

Building
ACTIVE
LISTENING
SKILLS

Judi Brownell

BUILDING ACTIVE LISTENING SKILLS

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PREFACE

The last decade has witnessed a tremendous increase in the number of listening resources available, and research in the field is accumulating. In spite of the uncertainties concerning the exact nature of the listening process, it is receiving increased attention in both the academic and business environments. *Building Active Listening Skills* contributes to the growing library of practical resources on how to develop essential listening competencies.

You will find this text different in several ways from other books on the subject. First, listening is broadly defined as a process involving six skill areas, or components: (1) hearing messages, (2) understanding messages, (3) remembering messages, (4) interpreting messages, (5) evaluating messages, and (6) responding to messages. Each specific listening skill is placed into one of these components. This structure allows listening to be approached from a behavioral perspective and provides maximum flexibility in selecting instructional content and focus.

The text format also enables the instructor to tailor courses or seminars to the specific participant group, since each component may be covered independently. A questionnaire is provided in Chapter 1 for use as a preprogram assessment instrument. As well as providing individuals with insight into their listening behaviors, the questionnaire aids in the selection of material and skill areas for any instructional program. Since listening instruction is frequently under time constraints—either as a unit within a longer course or as a short seminar—results of the questionnaire can be used to guide the instructor in creating objectives and choosing relevant materials. The text is designed so that the entire listening process need not be covered. Instructors

may choose to focus on one, two, three, or more components of the listening process.

Selected background information is presented under the process sections of Chapters 2 through 7. Those interested in a how-to approach can focus on the listening techniques portions of these chapters. There is a variety of exercises that allows for both individual assessment and group interaction. These have been clearly labeled so that individuals who want to use the text independently may do so. This format also encourages a self-paced approach where each individual is encouraged to work on areas of particular concern. Managers, students in programs of business and administration, or anyone interested in improving communication competence through more effective listening will find the ideas and information useful. The Instructor's Manual includes additional activities and instructional resources.

It is through our ability to communicate that we create and accumulate knowledge. This complex, often elusive process is more than simply a means of getting ideas from one place to the next—of “getting things done.” Our communication also affects the very nature of our existence. As educators, we have a responsibility to help individuals develop their potential to make wise decisions, to evaluate logically, to become sensitive and responsive to their colleagues. The enhancement of listening skills contributes to better personal and professional relationships and, hence, more effective social organizations.

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I was teaching in the Speech and Theatre Arts Department at the State College of New York at Cortland when I first considered writing a text on listening. My colleagues there, particularly Laurie Arliss and Patricia Underwood, provided the initial encouragement that spurred me to begin this project.

Two educators have had a lasting impact on my professional activities. Dr. Paul Ried, Associate Professor of Speech Communication at Syracuse University, has influenced me both through his teaching and by his example. His sincere concern for students, his dedication to the field, and his professionalism have inspired much of my work. The ideas of Dr. Elwood Murray, Emeritus Professor at the University of Denver, have proven valuable in my teaching and relevant to management education and practice. I thank them both for their guidance.

To my mother, Dorothy Broadwell, I express gratitude for help in proofreading the manuscript and in writing supplementary materials. Joseph Kopal also contributed to the Instructor's Manual. Thanks to Margaret Brownell for hours spent working on the permissions file.

The insights I gained through conducting listening training in local firms have been invaluable. I would like to thank both the practicing managers and my students in the School of Management at the University Center at Binghamton for their insights and enthusiasm. David Meredith, Management and Organization Development Specialist at Singer-Link Flight Simu-

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Finally, I would like to say thank you to my International Listening Association colleagues who have given me opportunities to share and to learn; to the editors and staff at Prentice-Hall, who led me through the process of turning ideas into print; and to my family, who have always been there when I needed them.

