

Listening Your Way to **Management Success**

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For Barbara and Mary

Preface

We write this book for managers—and for those who aspire to be managers. We are concerned primarily with listening, as the title of the book suggests. But communication is an interactive, ongoing process. It cannot be arbitrarily segmented into discrete stages. It is impossible, therefore, to discuss listening without referring to speaking. But we are concerned primarily with the receiver of the initial message—the way the listener hears, understands, and responds to the message that was sent.

Obviously we believe that the ability to listen is important for management success. To begin with, listening well is a skill that must be learned: you were not born with the ability to pay attention, to analyze, to respond empathically. You have to understand what skills are needed, master those skills, apply them judiciously, and get feedback about your use of those skills. It must be apparent from your experience that many people have never learned how to listen. Some rarely pay attention. Some pay attention to the verbal message but cannot analyze critically the purpose and the assumptions that lie behind the verbal message. And only a few can listen empathically, engaging in the human dialog.

Our experience and our research suggest quite clearly that the most successful managers are those who have learned to listen well. They listen attentively, so that colleagues and subordinates feel they are respected. They listen analytically and can respond in ways that advance discussions and solve problems. And they listen empathically when such a response is appropriate, giving others the feeling that their personhood is recognized. They lead—and listening is an important part of their leadership skill.

That in a sense is what this book is all about—listening for leadership. You'll learn how to comprehend better when information is presented. You'll learn how to listen critically, analytically, and creatively in both individual and group interactions. And you'll learn how to respond empathically in ways that go beyond game playing and pseudo-psychologizing.

We hope you find the book useful. And we'd like to listen to you. We'd be happy to get your reactions and suggestions: write to us in care of the publisher.

Finally, we wish to acknowledge the assistance of Timothy A. Burke of Hughes Aircraft Company, Gary L. Cruze of Sperry-Rand, and Professor Joseph W. McGuire of the University of California, Irvine. Their advice helped us strengthen the manuscript in preparation. They listened. We hope we heard.

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Hearing, Analyzing, Empathizing— and Management Success

Ever since you were a child, you've been hearing about the importance of listening:

"Pay attention."

"You're not listening. Don't you care what I'm saying?"

"If you want to get ahead around here, pay attention to the boss."

So you don't need one more sermon about why listening is important. What you do need is specific help in learning how to listen—in knowing how to develop these essential skills.

Your listening development begins by realizing that all listening is not the same. This book will help you understand three different types of listening: **Hearing, Analyzing, Empathizing**. They are important kinds of listening and responding. Being able to sort out these three general types will help you master the specific skills involved in each.

Think first about **Hearing**. It's the fundamental type of listening, upon which the other two are built. Use this definition: hearing is receiving the message as sent. Suppose someone in the company makes this statement: "Farley just called from Fairfax Distributing. They need another gross of our 6X insulating sleeves. Put them on the first shipment tomorrow."

The worker who has heard accurately responds like this: "One gross of 6X sleeves—shipped tomorrow to Fairfax. Right."

The worker who has not heard accurately might respond like this: "What are they complaining about? We sent out that order last week."

As the examples suggest, the most important quality of first-level hearing is *accuracy*: to receive and comprehend the message just as it was sent, without distortion. Even though it is a relatively simple skill, people still make mistakes at this fundamental level. For to hear accurately you have to perform several complex behaviors almost instantaneously:

- Receive the sounds as transmitted;
- Translate those sounds into the words and meanings that were intended;
- Understand the relationship of those words in the sentences spoken;
- Note the relevant nonverbal cues that reinforce the message;
- Comprehend the entire message as intended.

It's no wonder that many people don't hear accurately.

Observe that the focus of hearing is on the *message*. You tune in to the content of what is being said, and the understanding you try to achieve is at a basic level of comprehension. You want to get the literal meaning of what was said.

The second type of listening is **Analyzing**. Use this definition for this second type: analyzing is discerning the purpose of the speaker and using critical or creative judgment. It is a more difficult type of listening since it involves a cluster of high-order intellectual skills. Suppose someone at the office makes this complaint: "I've noticed that several of the secretaries are getting back late from lunch. Do you think you could send out a memo reminding them that lunch is an hour, not an hour and a half?"

