

LISTENING STRATEGY IN BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

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Abstract: In our days, when the external environment has wider impact on national business, as the globalisation and internationalization have no boundaries, the communication is the key of success. The communication reveals and helps better understanding of ideas, reduces grievances, improves relationships and the business outcomes. However, an effective communication needs listening which may be the powerful tool for the business's management. This paper is aiming to emphasise some aspects of communication in business, the importance of listening in the business communication as a tool for the company's management and to propose a strategy to enhance the power of listening in business communication.

Keywords: communication, listening, business, management, strategy of listening

1. Introduction

The real life demonstrated that the managers who have the ability to communicate well with the employees and the other stakeholders have got success in business. Too many entrepreneurs become estranged from their teams, turn off partners, and lose deals, all because they lack basic communication skills. Often this lack of skill gets passed down to teams and the problems are perpetuated through the organization (Steimle, 2017).

All managers should be conscious about their communication skills and they need to improve their weaknesses by learning and experiences. We often treat communication as if it were a discrete act, a matter of performance or lack thereof. Yet meaning cannot be separated from context. A crucial, but often overlooked, function of leadership is creating a culture in which effective communication can flourish (Satell, 2015).

The effective communication is about more than just exchanging information. It's about understanding the emotion and intentions behind the information. The effective communication combines a set of four skills (Robinson et al., 2018):

1. Engaged listening
2. Nonverbal communication
3. Managing stress in the moment
4. Asserting yourself in a respectful way

While these are learned skills, communication is more effective when it becomes spontaneous rather than formulaic (Robinson et al., 2018). But, the effective communication also means good understanding. Sanborn (2006) believes that the word "communication" is an amorphous term that is not adequately understood. As leaders, our goal is to foster understanding, and our primary tool to achieve understanding is effective communication. Effective communication allows participants to properly exchange ideas (Sanborn, 2006).

The common barriers to effective communication include (Robinson et al., 2018):

- Stress and out-of-control emotion
- Lack of focus
- Inconsistent body language

- Negative body language

In order to brake the communication barriers, the authors suggest the development of four main skills, as:

- Become an engaged listener
- Pay attention to nonverbal signals
- Keep stress in check
- Assert yourself

The art of persuasion and debate is a valuable part of the communication process. It is even worthwhile to dissent against our own opinions. Arguing against our self-interest can help to highlight potential weaknesses and flaws in our position before they are exposed by others (Fitzpatrick, 2010).

In our days the effective communication could use different means. A sticky note may help to personalize a written communication (Fitzpatrick, 2010).

2. The importance of listening in the business communication

Many of us think that communication is talking - and talk we do. We interrupt, advise, reassure, judge, analyse, criticize, argue, moralize, threaten, divert, diagnose, etc., etc. But, good communication requires good listening as well as talking. Verbal ways of showing that we are paying attention include:

- 1) an open invitation to talk;
- 2) using one or two words to encourage talking to continue;
- 3) asking open-ended questions and
- 4) knowing when to be silent.

A good listener uses questions sparingly because questions tend to focus the conversation on the questioner's perspective and concerns and can derail the focus of the speaker (Foster, 2018).

Covey (2004) believes that when people listen, they have four natural responses which are based on their history and perspective. The first response is to evaluate whether they will agree or disagree; the second is to probe in the effort to capture information; the third is to advise or give council; and the fourth is to interpret or explain the original message. Since we usually see the conversation from only our perspective, these autobiographical responses limit our ability to understand the other person's opinion.

A fair definition regarding listening is given by Rosa Urtubi (the president of PWN Bilbao, Spain, cited in Heskett, 2014): "Listening is assuming the responsibility, generosity to do something with whatever you hear. After all it is someone's gift to you".

Many managers think that listening is to encourage listeners to remain quiet and then to repeat back to the talker something like (Zenger & Folkman, 2016). But, regarding the listening skills, Zenger & Folkman (2016) have grouped them into four main findings:

- Good listening is much more than being silent while the other person talks;
- Good listening included interactions that build a person's self-esteem;
- Good listening was seen as a cooperative conversation;
- Good listeners tended to make suggestions;

The authors (Zenger & Folkman, 2016) also stress that there are different levels of listening. Not every conversation requires the highest levels of listening, but many conversations would benefit from greater focus and listening skill.

