

# Why is it so hard to listen in business?

## **The Problem: “People don’t listen” to one another”.**

A few years ago, a large American technology company ran a series of television advertisements saying “We listen”. Their business did not improve dramatically.

=Employee survey after employee survey indicates that the biggest complaint that employees have is the lack of communication, that is: nobody listens to them.

Professionals such as lawyers and accountants are in the business of helping their clients solve problems. The process is simple. First, the professionals ask questions to understand the client’s problem. Then they apply their professional expertise to come up with a solution to the client’s problem. Yet many clients complain that the professional, rather than solving their problem, fits them into a predetermined solution which may or may not suit their needs.

Internal computer systems users traditionally complain that their systems departments do not listen to them. Systems professionals spend a lot of time with computer users determining their needs. They complain that users want them to “read their minds”, instead of providing clear, stable specifications for the new applications they need. Days and months are spent in “requirements

planning” meetings. Specifications are written and exchanged. Yet the final software, as presented, often does not do what the user expected it to do.

What is happening here? Do people in business not listen to one another? Or do they listen and ignore what they hear? Do people not want to listen in the first place? Or do they intend to and not know how?

Clearly, listening is only part of the problem. The situations listed above are complex. They are complicated by the need to work in groups over long periods of time. But the fact remains that project postmortems, often conducted by expensive outside consultants, disclose that time and time again, people in business seem to not hear each other, despite their best intentions to do so.

## **What seems simple is really complex ...**

Our first blush reactions say listening is a simple skill. You just listen. We all do it all of the time. We are all pretty good at it. After all, if we could not listen, how would we get through the day? From the time, wake up to the time, we go to sleep, we interact with others. We listen to them and hear them. Working together and living together requires that we have the ability to listen to

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those around us. So what is the problem, since we all have the ability to listen?.

Of course, we all know that we fail every once in a while. Most of the listening we do all day does not involve much stress. Things get more difficult as you introduce strong feelings. We all know that not listening is one of the reasons that personal relationships break up, and people get into “personality conflicts” at work.

Our common sense understanding of such failures does not often stop at listening however. We look for more complex explanations, talking about personality dynamics or value clashes or group dynamics when we seek to explain these interpersonal breakdowns.

These may contribute. But “not listening” to one another” plays a large role in these situations. The fact that the participants cannot hear one another often turns relatively minor differences into major problems. Listening is not a simple skill, especially in contexts which involve stress.

Academic researchers have put a lot of energy into understanding what makes professional listeners effective. There is a large body of research on the listening behaviors of professional helpers (psychotherapists, counseling psychologists and social workers), individuals who should be professional listeners *par excellence*.

### Findings from research

The research uncovered some facts which have dramatic implications for listening in the workplace.

#### 1: Listening in the context of problem solving

The first thing that stands out is that these professional helpers **are not just listeners. They are listeners who are paid to help people solve problems.** Their listening behavior does not go on in the context of every day social life. They listen to order to help individuals make change in their lives. The listening which occurs is not the listening that we do as we meet one another socially on the street or in the restaurant. It takes place in a work context. The content of this work is personal change. It is dissimilar from the listening that goes on in the business workplace. There we listen to others in order to help solve problems which occur in the course of our normal work.

#### 2: Type of background is not the crucial factor

Secondly, “the school of therapy” does not really seem to make a difference in results achieved. Studies over a large number of years have shown that individuals trained in one brand of psychotherapy do not consistently out perform those from a different school.

At first, the fact that some helpers were better listeners seemed to be the answer. In some studies, people

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reporting “psychological problems” were randomly put in two groups. Some got counseling immediately. Others had to wait for a while. Results comparing the two groups were confusing. Similar numbers of people in each group reported get better in the same period of time. But further investigation disclosed that the people who did not get immediate professional help found *helpful* individuals to talk to while they were waiting. These “helpers” turned out to have many of the same behaviors of “effective” professional helpers.

