

## THE IMPORTANCE OF LISTENING IN INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

Veronica Păstae

Lecturer, PhD, "Carol I" National Defence University, Bucharest

*Abstract: In the present article we shall expand on the importance of listening as a major interpersonal skill. We shall review some definitions of listening in the literature and we shall underline its usefulness in interpersonal communication. Quite often, people feel a sense of frustration that they are only heard, but not really listened to. That is why we shall emphasize the role of effective listening in our interactions, showing that there are fields of activity, such as people oriented domains, in which being a good listener or not makes a great difference. We listen to others because we want to learn or to know where we stand in a situation or within a group. We also listen to other people because we want to offer moral support and advice. Thus, in the end we shall offer some suggestions for improving one's listening skill since this can improve our interpersonal communication and, finally, the quality of our lives.*

*Keywords: interpersonal communication, message, listening, good listener, effective listening*

### 1. Introduction

Sooner or later in our lives, we have all asked questions like: *Hey, are you listening to what I'm saying? Am I talking to the walls, here?*, which proves that sometimes we realize that we are only heard, but not really listened to. Hence, in what follows we shall approach the issue of listening to others as one of the most consequential interpersonal skills. We shall argue that there are fields of activity in which listening plays a crucial role in the outcome of human interactions and we shall put forward some ways in which one's listening skill could be improved.

The core of the issue is that two or more people could hear the same message, but could understand very different things from what is conveyed, which proves that we listen to and interpret reality in a very personal manner. What we understand from a message goes through several filters such as the culture we belong to, our education, our life experiences, our gender, social status, etc. However, being able to listen effectively helps us carry out instructions and fulfill the tasks we have been assigned and finally, it may help us avoid dangers, saving our lives. Though one may think that listening comes as naturally as breathing, this is an illusion. Only hearing is innate, listening is not. There is evidence that some people are far better listeners than others, but the good news is listening can be learned and trained like any other skill, because good communicators persevere and learn from their own mistakes.

### 2. The listening skill in the context of interpersonal communication

To begin with, there is a big difference between hearing and listening. Hearing is one of the human senses, it is physiological and does not necessarily imply the understanding of the aural input. We can passively hear sounds produced by people, animals and objects, which we

may not be able to make sense of, we may hear people speaking foreign languages which we do not know, or we may hear people speaking our own language, but choose not to pay attention since we are not interested in the topic or the speaker. This is hearing; listening, nonetheless, goes far beyond the mere perception of the sounds around us. According to the International Listening Association (ILA), hearing is *accidental, involuntary* and *effortless*, whereas listening is *focused, voluntary* and *intentional*.<sup>1</sup>

Literature in the field underlines that the big difference between the two lies in the active nature of listening. P. Emmert argues that listening is the active process of making meaning out of another person's spoken message<sup>2</sup>. L. Steil emphasizes the interaction between the interlocutors, defining listening as "the complex, learned human process of sensing, interpreting, evaluating, storing and responding to oral messages"<sup>3</sup>. This definition illustrates the importance of the listener's role and conduct for the success of the interaction. However, other approaches go beyond the mere interpretation of the spoken message and claim that a good listener also pays careful attention to nonverbal communication. According to R. Bostrom, the most appropriate definition of listening is "the acquisition, processing, and retention of information in the interpersonal context"<sup>4</sup>. Van Slyke also stresses the awareness and active participation of the listener, and argues that listening is "the process of becoming aware of all the cues that another person emits"<sup>5</sup>. It follows that during our interaction with the others, listening involves paying attention to both verbal and nonverbal messages. Along the same lines, Hargie and Dickinson claim that efficient listening involves taking into consideration the nonverbal cues, as well: "listening is (...) the process whereby one person pays careful overt and covert attention to, and attempts to assimilate, understand, and retain, the verbal and nonverbal signals being emitted by another"<sup>6</sup>.

Thus, no matter if the above scholars include the decoding of nonverbal messages in their definitions of listening or not, it is clear that this process requires focus on sender, and attention to his words, tone, body language, etc. Consequently, a good listener will be able to notice the interplay between the sender's verbal and non-verbal messages so as to perceive what is totally or partially transmitted, or what is left unspoken.