Regarding listening, the business analysts underline the differences between active and passive listening.

While active listening is a form of listening communication that is characterized by a deep involvement of the communicator and the listener, the passive one is when the listener don't pay

much attention to the communicator and is not engaged in understanding and responding to him/her.

The table 1 underlines the main differences between the two aspects.

Table 1 The main differences between the active and passive listening

Basis of Distinction	Active Listening	Passive Listening
Definition	Active listening means mindful and actively hearing and attempting to comprehend the meaning of the speakers.	Passive listening means showing like listening to the speaker but not making an attempt to comprehend the meanings.
Connectivity Level	Listener connects with the world and actively participates with the goal of problem-solving	Listener disconnects himself from the outsiders and has minimal interaction with others
Self-Responsibility	Take responsibility for their own learning and growth	Avoids responsibility for learning and problem-solving
Mental Approach	Sharp mind, alert to explore, reflect on information	Accepts and retain information as-is with no intention to question or challenge the idea for improvement
Self-Motivation Level	Strong	Weak
Engagement Level	High	Low
Will-Power	Strong willed, interested in new ideas, open minded	Narrow-minded, low or no will power, unreceptive to new ideas

Source: <https://www.differencebtw.com/difference-between-active-and-passive-listening/>.

Listening is not something that comes naturally or easily for most of us, however; it is a skill that must be cultivated and practiced. *Active listening* means, as its name suggests, means that we make a conscious and concerted effort to fully engage with the speaker. Active listening is the difference between simply hearing and listening with the intent to truly understand. It is a subtle but important distinction (Scuderi, 2018).

Still, active listening is becoming more difficult in this multitasking world where we are simultaneously engaged in many conversations over various mediums. According to a study conducted by the University of Kansas, 74% of 500 individuals reported that they multitask using text-based communication while also engaged in a face-to-face conversation (Baron, 2008).

However, according to Cialdini, Goldstein and Martin (2008), fear will stimulate the listener to take action; but if the listener is not told how to reduce the risk, the listener will eventually block out the message. Therefore, we must be sure not only to highlight the issue but also to communicate to our audience attainable steps to reduce the risk.

According to Hamlin (2006) the world is composed of various personality types, all of which affect how a person will listen. Another aspect that affects how someone listens is age. A person's generation will impact how the individual accesses their news, tackles work or perceives time. For example, Baby Boomers, those born during the middle part of the 20th Century, may be more likely to read a paper to receive their news. On the other hand, Generation Xers, those born between 1961 and 1981, may tune into their favourite cable news network; and those labelled Generation Y, those born after Generation X, may receive a constant stream of information via their mobile phones. We must be aware that factors such as our age may affect our listening skills.

In the era of the IT development, the “listening is a skill that we’re in danger of losing in a world of digital distraction and information overload” (Horowitz, 2012).

3. Strategy of listening in business communication

The literature is offering different strategies to increase the effectiveness of listening skills, such as: Schilling (2012) that propose a strategy with 10 steps:

Step 1: Face the speaker and maintain eye contact;

Step 2: Be attentive, but relaxed (meaning be present, give attention, apply or direct yourself, pay attention and remain ready to serve);

Step 3: Keep an open mind;

Step 4: Listen to the words and try to picture what the speaker is saying;

Step 5: Don't interrupt and don't impose your "solutions";

Step 6: Wait for the speaker to pause to ask clarifying questions;

Step 7: Ask questions only to ensure understanding;

Step 8: Try to feel what the speaker is feeling;

Step 9: Give the speaker regular feedback;

Step 10: Pay attention to what *isn't* said—to nonverbal cues.

In order to develop the listening skills, Brodow (2018) suggests the following behaviour for managers:

- Develop the desire to listen;
- Always let the other person do most of the talking;
- Don't interrupt;
- Learn active listening;
- Ask for clarification if needed;
- Get used to 'listening' for nonverbal messages – body language;
- Ask a question...then shut up.

About the same strategy is proposed by Scuderi (2018) who emphasises 11 steps for an efficient listening.