### **3: Effective listening is a set of skilled behaviors which can be modeled and taught to others**

This led some investigators to explore what people really did in “helping” relationships. This work took two forms. Some individuals spent a great deal of time exploring the professional behavior of a few “acknowledged” wizards, using videotape to slow down and examine their behavior in very fine detail.

Others did studies in which they examined the behaviors and the values of large groups of “helping profession” trainees. First, they inventoried their behaviors and values as they entered formal training in the theory of therapy and practical therapeutic techniques. They followed this up with more investigation at the end of their training, and finally once again, as they worked as professionals.

All of this produced some very intriguing insights into the structure of listening. Effective listeners consistently do certain behaviors whenever they “turn on” their listening. These behaviors can be organized into sets of skills. These sets make up a model of effective problem solving listening. Based on these models, others can learn to become effective listeners.

### **Does this apply to business?**

The findings of this research have direct and dramatic applicability to business. A model of effective listening in for **interpersonal problem solving** follows. This is what we do at work: interact with one another to solve problems. The **content of problems** dealt with in the counseling room may be different, but the effective listening behaviors are the same.

### **A Model For Effective Listening**

Depending on how you organize the list, there between 10 to 30 basic and complex behaviors which make up effective listening. The model can be summarized by focusing on 5 issues.

#### **1: The behaviors which underlie empathy**

Effective listeners demonstrate empathy. The results of this seem like magic. But the ways in which effective listeners achieve empathy and rapport are clear. The magic of empathy has a clear structure. Effective

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listeners use their bodies and their voices to build to build and to maintain a rapport connection with the people to whom they listen.

Empathic listeners start by developing contact with the people to whom they listen on the non-verbal level.. They use their bodies as tools for accomplishing this. They do not simply repeat a standard set of non-verbal gestures. Effective listeners actively adapt their gesture and eye-contact patterns to match the individual to whom they are currently listening. Their non-verbals establish and maintain a dynamic set of links with the other person which, once established, can be used to accomplish a variety of timing, structuring and confronting objectives during the course of the exchange.

Once learned, these behaviors are become habitual through practice. That is, the listener does them naturally and immediately in response to the non-verbal body language of the other person.

As well, empathic listeners tap into and follow the predominating internal processing patterns used by the people to whom they are listening. They identify the most likely internal processing pattern by hearing its results in the verbal language patterns used by others. Based on this, they introduce similar speech patterns into their own verbal expression during their exchanges..

For example, another person may constantly use visual words and images. This indicates that the other person

may be making sense of things by processing internal visual images. In response, effective listeners weave visual language into their verbal responses. Similarly, if the other person uses auditory or tactical language, they do so as well.

Empathic listeners pick up on the other person language patterns shifts and follow them. In effect, they are transmitting the message “I have heard you” every time they open their mouths.

### **2: Values impact the degree of predisposition to apply effective listening behaviors**

Some people appear to benefit much more dramatically from training in listening than others. All the individuals who attend a program based on this model are able to apply the various behaviors during the program. But some consistently use them to a far greater degree once the program is finished. They take them back-to-the-job and apply them in clear and observable ways. These people have a personal value set which allows them to shift their focus of importance back and forth between themselves and others in a balanced way.

Everyone conceptually can learn conceptually about good listening behaviors. Everyone can participate in the skill training exercises and demonstrate improvement. But only those people with value sets which have this characteristic show dramatic improvement in the

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effectiveness of their actual listening behaviors in on-the-job problem solving contexts.

### 3: Effective listening involves effective questioning

Individuals can learn effective questioning techniques which dramatically increase the effectiveness (“doing it right”) and the efficiency (“doing it with less resources”) of their fact gathering. These techniques involve more than using open and closed questions. They involve being able working with the interviewee’s verbal material in ways which shift topic direction, summarize content, reflect back feeling, paraphrase to create topic closure, and open new topics which service the listener’s purpose. As well, they allow the listener to use “minimal encouragers to talk” to go into the hidden depths which lie behind the first expression by a person on some issue.