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PART I

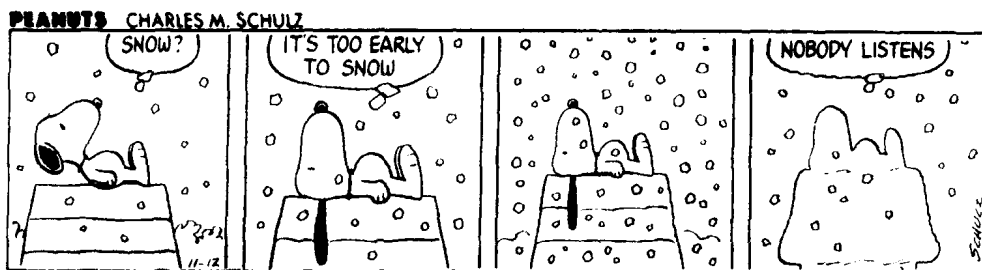
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INTRODUCTION

LISTENING: RECOGNIZED AT LAST

Your listening competence is a key factor in determining both personal and professional success.¹ As technological advances make the collection, processing, and retrieval of information more sophisticated than ever, the need for effective communication becomes increasingly acute. Individuals must be prepared to analyze and synthesize information, make decisions, create appropriate messages, and communicate them clearly. Managers must handle relationships and deal with information wisely. To accomplish this, a high level of communication competence is required.

We sense from an early age that to speak well is important—to present ourselves favorably, to express our ideas clearly, to convince and motivate. Teachers correct our grammar, parents correct our posture. With the help of wise educators and simplified manuals, most of us do a fair job of talking.



But do we listen? If someone asked, “Do *you* listen?” you would likely say, “Of course!” The truth is, you may not be listening nearly as well as you think.

Researchers have studied how well the average person listens, and the results are revealing. Without a doubt, most of us have inadequate listening skills. In fact, personnel managers ranked listening the most “troublesome communication skill.”² Fortune 500 training managers agreed, calling poor listening one of “the most important problems” facing their organizations.³ But now for the good news: Listening skills can be improved. Listening can be approached as a learned skill, just like reading, writing, or speaking. That means that although it takes hard work and practice, your personal initiative can result in a significant improvement in your listening competence. In fact, listening is an area where trying hard really does pay off. Why not get started?

It is easy to oversimplify the process of listening. Most people will tell you that it’s not difficult to listen—they do it all the time! To some extent, of course, they’re right. Most executives spend 45 percent to 63 percent of their day listening.⁴ During the late 1970s the Sperry Corporation focused public attention on listening when it advertised itself as the company that “understands how important it is to listen.” Their pamphlet, “Your Personal Listening Profile,” clearly identified the importance of listening and brought to light the need for increased emphasis on the development of listening competence.⁵ (See Table 1-1.)

Since Sperry’s pioneering move, an increasing number of individuals and organizations have become interested in this topic. Among the most significant developments was the founding of the International Listening Association in 1979.⁶ The ILA promotes the study and teaching of listening through

- the establishment of a network of professionals;
- the exchange of information, teaching methods, and training materials; and
- the encouragement of research in all areas of the field

Table 1-1

<i>COMMUNICATION SKILL</i>	<i>WHEN LEARNED</i>	<i>EXTENT USED</i>	<i>EXTENT TAUGHT</i>
Listening	1st	45%	4th
Speaking	2nd	30%	3rd
Reading	3rd	16%	2nd
Writing	4th	9%	1st

As the concern among educators increases, course offerings and seminars will reflect a heightened awareness of the central role listening plays in the communication process. In the years to come, individuals will assume their organizational responsibilities better prepared to confront and handle successfully the various listening situations they encounter.

THE COMMUNICATION PROCESS: HOW WE SHARE MEANINGS

Perception: A Starting Point

There's a saying that goes: "From the other person's point of view, he's probably right."⁷ Perception and point of view—the way we select and interpret the stimuli we receive each day—are important concerns for the listener. We are interested in how individuals experience the world and how they translate sensory data into patterns of thought and speech. Although the exact nature and causes of perceptual differences are difficult to determine, there is no doubt that each person processes information in a unique way. In a sense, all of us create our own meaning, our own reality. And, in that regard, effective communicators consider not only their own beliefs, but also what their *partners* believe to be true.

Certainly our perspective—whether it be the difference between a child's and an adult's selective perceptions or the difference between a front row seat and the balcony—plays a role in determining which stimuli we receive in any given situation. To some extent, we see what we expect to see. Our perceptions are colored by our preconceived notions. We select information in keeping with our interests and needs, and in the process we further limit our view. These internal factors are significant; yet, because they are internal, they also are difficult for the listener to identify.