A manager who knows how to analyze critically would respond like this: "I'm afraid the memo might create a problem. How many are late? Who are they? Let's do some more thinking about the situation before we send out a memo."

The manager who has only heard without analyzing critically might respond like this instead: "Good idea. I'll get it out today. I can't stand people who waste company time."

The most essential quality of analyzing is analytical judgment—understanding the real purpose of the message and responding critically or creatively, as the purpose requires. Analyzing, as we use the term, involves these steps:

- Hearing the message accurately;
- Identifying the stated purpose;
- Inferring the unstated purpose;
- Determining if a critical or creative judgment is required;
- Responding accordingly.

Note that analyzing begins with hearing—but moves far beyond that basic level. Observe also that the focus of analyzing is on the purpose—how is this speaker trying to affect my behavior? The understanding that results from analyzing is at a deeper and more complex level than the

comprehension involved in hearing. You need to comprehend the literal message, but you want to go beyond that. You want to analyze the intent, understand what is really going on in the communication transaction, and respond accordingly.

The most complex type of listening is **Empathizing**. Empathizing is being fully present to the other, knowing what was said and what was left unsaid, and responding with supportive acceptance. It's actually an art as well as a skill—an intuitive instinct for the authentic response. Suppose a co-worker from another department makes this comment at coffee break: "That boss of mine is impossible." One who knows how to empathize might respond like this: "You're sounding frustrated. Care to talk about it?" Contrast that supportive response with this insensitive turn-off: "They're all the same. Have a martini at lunch and forget all about her."

As an art, empathizing is difficult to analyze and dissect, but it does seem to involve these stages:

- Hearing the message accurately;
- Listening to sense the unstated purpose;
- Withholding judgment;
- Seeing the world from the perspective of the speaker;
- Sensing the unspoken words;
- Responding with acceptance.

Empathizing builds upon hearing and listening, but extends significantly beyond them in its nature and impact. Note that the focus of empathizing is on the person, not the message or the purpose: at this moment what are the human needs of this person who stands before me? The understanding that comes from empathizing is at the deepest level of insight. By being fully present to the other, you have deepened your awareness of the humanity of the one who speaks to you.

Let's summarize at this point. **Hearing, analyzing, and empathizing** are three related but different types of listening. While they share some common elements, they are sufficiently different to warrant separate examination. They build upon each other and use somewhat different skills. Exhibit 1.1 summarizes what you have learned about these three types of listening. Throughout the book **listening** is used as the umbrella term to talk about all three types—but keep reminding yourself that there are these three different types of listening.

So that's what this book is all about—hearing, analyzing, and empathizing. In the next chapter you'll learn how to hear accurately, since that type of listening is most basic. The middle chapters deal with several different managerial situations which require you to use your analyzing skills in listening critically and creatively. The book concludes with a final chapter to help you learn how to empathize.

Exhibit 1.1
Hearing, Analyzing, Empathizing

Type	Definition	Focus	Nature of Understanding
Hearing	Receiving the message as sent	Message	Comprehension
Analyzing	Discerning purpose, using critical or creative judgment	Purpose	Analysis
Empathizing	Being fully present to the other	Person	Insight

Mastering these three levels of listening will give you an edge in the corporate struggle. First, consider how important accurate hearing is for managers. If you hear accurately, you get useful information. You project an image of alertness and attentiveness. You make the speaker feel that he or she is worth listening to. You receive important company messages as they were sent.

If you know how to analyze, to listen critically and creatively, you can distinguish unimportant facts from significant ideas. You can make meetings more productive. You know how to receive and evaluate corrective feedback. You can build upon the ideas of others in developing innovative solutions. And you project an image of an intelligent and creative manager.

Finally, if you learn how to empathize, you can improve the morale of those who work for and with you. You can develop a productive, worker-oriented climate. You can bring out the fullest potential of the team you lead. You project the image of a sensitive leader.