### 3. Benefits of effective listening

The importance of listening for our interaction with other people cannot be emphasized enough, both at personal and professional levels. Ever since we are born, we start learning by seeing, hearing and listening. Thus, listening becomes the understructure on which other communication skills are built. Robbins and Hunsaker state it directly, that not being an effective listener will lead a person to trouble in developing their other interpersonal skills.<sup>7</sup> The same opinion is held by Hargie and Dickson, who view listening as a *prerequisite skill* for the development of other interactive skills: "To ask the right questions, be assertive, give appropriate

---

<sup>1</sup><http://www.listen.org/> (accessed 04.05.2017).

<sup>2</sup> Emmert, P., "President's perspective", in *ILA Listening Post*, 56, 1996.

<sup>3</sup> Steil, L., "Listening training: the key to success in today's organizations", in D. Borisoff and M. Purdy (eds.), *Listening in everyday life*, Maryland: University of America Press, 1991, p.203.

<sup>4</sup> Bostrom, R., "The process of listening", in O.Hargie (ed.), *The handbook of communication skills*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, London: Routledge, 1997, p.243.

<sup>5</sup> Van Slyke, E., *Listening to conflict: finding constructive solutions to workplace disputes*, New York: AMACOM, 1999, p.98.

<sup>6</sup> Hargie, O. & Dickson, D., *Skilled Interpersonal Communication. Research, Theory and Practice*, Routledge, London & New York, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, 2005, p.172.

<sup>7</sup> Robbins, S. & Hunsaker, P., *Training in interpersonal skills: tips for managing people at work*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1996, p.35.

rewards, employ apposite self-disclosure, negotiate effectively, open and close interactions, and so on, you must engage in concerted listening”.<sup>8</sup> In our private life, listening improves relationships with family members (*i.e.* spouses, children, parents, in-laws, etc.) and friends, helps us expand our social network, and enriches our experiences, as underlined by Solomon and Theiss: “listening can be a rewarding, informative, and enlightening part of the interpersonal communication process”.<sup>9</sup>

But being a good listener goes far beyond personal life, greatly benefiting one’s career. In 1997, Hargie<sup>10</sup> argued that there are three sets of skills needed in any professional domain: 1) *cognitive skills*, which refer to the knowledge and expertise necessary to function in a particular job; 2) *technical skills*, which refer to the ability to operate the necessary specialized equipment; 3) *social and communication skills*, which involve an individual’s ability to engage in and manage interpersonal relations.

Listening belongs to the third category and it leads to better cooperation and information sharing among employees, to increased professional satisfaction, to more creativity, which further results in higher productivity and sales figures. Social and communication skills have also been called *soft skills* that round off someone’s academic expertise. Research has shown that in certain areas such as people-oriented domains, listening can be crucial for the efficiency of one’s performance. In the educational field, students learn a lot by listening, and teachers become aware of learners’ needs, weaknesses and strong points. In language learning, for instance, listening is one of the four basic skills. In the health care domain, listening to the history of someone’s personal health problems or investigating their lifestyles, can help doctors and nurses diagnose and cure the patients. In fields such as psychotherapy or priesthood, it is essential to listen to others in order to advise and soothe them. In customer service, sales, business, management, politics, etc., listening enhances people interaction, inspires trust, improves team work. Paying attention to the interlocutor’s feedback helps us adjust future behaviour and make better decisions, or gives us the possibility to take advantage of our competitors’ weak points.

As a consequence, researchers have turned their attention to what effective or active listening requires. K. Floyd argues that we might listen to someone, but we might not do it effectively. In his opinion, *effective listening* necessarily entails the listener’s willingness to figure out the intentions of the speaker: “Effective listening involves listening with the conscious and explicit goal of understanding what the speaker is attempting to communicate”.<sup>11</sup>

The scholar points out that we might even involuntarily distort the meaning intended by the speaker, but listening effectively means, however, to do one’s best to understand the speaker’s communicative intentions.