KNOTS

There must be something the matter with him
 because he would not be acting as he does unless there was
 therefore he is acting as he is
 because there is something the matter with him
 He does not think there is anything the matter with him because
 one of the things that is
 the matter with him
 is that he does not think that there is anything
 the matter with him

therefore
 we have to help him realize that
 the fact that he does not think there is anything
 the matter with him
 is one of the things that is
 the matter with him

—R. D. Laing

Source: From *Knots*, by R. D. Laing, Copyright © 1970 by R. D. Laing. Reprinted by permission of Pantheon Books, a division of Random House, Inc.

After we select information from our environment, some strategy is required to impose order on even our simplest experiences. Otherwise, the world would appear as a series of disconnected events. We know that our interpretation depends not only on how we see things in relation to their surroundings, but also on what we already know. Pygmies, for example, who spend most of their lives in the jungle, have difficulty “learning” that objects appear smaller when seen at a distance. In their experience, all objects are viewed at close range. They have no notion of perceptual distance.

In our efforts to impose order on our environment, we learn to follow certain rules. We group together objects that are located near one another; we “fill in” when stimuli are perceived as incomplete; we group together items that appear similar; and once we perceive something in a particular way, our perception tends to remain stable.

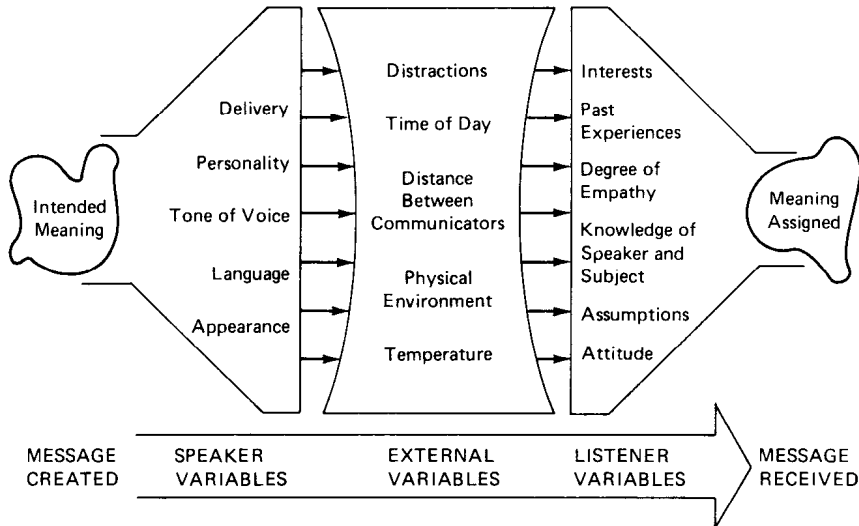


Figure 1-1 Variables in the perception of oral messages.

Finally, it is important to note that our perception of people is even more complex and potentially problematic than our perceptions of objects and events. One reason is that we tend to go beyond our observations of an individual's overt behavior and physical characteristics to make inferences based on these observations. Unless we are careful, it is easy to forget that these inferences are constructs of our own mental processes and not concrete attributes of the person in question.

Given the complexity of the perceptual process (Fig. 1-1), it is a wonder that we do so well in our daily efforts to share meanings with our colleagues. Effective listening requires that we understand perceptual differences and the impact these differences have on communication.

Communication: A Definition and a Model

Communication is a dynamic, reciprocal process. A brief look at a model of oral communication is helpful in understanding the role listening plays in the total communication process. First, however, a definition. Let's agree that *communication is effective to the extent that the meaning the listener receives is the one the speaker intended*. This idea of shared meaning highlights the importance both of sender and receiver in any encounter. The listener must assign meaning to the other person's behavior in order for communication to occur. Too often we think of communication as an "act," a one-way process where the speaker does all the work and is to blame if the message is misunderstood.