Effective workers hear accurately. Intelligent managers listen analytically. Successful leaders empathize sensitively. So how do you stand? One way of assessing your present level of accomplishment in these essential areas is to take the diagnostic quiz shown in Exhibit 1.2. Try to be objective and honest about yourself, neither too severe with nor too easy on yourself. And you can learn more about your skills if you get the objective feedback of someone who knows you and will be honest with you. Make a photocopy of Exhibit 1.2. Give it to a colleague—not a subordinate or a superior. And ask him or her to give you an honest rating. Then put together your assessment with your colleague's responses and decide which skills need special strengthening.

You'll notice that the fifteen statements deal in turn with the three types of listening: statements 1 to 4 with hearing; 5 to 11, analyzing; and 12 to 15, empathizing. We've omitted the three labels and attempted to use language your colleague will understand better. We've done so with the hope that you'll get a more objective appraisal.

Exhibit 1.2 Assessing Listening and Responding Skills

How well does this person listen and respond? Read each statement listed below. Decide how often this person uses each skill and circle the appropriate response.

Listening and Responding Skills	Frequency of Use				
1. Pays attention to what is being said.	Almost always	Usually	Occasionally	Rarely	Uncertain
2. Hears messages spoken at normal conversational level.	Almost always	Usually	Occasionally	Rarely	Uncertain
3. Understands special terms used on the job.	Almost always	Usually	Occasionally	Rarely	Uncertain
4. Comprehends messages accurately.	Almost always	Usually	Occasionally	Rarely	Uncertain
5. Makes intelligent inferences about speaker's real purpose.	Almost always	Usually	Occasionally	Rarely	Uncertain
6. Builds creatively upon the ideas of others.	Almost always	Usually	Occasionally	Rarely	Uncertain
7. Expresses differences constructively.	Almost always	Usually	Occasionally	Rarely	Uncertain
8. Listens well and responds constructively in meetings.	Almost always	Usually	Occasionally	Rarely	Uncertain
9. Helps others resolve their disputes constructively.	Almost always	Usually	Occasionally	Rarely	Uncertain
10. Uses listening skills to get information needed to increase power and influence.	Almost always	Usually	Occasionally	Rarely	Uncertain
11. Receives positive and negative feedback maturely.	Almost always	Usually	Occasionally	Rarely	Uncertain
12. Knows when it is appropriate to listen empathetically.	Almost always	Usually	Occasionally	Rarely	Uncertain
13. Withholds judgment when other person is speaking about important personal concerns.	Almost always	Usually	Occasionally	Rarely	Uncertain
14. Senses with insight what is felt but not spoken.	Almost always	Usually	Occasionally	Rarely	Uncertain
15. Responds with supportive acceptance when person is speaking about important personal concerns.	Almost always	Usually	Occasionally	Rarely	Uncertain

Hearing: Comprehending the Message

The first and most basic type of listening is hearing: the skill of receiving the message as sent. When you hear accurately, you comprehend the literal message as the speaker intended it. Suggesting that hearing is basic does not mean that it is unimportant. In fact, unless you hear accurately, you cannot meaningfully analyze or empathize. Many managers are ineffective at this first type of listening. They miss key parts of spoken messages, cannot remember what was said a few minutes before, and make mistakes because they act on the basis of misinformation.

Why don't people hear better? The usual answer is, "They don't pay attention." But not paying attention is a symptom. The reasons for inaccurate hearing are more complex. Part of the problem, of course, may lie with the speaker. If the speaker does not articulate or speak with sufficient volume, then even an attentive listener will have trouble comprehending. Or if the speaker uses language too technical for the listener, does not give enough examples to illustrate an idea, or does not organize the message clearly, then communication problems will result.

Blocks to Accurate Hearing

Our concern here is with the listener. What happens when even clear messages are not heard? Exhibit 2.1 lists the ten most important blocks to the accurate hearing of messages clearly sent. Understanding these blocks will help you improve your hearing skill.

