The Fundamentals of Effective Listening

Here are some of the habits of effective listening. They help to identify the basic principles of listening and the barriers that often prevent open and unbiased communication.

What to Do

Listening through Questioning

Effective listeners follow the 70/30 rule. They listen for 70% of the time, and talk for only 30% of the time. They also cultivate the habit of asking effective questions that enable them to dig deeper into the meaning and motives behind the words that the other person speaks.

Below is a list of typical questions that will enable you to better clarify what the other person is saying. The key is to memorize these questions and continuously cycle through them in your mind as the other person speaks.

- What is this person trying to tell me?
- How do I feel about this?
- How do they expect me to react?
- Why are they telling me this?
- What are their motivations?

The Principles of Effective Listening

Effective listening doesn’t simply involve hearing the words that are being expressed. It is a far more refined skill that requires patience and discipline to cultivate and master.

Here is a list of key guidelines and strategies that will enable you to cultivate the necessary habits and behaviours of effective and proficient listeners.

For more information about developing these skills, please take a look at life coaching principles.
**Attending Skills**

As an effective listener, you must work on expanding your awareness and ability to recognize certain patterns of behaviour that will enable you to gain deeper insights into a person’s message and its underlying meaning.

Here are two areas you should be paying particular attention to:

1. **Body Language**

   A person’s body language will often reveal a plethora of information about the thoughts and emotions that are hiding behind the words they speak. This can unlock unexpected insights, motivations and motives that will enable you to derive deeper levels of meaning into their message.

   Particularly pay attention to their body language in between the words they speak (during pauses). This may help reveal hints about their thought process and enable you to better understand their *needs* and *wants*.

2. **Patterns of Speech**

   It is said, that it’s not so much the words we speak, but rather how we express ourselves, from which the meaning of our message is derived. For this very reason you must attend to the following key variables:

   - Silences between the words
   - Word emphasis and spacing
   - Voice level and intensity.

   Each one of these variables will provide you with a world of new insights about the other person that would normally be hidden from conscious view.
What to Do

When it comes to effective listening, there are certain and specific habits that if cultivated, will enhance your concentration, ability to understand, while at the same time enabling you to dig deep into the psychology of another person and unlocking the hidden meaning behind their words.

Subdue Your Inner Voice

Our inner voice could very well be the greatest hindrance to our understanding of another person’s message. The reason for this is three-fold: we formulate an answer, reach a conclusion, or begin to judge the words that another person is speaking before they are finished getting their message across. For obvious reasons, this impedes our understanding of the message and damages the rapport we have worked so hard to create.

The solution is to progressively quieten the voice inside your mind by focusing your energy and attention outwards onto the other person and the intricacies of the message they are trying to get across to you.

Create Mental Pictures of Information

Our memory is most efficient when it is thinking in pictures. And this is most evident when we are completely absorbed in a conversation with another person. During these moments, we are able to recall a conversation effortlessly because the entire time our brain was formulating a series of pictures creating a memorable storyboard that was easy to remember.

Conversely, when we are bored, our brain tends to drift or fall asleep, and as a result very little of importance is remembered about the conversation.

The solution is to progressively turn another person’s words into associating pictures in your mind. In this way you will be better able to remember and recall the intricacies and details of their message.

Put Information into Perspective

As you listen to the content of another person’s message, it is important to put this information into perspective accordingly, otherwise you may miss the underlying meaning
of the message, which could cause confusion and create misunderstandings. As a consequence, this may very well break the rapport you have created with the other person and damage your long-term relationship.

The solution is to take into account some key variables that can impact and influence the message that the other person is trying to get across to you.

**Social Context**

A social setting can influence and impact the message that the speaker is trying to get across to you. In some instances certain social settings may prevent them from speaking freely, while other social settings allow them to open up and say what’s on their mind. An effective listener takes these possibilities into account and interprets the speaker’s message accordingly.

**Speaker’s Cultural Background**

A speaker’s cultural background and associating beliefs may influence the content, intentions and motivations behind their message.

An effective listener fully understands that the same message relayed from a different cultural perspective, can differ in meaning quite significantly. They therefore take this into account when interpreting the content and intentions of the speaker’s words.

**Speaker’s State-of-Mind**

People will say and do things in accordance with their dominant state and emotional frame-of-mind.

When someone is upset they may say and do things that are normally not part of their everyday behaviour. Conversely, the same applies when a person is overly happy, excited or enthusiastic. In such instances they will say and do things that may not represent their true intentions.

An effective listener realizes that how a person is emotionally, will influence the meaning of their message, and they therefore take the other person’s emotional state and intentions into account throughout their interpretations.
Speaker’s Life Experience

Every one of us has had a unique life experience to date. This experience has probably been filled with many disappointments and triumphs. Consequently, we have learned great lessons that have made us who we are today — providing us with a unique perspective on life, the world, and on our communication with others.