Listening has also been described as a multistage active process which could be divided into three distinct phases that subsequently include specific activities, as summarized in the following table:

<b>PHASE</b>	<b>ACTIVITIES</b>	
<b>Preparation for</b>	<i>Focus on speaker</i>	Relax, avoid distractions, concentrate on the speaker.

<sup>8</sup>Hargie, O.&Dickson, D., *op.cit.*, p.170.

<sup>9</sup>Solomon, D. & Theiss, J., *Interpersonal Communication. Putting Theory into Practice*, Routledge, New York, 2013, p.208.

<sup>10</sup>Hargie, O., (ed.), *The handbook of communication skills*, Routledge, London, 1997.

<sup>11</sup>Floyd, K., *Interpersonal communication*, McGraw-Hill, New York, 2011, p.218.

<b>listening</b>	<b><i>Remove distractions</i></b>	Stop talking, stop interrupting, avoid looking out of focus, ensure you receive the message accurately.
<b>Listening</b>	<b><i>Support speaker to communicate freely</i></b>	Use non-verbal language for approval and insert short words to encourage the speaker to express himself without constraints.
	<b><i>Adopt a prejudice free attitude</i></b>	Be impartial, avoid irritation, adapt to speaker's way of communicating, accept cultural differences and his communication posture.
	<b><i>Show patience</i></b>	Allow speaker to continue over long pauses, avoid interrupting or finishing sender's sentences.
	<b><i>Focus on ideas</i></b>	Place ideas in context, link ideas to understand the general framework.
	<b><i>Observe non-verbal communication</i></b>	Focus on gestures, facial expressions, eye-movements etc.; focus on tone and volume of the speaker's voice, try to decipher the speaker's mood.
	<b><i>Show empathy</i></b>	Open your mind, concentrate to understand the expressed point of view, acknowledge the expressed perspectives and approaches, avoid preconceived ideas to interfere with the speaker's message, carefully construct counter-arguments.
<b>Assessment of the listening process</b>	<b><i>Interpreting, memorising</i></b>	Assign sense to messages, enhance your tacit knowledge.
	<b><i>Remember and evaluate listening experience</i></b>	Assess your listening behaviour, review messages, learn from past listening experiences.

Table 1. *Effective listening phases and activities*<sup>12</sup>

As it can be inferred from the table above, effective listening requires preparation, which basically implies giving the speaker our undivided attention. Avoiding prejudice and biased attitudes is another prerequisite for effective listening. Additionally, we should take into consideration both verbal and nonverbal communication; besides words, body language and voice inflections offer clues about the speaker's intentions, attitudes and mood. Empathy is another characteristic of good listeners; we should try to put ourselves in the interlocutor's position and avoid being critical and judgemental. The point is to make the speaker relax and feel at ease. Last, but not least we should be analytical and ponder over our listening experiences; if certain courses of action went wrong, we should investigate the reasons and avoid making the same mistakes again. Our reactions should be tailored to suit the personality and behaviour of

<sup>12</sup> This summary is a synthesis of the article "The 10 Principles of Listening" available at <https://www.skillsyouneed.com> (accessed 05.05.2017).

each interlocutor; there is no universal recipe, not all reactions are appropriate for all speakers, not even for the same speaker. On different occasions, our listening behaviour should change to correspond with the circumstances. It is not an easy task, that is why so much research has been carried out in the attempt to improve interpersonal communication, since it has huge impact on the morale of family members and co-workers. The good news, however, is that we can improve our listening skill if we are willing to.