Combined with empathic rapport, they allow a listener to accomplish specific objectives. They turn a work conversation into a conversation which meets the listener’s purposes.

### 4: Listening comes before problem solving

Effective listeners make a dramatic separation between fact gathering, problem definition, solution generation and action implementation. They spend up front time getting the facts and examining them from a variety of perspectives. They dig behind the surface level of

presented facts to uncover the deeper issues which sit behind them.

In the process of doing so, they often create “aha” experiences for the people to whom they are listening. These experiences may dramatically change the qualitative nature of the problem, placing it into perspectives not considered before this point in time.

### 5. Listening is not the same thing as problem solving

Effective listeners know the difference between listening and problem solving. Problem solving in a workplace context requires professional expertise and specific content knowledge. Effective listeners will not move into problem solving when they do not have the required content expertise. Instead, they will seek to identify such individuals, taking steps to actively involve them in the problem solving process. When working in groups, effective listeners use their empathic rapport and questioning skills to make sure that content experts are heard by the others in the group.

### So why do people not become effective business listeners naturally?

Problem solving listening is simply not the same thing as everyday listening. Effective problem solving listeners can use their skills to be effective every day listeners. But day to day listening is not a sufficient preparation for dealing with business problems, especially under stress.

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Those individuals with personal values which predispose them to becoming effective problem solving listeners seem to acquire their abilities in two ways. They see others who already have the skills, and they simply copy them. Because of their ability to shift their focus of importance between themselves and others, they recognize the value of effective behavior when they see it and try it out until they get it right.

Or individuals can attend an effective training program which provides them with the needed insight and skills.

### **An effective model for listening training programs**

The most effective model for such training is based on the training model we all know from sports. Empathic rapport and questioning technique are broken into sets of sequential behaviors. A brief conceptual explanation is given of each behavior, clarifying its place in the overall skill model. Each basic behavior is demonstrated by an expert. Individuals then participate in behavioral drills which give them an opportunity to concentrate on developing skill in this specific behavior. They get immediate feedback on their success and failures, so that they can refine their use of the behavior.

Continuing practice allows each individual to move through a learning sequence which goes from “unconscious incompetence” to “conscious incompetence” to “conscious competence” to “unconscious competence” In other words, the skilled

behavior becomes a habit which the person can utilize smoothly and quickly in response to events.

More complex behaviors are built on top of the more basic ones. Periodic “role plays” serve the function of scrimmages in sport. They provide opportunities for the individual to integrate the new behaviors into integrated habitual responses.

Videotape recording playback is used throughout the training process to give “unbiased”, objective feedback on the impact of the new behaviors, both positive and negative.

### **What about those people who do not share the predisposing values?**

A well designed video-based training can improve the problem solving listening behavior of anyone. Everyone will learn what it take to be an effective listener. However, the issue is what they will apply when they get back to the job.

The attendees split into three groups. The predisposed individuals demonstrate dramatic improvement in their listening effectiveness during the program. They take this back to the job. Chances are they would have eventually acquired these skills by themselves. However, they have acquired them in days, rather than the months and years it may have taken them to find models for all the behaviors they need.

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Some of the others see the impact of their current value patterns on others for the first time. The videotape feedback makes the result of their behavior immediate and undeniable. This may lead to a dramatic value shift, leading these people to realign their person values with those which characterize effective problem solving listeners. They then begin to show the behavioral improved shown by the first group.

The remainder leave with some improvement in their listening abilities. Often they acquire an understanding that careers which require effective problem solving listening are not for them. They experience a profound increase in self awareness. As a result, they have a much better sense of where and when they can and cannot be effective.

### What does this mean for you?

Attending an effective listening training program experience can have a positive impact on your career development. It can dramatically increase the effectiveness of your business listening in a very short period of time.

An effective program will have three distinguishing factors. First, it will break listening down into sets of small skills, which build on one another. Second, it will insist on practice, practice, practice. Third, it will use videotape to provide you with immediate and objective feedback throughout the program.

So find an effective program, and make it part of your personal professional development agenda.

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