An effective listener understands that they must interpret another person’s message in accordance with their life experience, learning and current circumstances. They fully realize that a person’s perspective and message is tinged with echoes of the wisdoms, learning, mistakes and obstacles they have faced, failed at, and overcome, over the course of a lifetime.

The Influence of Peers

The presence of other people can significantly influence the message and information that another person is trying to get across.

At times we will refrain from saying certain things or acting in a specific way because we are concerned that others may overhear us. For this very reason, an effective listener takes the influence of other people into account when interpreting the message of the person they are listening to. They carefully observe this person’s body language and eye movements in order to pinpoint where their attention is going, and they adjust their responses and analysis of the message accordingly.

Sort Facts from Fiction

It is very easy to become emotionally drawn into a conversation, that we simply lose all scope of reality and don’t distinguish the facts from the fictitious information we are hearing.

People are emotional creatures, and as such they will always be tempted to bend the truth or tell a few white lies here and there. It is your job as an effective listener to distinguish between these fragments of information and question the person accordingly.

Unless you are able to get to the facts, then you simply will not acquire a comprehensive understanding of the message you are hearing.
Listen to Emotional Content of Message

The words we speak are nothing more than labels and interpretations of our hidden emotional experiences and intentions. However, unless we see them from this perspective, we will never fully realize their significance or uncover their underlying meaning.

An effective listener understands that it is not so much the words, but rather the emotional undertones behind the words that are significant to the message the speaker is trying to get across.

In order to identify these emotions, an effective listener must observe the speaker’s body language, demeanour, facial gestures, eye movements, and subtle biological signals as a whole. These provide hints of the underlying emotional undertones that lie hidden within their speech.

Summarize by Prioritizing Ideas

As you listen to another person speak, take time to routinely summarize what they have discussed in your mind, while at the same time prioritizing major ideas and points for further discussion.

Paraphrase by Seeking Understanding

Occasionally while the speaker is conversing with you, take time to gain clarification and understanding of their message by paraphrasing what they have just said. This will show the other person that you are paying attention and listening to their message. Likewise, it signifies that you consider what they are saying as being relevant and important, which helps build great respect and enhances the level of rapport within the relationship.

Also, when paraphrasing another person’s message, take time to interpret what they have said in your own words.

Once you have completed your summary, simply ask the speaker if you have understood them correctly. In this way you will minimize any confusion, assumptions, or incorrect conclusions that you may have made while listening to their message.
Use Encouragers

Encouragers are simple affirmative words you can use throughout the process of listening. These encouragers inform the speaker that you are listening to them, and that you have understood the message they are trying to get across to you.

Typical encouragers include:

Yes... Aha... Okay... I see... Oh... I understand... Tell me more... That’s interesting...

Use Good Eye Contact

Good eye contact shows the speaker that you have their attention, and are interested in what they are saying. It also enables you to focus-in on the message and the accompanying subtle signals that will help you unlock the speaker’s true motives and emotional intentions.

As a word of warning, remember that too much of a good thing can lead to very undesirable consequences. You must therefore moderate your eye-contact accordingly in response to the person’s eye-contact and speech.

Use Expressive and Open Body Language

As you listen to the speaker’s message, attend to your body language. Make sure that it is open, welcoming and expressive — encouraging and supporting the speaker’s ideas and opinion. In this way you will develop higher levels of rapport and will thusly have greater influence over the speaker’s future decisions and actions.

Wait Two Seconds Before Replying

Sometimes we are just too quick to jump-the-gun, and end up interrupting someone who hadn’t yet exhausted their train of thought.

In many instances the speaker will pause for a moment to take a breath or gather their thoughts, and we will jump right in to say what’s on our mind.

Effective listeners clearly understand this trap, and therefore wait two to three seconds before replying. They want to learn as much about the speaker’s message as possible, and will therefore take time to hear them out fully before stating their own opinion or asking further questions.
What Not to Do

There are several unfortunate communication habits that will immediately break the rapport you have established with another person. One slip-up occasionally can be forgiven. However, if you consistently partake in the following communication sins, then you are surely losing the respect and admiration of those you interact with.

Don’t Interrupt Speaker

Almost nothing frustrates a speaker more than being interrupted by another person in the middle of a sentence.

It doesn’t matter how wonderful the information is that you are about to share. Just hold your tongue for the moment, cultivate the effective listening habits discussed above, and let the speaker exhaust their train of thought.

Only once the speaker is silent, should you respond in turn.

Don’t Finish People’s Sentences

The one thing in the world that probably frustrates a speaker more than someone who continuously interrupts him or her is a person who consistently finishes their sentences.

Yes, you might be showing the speaker how clever you are by being able to predict their train of thought. However, on the flip-side, you are also sending the message of superiority and control that will inevitably break any rapport you have created with this person.