Effective communicators understand the transactional nature of communication, where each participant is mutually influenced by the other. From this perspective, both speaker and listener participate in the creation of meanings. The mental images held by each person influence the interaction. From the listener's viewpoint, these three images include:⁸

Image A: how the listener sees himself with regard to his relationship with the speaker

Image B: how the listener believes himself to be seen by the speaker

Image C: how the listener sees the speaker

The relationship is affected by any discrepancies between the images and the facts to which they refer, or between the image held by the listener and that held by the speaker. John Stewart further explains the transactional perspective:

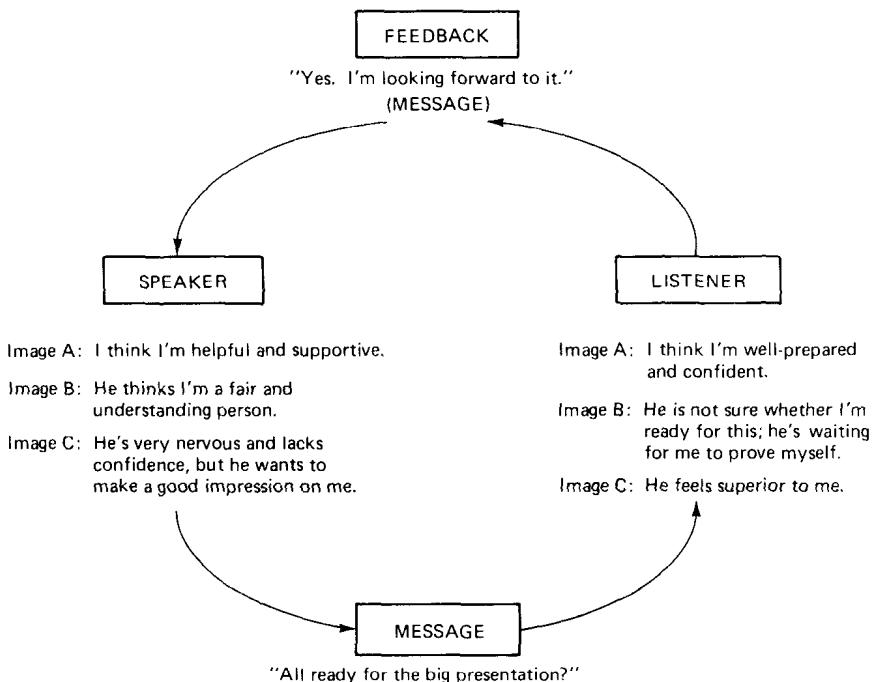
All human communication is transactional. We're always engaged in the definition-and-response-to-definition process. . . . When you

adopt a transactional point of view . . . you can't help but look at what's between the persons involved. If you focus your attention on just person A, for example, you realize that since person A is who he or she is only in relation to person B, you have to look immediately at what's happening between them.⁹

Our simplified model (Fig. 1-2) presents an example of the three images as they might occur in a typical encounter.

As listeners, we have a responsibility to work toward accurately shared meanings. We do this by becoming better informed about what to look for in our communication encounters, and by developing our own sending and receiving skills. Remember that the response you make as a listener becomes the new message, influencing the communication process in the same way as the speaker's original statement. By analyzing specific communication situations, you can often detect problems and work toward resolving them. Fig. 1-3 provides some helpful questions for those who are concerned with improving the effectiveness of their interactions.

Figure 1-2 The transactional process.



Effective Listeners Ask Themselves the Following Questions:

Concerning the *speaker*

- How does the speaker see me?
- How does the speaker think I see him?
- What is the speaker's purpose?
- Has the speaker considered his listener(s) in designing his message?
- Are there any "hidden agendas"?
- Do the speaker's voice and gestures enhance his message?

Concerning the *message*

- Are the ideas expressed clearly and concisely?
- Are the ideas well organized?
- Is the logic and reasoning sound?
- What emotions or values is the message intended to appeal to?

Concerning the *feedback*

- Is my feedback appropriate?
- Does it consider the specific individual and situation?
- Do my nonverbal behaviors reinforce my verbal response?
- Does my feedback reflect my honest intent?

Concerning interference in *listening*

- What internal distractions am I experiencing?
- What external distractions are present?
- What can I do in the situation to maximize my listening effectiveness?

Figure 1-3.

SIX APPROACHES TO LISTENING

There can be no "part-time" listening. Each of us has an ethical as well as a professional responsibility to be well informed, to keep both our ears and our minds open to new ideas and different points of view. If we want to take active roles within the family, community, or organization, listening competence is critical. A brief look at how researchers and educators have described the listening process is a good place to begin.

There is disagreement concerning exactly what the process of listening involves and how it best can be studied and taught. Definitions range