#### **4. Suggestions for improving one's listening skill**

A great deal of research has been lately devoted to interpersonal communication and interpersonal skills, such as listening. This is because the ability to listen effectively can enhance the quality of our private life and increase our productivity at work. K. Floyd asserts that our listening skill can be improved if we want to make our interactions more rewarding: "Like other aspects of communication, listening is a skill you have to learn and practice. When you listen properly, the activity adds a great deal to the quality of your relationships. When you don't, your communication and relationships both suffer".<sup>13</sup> G. White underlines that it is of paramount importance for the listener to have the willingness to give his attention to the speaker and be empathic<sup>14</sup>. Additionally, good listeners maintain eye contact and are able to detect and interpret nonverbal cues that bring further information to the interaction. Actually, the first step in becoming an effective listener is to have the awareness that this is a crucial factor in interpersonal communication. Subsequently comes the self-improvement effort in this direction. Hereunder are some concrete examples of powerful training tools for becoming a more effective listener:

- communication books, workshops, courses or lectures held by domain specialists provide professional perspectives and advice;
- role-plays and simulations can be illuminating as people may play different parts and put themselves in someone else's shoes: parent/child, husband/wife, teacher/student, boss/employee, doctor/ patient, salesperson/ customer, etc.;
- video recordings of interactions and video feedback help people ponder over their words and body language so as to go on with what went well and correct what went wrong;
- peer feedback involves analyzing the companions' comments and reactions to our words and actions;
- taking notes, paraphrasing our interlocutor's words and questioning him on the topic under discussion make us better remember what has been discussed and help the speaker relax.

These practical techniques to improve one's listening skill prove useful because they address all the phases involved in the interpersonal communication process.

#### **Conclusion**

Undoubtedly, some people are better communicators by instinct, but nonetheless, it is a fact that education and practice can develop and improve anyone's communication skills. As we have argued, the most important step in becoming a good communicator is awareness of one's own behaviour and the willingness to improve one's conduct. Yet, changing one's behaviour can be as difficult as changing one's physical condition, demanding discipline and perseverance. Still, academic performance is not enough to ensure us the optimal functioning at work. People oriented professions, in particular, require openness, sensitivity, mediating and negotiating skills.

---

<sup>13</sup> Floyd, K., *op.cit.*, p.216.

<sup>14</sup> White, G., *Listening*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998.

Effective listening helps us become better friends and better employees, making us aware of other people's needs, moods, weaknesses and strong points. Listening is a basic interpersonal skill and it has been statistically proven that interpersonal skills enhance someone's employability. Good listeners make good communicators who are able to understand the entire complexity of the messages they receive. They make better learners and tend to have higher positions and salaries in the companies they work for, which finally leads to the conclusion that it pays to seek ways of enhancing one's interpersonal communication skills.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

1. Berko, R., Aitken, J. E. & Wolvin, Andrew, *ICOMM: Interpersonal Concepts and Competencies. Foundations of Interpersonal Communication*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2010.
2. Bostrom, R. 'The process of listening', in O.Hargie (ed.) *The handbook of communication skills* (2nd edition), London: Routledge, 1997.
3. Emmert, P., "President's perspective", in *ILA Listening Post*, 56, 1996, pp.2-3.
4. Floyd, K., *Interpersonal communication*, McGraw-Hill, New York, 2011.
5. Hargie, O., (ed.), *The handbook of communication skills*, London: Routledge, 1997.
6. Hargie, O. & Dickson, D., *Skilled Interpersonal Communication. Research, Theory and Practice*, Routledge, London & New York, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, 2005.
7. Robbins, S. & Hunsaker, P., *Training in interpersonal skills: tips for managing people at work*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1996.
8. Solomon, D. & Theiss, J., *Interpersonal Communication. Putting Theory into Practice*, Routledge, New York, 2013, p.219.
9. Steil, L., "Listening training: the key to success in today's organizations", in D. Borisoff and M. Purdy (eds.), *Listening in everyday life*, Maryland: University of America Press, 1991.
10. Van Slyke, E., *Listening to conflict: finding constructive solutions to workplace disputes*, New York: AMACOM, 1999.
11. White, G., *Listening*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.
12. Wolvin, A. D., Listening, Understanding, and Misunderstanding, in Eadie, W.F. (ed.), *21<sup>st</sup> Century Communication: A Reference Handbook*, Sage, San Diego State University, 2009, Vol. I, pp. 137-146.

### **Websites**

<http://www.listen.org/> (accessed 04.05.2017)

<https://www.skillsyouneed.com> (accessed 05.05.2017)