There are instances however where finishing off another person’s sentences can build deeper levels of rapport. These scenarios are more likely to occur only between good friends or romantic partners though.

Don’t Make Assumptions

We often rush to make unruly assumptions based on the limited amount of information we have collected throughout our interactions with others.
Instead of assuming that what we have heard is true or false, simply ask the speaker a set of probing questions that help unveil the mask of mystery.

**Don’t Become Critical or Judgmental**

Who are we to criticize or judge another person’s ideas or perspectives? Isn’t all information and knowledge just an opinion of our senses and calculations? Have these opinions not changed over time from generation to generation and from one century to the next? If you have responded to these questions honestly, then you already have your answer.

You don’t necessarily have to agree with another person’s perspective, however be tolerant and understand that it is what it is, just a perspective.

As a final thought, we must remember that it is our internal judgments and criticisms that will create the impenetrable barriers that will block the channels of understanding, rapport and communication.

**Barriers to Effective Listening**

Becoming an effective listener requires the ability to cultivate and grow a set of fundamental skills that will open the channels of communication and promote greater understanding. On top of this, it also requires a deep awareness of the obstacles, challenges and barriers that may impede the speaker’s message from getting through in the first place. And this is going to be the focus of this discussion.

**Content of Message**

The 1st barrier to effective listening lies in the content of the message itself.

If the speaker’s message is difficult to understand, unfamiliar, or simply isn’t of interest, then this will significantly impede the message from getting through to the listener.

The **solution** is to ask a whole plethora of open-ended questions that will help you gain deeper insights and understandings into the topic under discussion.
Speaker and Listener Psychology

The 2\textsuperscript{nd} barrier to effective listening is hidden in the psychology of the speaker and listener.

At times the speaker and listener can be so vastly different from a psychological perspective that the message will simply be misunderstood, wrongly interpreted, or even lost completely.

In other scenarios the speaker may impede the listener’s ability to hear with an unfortunate habit of movement or speech that distracts the listener from the content of the message.

The solution is to work on developing deep levels of rapport and finding common ground that will enable you to open the channels of communication.

Environment

The 3\textsuperscript{rd} barrier to effective listening is the environment.

An environment can be too noisy, hot, cold, bright, uncomfortable, wet, windy, stuffy or polluted. This environment will thusly manifest a whole plethora of distractions that will impede the message from getting through in its intended form.

The solution is to simply find an environment that has as few sensory distractions as possible.

Listening Filters

On the outside it appears that the words we hear another person speak just simply pass through our eardrums and into conscious awareness. This couldn’t be further from the truth.

Everything that we hear actually passes through a set of psychological filters that we have cultivated over a lifetime.

Each of these filters re-interprets the message to ensure that it is consistent with our deepest wants, desires, motives and our overall psychological makeup. It is this psychological makeup that determines how we interpret our world and the messages that people send our way.

Now that we are consciously aware of our psychological filters, let’s now take a journey through the message of a speaker as it travels through our filters of interpretation.
As you read through this section, keep in mind that the speaker’s message doesn’t necessarily pass through each filter in chronological order. Instead it passes through all filters at more or less the same time in very quick succession (we are talking fractions of a second). In the end, it is the most dominant filters that will determine how the speaker’s message will be interpreted.

**Filter 1: Ear**

Here the speaker’s message (words) passes through our eardrums, where they begin their long journey towards interpretation.

All things being equal, we should be able to hear the entire message that the speaker is getting across to us. However, this is rarely the case due to the three barriers to effective listening we discussed above.

**Filter 2: Selection**

Next, the message passes through our selection filter. The selection filter directs our focus and attention while interacting with others.

If for instance we are momentarily distracted by other sensory stimuli while hearing the message of the speaker, then these words will naturally be re-interpreted and transformed ever so slightly — mirroring the stimuli that originally distracted us.

**Filter 3: Culture and Social Class**

The message now passes through the cultural and social-class filter. This filter is riddled with biased opinions and perspectives that are a reflection of a lifetime of social conditioning.

At this point the message is re-interpreted to ensure that it fits in with our perception of social reality.

**Filter 4: Personal Values**

The message now sinks even deeper into the values filter.

Our values are nothing more than emotional interpretations and labels for our experiences. We value that, which we consider to be important and worthy to our lives. We will therefore interpret the speaker’s message in accordance with our highest set of values.

If for instance our highest value is to be loved, then we will consequently interpret the speaker’s message from a perspective of love. If on the other hand we
value security above all else, then we will effectively interpret the speaker’s message from the perspective of security.

Each of these values is significant and will ever so slightly alter the message of the speaker to ensure that it fits with what we value most in this world.

