, s/he keeps the speaker from sharing his/her thoughts and feelings.

Some examples of listening obstacles and judgmental responses are:

1. Having to be right - The listener may say, "You’re wrong. No way! I'll tell you how it is."

2. Dismissing the speaker's needs - The listener may say, "Wait until later. I'm busy right now."

3. Giving advice - "Why didn't you do this first?"

4. Discounting emotions or thoughts - "You shouldn't feel that way."

5. Comparing unfavorably - "Susie didn't have any trouble when I worked with her. What's your problem?"
Worksheet #2 (Page 4)

Many times it is much easier to be judgmental than to be reflective and hear what the speaker is saying and feeling. Be aware of your own tendencies to be judgmental, your biases, beliefs, interests, and fears. All of these may prevent you from listening for understanding. Hold off on making a judgment until you get all the information.

Clariﬁying Questions

Another important listening skill that you will need to develop is that of asking clarifying questions. Clarifying questions will help you gain more information to complete what the speaker is trying to say. If you don’t understand something the speaker has said, you can ask questions. If the speaker left out something you needed to know, you can ask for clarification.

For example, your boss tells you that if you want to apply for a shift change or a department change, you need to let him know right away. Some clarifying questions you might ask are:

- Whom do I need to tell?
- Exactly when is the deadline?
- Can anyone apply for a shift change?

What clarification questions might you ask in response to the following?

Your boss says to you: “Bring those papers on productivity rates for your area by my office next Tuesday.”

Once you ask for clarification, the speaker can provide you with corrections and details to the message. To process this new information, you can return to your reflecting skills and may need to continue to ask questions to gain new information. Reflecting and questioning will help you gain skill in the listening process.
Ways to Improve Your Listening Skills

- Always look directly at the speaker.
- Focus on what the speaker is saying.
- Listen. Don’t interrupt.
- Do not let preconceived ideas about the subject or speaker get in the way of the conversation.
- Let the speaker know you are understanding what s/he is saying by giving short clues, such as Yes,” “I understand,” “Oh,” “Go on,” “Okay,” etc.
- Use body language such as nodding, having eye contact, smiling, etc.
- Silence does not indicate passivity. Good listening is hard work.
- Ask questions
- Summarize.
Worksheet #3 Ways to Improve Your Listening Skills

Ways to Improve Your Listening Skills

- Always look directly at the speaker. In some cultures, direct eye contact is rude and offensive. However, in Western culture, direct eye contact means you are listening.

- Focus on what the speaker is saying. Keep all other distractions out of your mind.

- Listen. Don’t interrupt. Let the speaker get the message across to you without interruption. May you “just know” what they are going to say or maybe you want to add something to his/her remarks. Think better of this. Allow the speaker to complete his/her comments.

- Do not let preconceived ideas about the subject or speaker get in the way of the conversation.

- Let the speaker know you are understanding what s/he is saying by giving short clues, such as “Yes,” “I understand,” “Oh,” “Go on,” “Okay,” etc. You are signaling to him/her that you want him/her to go on.

- Body language is a clue to your understanding of what the speaker is saying. By nodding, having eye contact, smiling, etc., you are showing the speaker that you want him/her to continue. On the other hand, if you turn to look out the window or at your computer screen, you are signaling your lack of interest.

- Silence does not indicate passivity. Good listening is hard work.

- After the speaker has finished his/her remarks, it is all right to ask questions to help in your understanding of what has been said. This shows interest and gets you the facts you need.

- Summarize the remarks of the speaker.
Worksheet #4 Listening Scenarios

Listening Scenarios

Scenario 1

Bob and Barbara carpool to the school where they are both teachers. Barbara is late again this week. Finally, she arrives at Bob's house. She begins to say something about her two-month-old girl awakening continually throughout the night. She doesn't even get her sentence completed before Bob cuts her off, "It seems like your alarm clock must be on the wrong time again." Then he sees the confused look on Barbara's face.

Why did Barbara look puzzled? What did Bob do to cause the confusion?

Scenario 2

Chris is so upset about his monthly sales report for his district that he does not pay attention to Mr. Smith's directions. Although Chris turns in a nicely written report, he does not include information about clients and costs, which Mr. Smith told him to include.

What listening skill would have been most helpful for Chris?

Scenario 3

At a publicity meeting for a new product, Lauren says to Jill and Emily, 'The winter season is a peak time for this company. We are very fortunate to be able to bring this new product out at this time. But we're going to have to increase the number of businesses we call on. I've revised our campaign plan. I want you all to make forty calls a day.' Jill and Emily nod in agreement. No questions are asked. Before they leave her office, Lauren gives a quick summation. She says, 'Thanks for your help. I think this week you can each manage forty calls.' Jill says, 'Forty? I thought you meant twenty calls each!'

What led to the confusion? What saved Jill and Emily from making a terrible mistake? What should Jill and Emily asked before leaving the meeting?
Worksheet #4 Listening Scenarios (Page 2)

Scenario 4

Joe is driving in Marietta and can’t find Rossi Pasta. He stops on Third Street and asks someone who is sitting on her porch for directions. The lady says, “You go down to the second stop light and make a right turn. I’m not sure of the street name. It begins with a ‘W’ I think. Drive to the bridge located beside the Chinese restaurant. It’s near the football field. Go to the stoplight immediately before the ‘Y’ in the road. It has flowers planted there. It should be right on the corner. If you come to the ‘7-11’ you know you’ve gone too far.”

What was Joe trying to find? What should Joe do at the end of the conversation to make sure he understands? Could you find the business Joe was looking for?