Exhibit 2.1**Blocks To Accurate Hearing**

1. The environment is noisy and distracting.
 2. The listener has a hearing deficiency.
 3. The listener has an auditory processing deficiency.
 4. The listener can hear three times as fast as the speaker talks.
 5. *The listener is absorbed in self.*
 6. The listener has negative attitudes towards the speaker.
 7. The listener is insensitive to nonverbal aspects of the message.
 8. The listener does not understand the key terms used.
 9. The listener misses important sentence signals.
 10. The listener does not move the information to long-term memory.
-

The first problem lies with the environment. The workplace is often a noisy world of telephones ringing, typewriters clacking, people shouting, and the intercom blaring. Managers who work in such noisy environments must take special steps even to hear the words: find a less noisy spot, move closer to the speaker, and pay closer attention.

The next two blocks deal with the listener's sensory and cognitive abilities. About five percent of the adult population have hearing losses serious enough to impede communication. Since the problem becomes more acute with age, managers in the 45-65 age bracket should have their hearing checked periodically, especially if they suspect they're not hearing all that is said.

Another ten percent of the population suffer from a cognitive problem which the specialists call "auditory processing deficiencies." People who have this problem hear the sounds all right but cannot make sense out of what they hear. Taylor (1978) suggests that the most important elements in this deficiency are attention, discrimination, memory, separation, and closure. Attention, of course, is the ability to focus on the message. Discrimination is the ability to recognize differences in pitch, rate, loudness, and quality. Auditory memory is the ability to remember the sounds and meanings for both short and long periods. Separation is the ability to distinguish the sound you wish to hear from all the competing sounds that surround it. Finally, closure is the ability to pull words together in order to derive meaning.

Although auditory processing deficiencies are most prevalent in school children, many adults experience these same kinds of difficulties to a less acute degree. They need the help of trained professionals who can pinpoint the exact nature of the difficulty and prescribe corrective measures.

The fourth problem arises from the wide variation between speaking rate and listening rate. You probably speak about 125 words a minute. You can listen at a rate of 400–600 words a minute. That difference is both a problem and an opportunity. It is a problem because it makes it easy to be only partially attentive. Someone comes into your office to speak to you at some length about an important problem. The speaker begins to speak. Your mind races ahead. You start to tune out as soon as you think you have the gist of what is being said. The speaker continues at the slow speaking rate. Your mind begins to wander again to a matter of more direct interest to you, and poor listening occurs.

Good listeners use the difference in rates as an opportunity. They attend to the nonverbal signals as the words come slowly out of the speaker's mouth. They listen critically if the message seems more than a piece of information. They make connections between what is being said and what they already know. They fix important information in their long-term memories. They use the speaking-listening gap as an opportunity to think more actively about the message—not to think about other matters.

The next block to accurate hearing is self-absorption. The term is used here to mean thinking about one's own concerns, instead of the speaker's. You become self-absorbed when you are experiencing severe emotional stress. All you can think of is your own anger, your own sense of being right. You become self-absorbed when personal problems intrude. You can't think about the latest sales figures because your daughter is suffering from depression. And you become self-absorbed when your own concerns at the office are so overpowering that you can't think of anything else. All that self-absorption, whatever its genesis, means you have difficulty attending to what is being said to you.

What can you do about problems of self-absorption? You can't escape them. Your feelings, your personal problems, your own work-oriented concerns are always with you. You have only two choices when self-absorption is getting in the way. The more reasonable option is to exercise the self-discipline to put your own concerns aside for the moment: "My daughter's depressed—but my worrying about her depression while I try to work will not improve things." If the problem is so acute that it cannot be put aside, then on appropriate occasions you can ask the speaker to talk with you at another time: "Helen, what you have to say sounds so important that I want to give it my full attention. But I know that this is not a good time. Last quarter's figures have me so concerned that I just have to take the time right now to analyze them more carefully. Would you mind coming back in an hour when I know I'd be able to give your matter the attention it deserves?"

Even if you are not absorbed with your own feelings, problems, or concerns, you can have trouble hearing if you have negative attitudes