**Filter 5: Beliefs**

Next, the speaker’s message passes through our belief filter. This filter is riddled with deep conviction about the world, ourselves, society and other people. It is tinged with biased perspectives, self-limitations and emotional assumptions.

Anything we hear that simply does not fit in with our beliefs and convictions, we automatically reject at an unconscious level of awareness. This consequently prevents us from interpreting the speaker’s message in the right context.

**Filter 6: Emotions**

Every moment of our day, we experience certain types of emotions that naturally affect our state-of-mind and how we interpret information coming from the external environment. Hence, the speaker’s message will be re-interpreted in accordance with the current emotional state we are experiencing.

If for instance we are feeling joyful and fulfilled, then we will interpret the speaker’s message in a positive way. If on the other hand, we are displaying the emotions of anger or frustration, then we will naturally interpret the speaker’s message in a completely different way.

**Filter 7: Personal Attitude**

The personal attitude we bring into any interaction with another person, is simply a reflection of recent events, emotions and our personal experiences. And it is this attitude that will significantly influence how you interpret the speaker’s message.

Your attitude will either block you from understanding the true intentions of the speaker’s message, or it will open up new doors of insight and realization.

**Filter 8: Personal Decisions**

Next, the speaker’s message passes through our decision filter. This filter is deeply entrenched in the habit of maintaining consistency.

If the speaker’s message does not seem to be consistent with your past choices and decisions, then you will subconsciously reject the message and interpret it
accordingly. Because in this scenario the speaker’s message is taken out of context, this can very easily lead to disagreement and misunderstanding.

**Filter 9: Memory**

The final filter is our capacity to remember the message of the speaker.

If we are unable to recall the message that was shared with us in full, then this by itself can lead to misunderstandings and a plethora of incorrect interpretations.

This actually occurs quite often, due to the persistent influence of the other filters and their capacity to unconsciously delete portions of the speaker’s message, and replace these portions with personal biased opinions.

**The Light at the End of the Tunnel**

Is it really any wonder that only 25% of the speaker’s message and true intentions are clearly understood by the listener?

The best way to work your way around these filters is to become aware that they exist in the first place. It is after all, only through conscious awareness, that you will develop the capacity to think more effectively and maintain a semblance of control over the influence that these filters have on your interactions with others.

**Listening Stages**

There are six typical stages of listening that reflect our level of proficiency and expertise as an effective listener. Each stage requires a different set of skills and a certain level of concentration and awareness.

If you take the time to incorporate everything we have discussed thus far into your interactions with others, then you will progressively climb the ladder and achieve the status of a Master Listener in very quick succession.

As we go through each of these listening stages, identify where you personally lie on the effective listener scale.
Stage 1: Glazed Eyes

At this stage the listener is listening to the message of the speaker, however they are not hearing the words or making any sense of the message. They are in essence floating around in their own imaginary world, easily distracted by other stimuli, overwhelmed by their own inner voice, and really couldn’t care less about the message that the speaker is trying to get across to them.

Stage 2: Automatic Response

At this stage the listener is vaguely paying attention to the message of the speaker. They pick up on a few words here and there and respond in-turn. However, their responses require very little thought and are often automatically generated empty words that have no real purpose or meaning.

Listeners at this stage often interrupt the speaker while they are talking, while at the same time secretly judging and criticizing their message. This essentially prevents them from gaining a deeper understanding of the message that is being shared.

Stage 3: Can Answer Questions

At this stage the listener is able to answer questions about the speaker’s message. They have paid attention to the overall patterns and words of the message and can as a result answer some simple questions. However, they have not as yet developed the capacity to summarize and prioritize the speaker’s ideas; to put the speaker’s message into mental pictures; paraphrase their understanding of the speaker’s words, or acknowledge their true intentions.

Stage 4: Can Repeat Last Few Words

At this stage the listener has developed good attentive skills, which enable them to repeat the speaker’s last few words and gain marginal insights into the speaker’s motives and intentions.

Stage 5: Can Tell Another Person

At this stage the listener is very well in-tuned with the speaker’s message. They are able to read the speaker’s body language, facial gestures, tone of voice, and can put the speaker’s message into perspective. Moreover, if required, they have the ability to repeat what they have heard in precise detail to another person.
**Stage 6: Ability to Teach Others**

At this stage the listener has mastered all the listening fundamentals we have discussed within this section. They are fully in-tune with the speaker’s message, motives, desires and intentions, and are able to take the information they have heard and teach it to others easily and effectively.

Their understanding of the speaker’s message goes well beyond words alone. Consequently they are able to identify with the speaker on a variety of levels, and have built a detailed picture of the psychological makeup of the other person. They are in essence a Master Listener, who has succeeded in moving the speaker’s message through each listening filter without the slightest misunderstanding, which has effectively helped them to develop deep levels of rapport and influence over the speaker’s behaviours, words, decision and actions.