Having in view the above-mentioned authors' opinion about listening (Scuderi, 2018; Brodow, 2018; Zenger, 2016; Schilling, 2012) we propose a conceptual strategy to enhance the power of listening in business communication comprising 12 steps (fig.1).

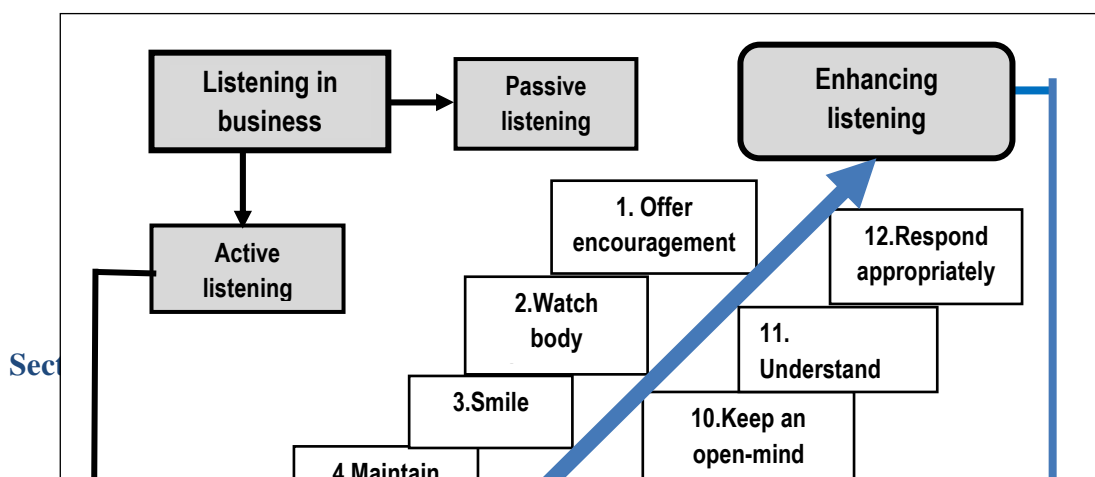


Fig. 1 Conceptual strategy of listening in business communication

The 12 steps of the strategy are the followings:

1. Offer encouragement: showing the interest in what is going to be listened;
2. Watch the body (non-verbal communication): when the way of communication permits;
3. Smile: offering a positive face expression;
4. Maintain eye contact: when the way of communication permits;
5. Give focused attention: affirming the following of the ideas;
6. Allow silence;
7. Don't interrupt: don't impose opinions or solutions;
8. Reflect back: giving signals of understanding;
9. Ask relevant questions: show the interest;
10. Keep an open-mind: lack of assumptions;
11. Understand: giving feed-back and putting questions;
12. Respond appropriately: share thoughts and opinions.

About all these actions could be applied to face-to-face communication, as well as to the IT communication (smart mobile phone, tablet, Facebook, email,

4. Conclusions

The communication is an important skill in business, but the listening could be considered the core skill of the communication. It is the milestone of good relationship into and outside the company, having a great influence on the business success, employees and customers' satisfaction, the quality of work and the competitive advantage of the company.

The listening could be passive, when the listener is not involved in the conversation or active, when the listener is participating to the conversation by paying attention to the communicator, putting questions, understanding the meaning of the discussion and responding. Active listening is a model for good communication. Listening is not just to gather information and share ideas, but also to gain perspective and understanding. It takes practice to develop active listening skills, and it's a habit that has to be reinforced. The goal of conversation is not merely to trade words, but to truly understand what the other party is saying and to be understood in turn (Scuderi, 2018).

The ways the people wish to listen and communicate depend on their native aptitudes, learning and their IT skills, so that the young generation prefer the IT devices and gadgets. In this respect the managers need to adapt their communication style to these new challenges. "In today's high-tech, high-speed, high-stress world, communication is more important than ever, yet we seem to devote less and less time to really listening to one another. Genuine listening has become a rare gift—the gift of time" (Schilling, 2012).

The conceptual strategy of listening in business communication proposed in the paper may be a useful tool for managers to enhance their skills of communication to become and remain successful.

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