

A Brief Introduction to Listening Skills

James Trevelyan

This is a brief introduction to the most neglected skill in communication. If you look around you will find that nearly every communication skills book or course misses it.

Listening is the single most important skill for engineers, in my opinion. Engineering is great fun, mostly because you can spend lots of money that belongs to other people doing what most engineers like best: transforming your own ideas into concrete reality: buying or creating expensive toys that you get to play with. However, your clients will only give you money if you respond to their needs. Most clients tend to be verbal people: they don't tend to express their needs in writing or drawings. That's the first reason why listening is so important for engineers: you need to listen to understand your clients' needs.

The second reason why listening is important is that engineers seldom perform the actual hands-on technical work (except perhaps for many software engineers and some design engineers). Mostly you will be organising lots of other people to do the work for you. You need to be sure they are listening to you, and you need to listen to them when they tell you about problems that come up. Accurate communication is one of the best ways to avoid nasty engineering problems. Most engineering disasters ultimately come down to communication failures because engineers tend to spend more time communicating than any other single type of activity.

Most people think that just because they can hear, they can listen perfectly well. However, just a few minutes observation will tell you that many people could greatly improve their listening skills. You may be no exception.

When I have asked my students in the past about which aspect of communication skills they would most like to improve, the most common request is often phrased like this:

"I would like to be able to get my point across more often. I find that other people don't listen to my ideas. I'd like them to listen more carefully and I get frustrated when they seem to misunderstand what I am saying or miss the point completely."

Actually, knowing about listening skills can really help you here.

The chances are that the problem is that the "other people" are not listening well.

If you can pick up on their listening skills, you can save yourself a lot of trouble. Once you can tell when the other person is *not* listening, you can avoid wasting your time and effort and try some other approach to get their attention.

Just try this little exercise.

Join a group of students talking about something: it could be a project group meeting, or just a casual conversation between lectures, or a group of people trying to organise

a social activity. Even better, if you're living at home, just watch a family conversation around the meal table.

Watch and listen carefully.

See if you can notice when someone starts speaking before the other person has finished talking.

When this happens the interrupting person has switched their mental focus some seconds before they opened their mouth to what they're going to say. They not only miss what the other person said while they were starting to speak, but also what was said for the last few seconds beforehand.

The main trick to good listening is to keep your focus on what the other person is saying, right through to the end. It's hard. So often, if you're like me, you will find your attention drifting....that strange way they say a certain word....the piece of food stuck to their lower lip...so many things can divert your attention. How many times have you been listening to someone, perhaps in a lecture, and found yourself thinking about something completely irrelevant?

Fortunately, since most of us start with poor listening skills, it's not so difficult to make a big improvement.

Posture

The best place to start is with your posture.

Notice how when people are really listening carefully their posture often tells you just that, without even having to listen carefully to what's going on.

A young guy who is leaning right back in his chair, with his hands holding the back of his head, staring at the ceiling....chances are he is not listening much. Compare this to someone sitting forward in his or her chair, with head and eyes fixed on the person speaking. This person is probably concentrating on what the speaker is saying.

Be careful, however. Posture can be deceptive. A person who does not look at you when you're speaking may actually be listening very attentively, even though it might seem to put you off.

Yes, that's right. The posture of the person you're speaking to can actually send you a powerful message. So, by sitting up attentively, leaning forwards and focusing on the person you are listening to can help hold their attention, and send a non-verbal message to them that you are listening carefully.

Appropriate Body Motion

Once again, watch other people talking. What do they do when other people are talking? Do they fiddle with their papers or books? Do they shuffle their feet?

Someone who is really listening hard will probably keep very still because their mind is focused on the speaker. See if you can watch yourself when you're listening.

Eye Contact

Like posture, eye contact is very important.

Keeping your eyes focused on the speaker does two things.

First, it helps you to avoid distractions and helps you to focus on what is being said.

Second, like posture, it sends a strong non-verbal message to the speaker that you are focusing on what they are saying.

When I am speaking to a class, even a large class, I scan my eyes across the entire audience all the time I am speaking. I look into the eyes of the audience all the time. This way, I can not only hold their attention longer, but I can also tell when I start to lose the audience because some people will start to move their eyes around the room away from me. Soon after, if I don't regain their attention, I will start to hear shuffling feet, papers being moved around, and I know that I have lost the attention of my audience!

Eye contact is a very powerful tool for the listener.

Once again, be careful...some people feel uncomfortable staring at someone, particularly in a small group or one-on-one situation, and will actually look away while you are talking, even though they are listening carefully. Other people may have a natural squint: their eyes seem to be looking somewhere else, even though they are actually looking right at you.

Eye contact is a useful indicator, but you need other techniques to make sure that listening is working.

When it comes to lectures and presentations, remember that a PowerPoint presentation is a great attention diverter! People in the audience will look at the screen, and soon most will stop listening to what you are saying. That can be fine: sometimes the picture tells the whole story. Mostly it doesn't, however. When you want to regain your audience attention, you can simply press the '.' key: the screen will go black. Press it again to get the picture back.

Environment

When you want someone to listen to you carefully, it helps to choose a good environment, without too many distractions. You cannot always choose your environment, but it helps to be aware of how different environments can affect listening.

Listening is all about focusing on the speaker so any interruption is likely to interfere with your concentration.

Switch off mobile phones (both your own and the speaker's).

Avoid an office at times when people are likely to come looking for you or the person you are listening to. If you can't go somewhere else, put up a 'Meeting in Progress' sign to minimise interruptions, and remember to take it down afterwards.

Make sure the other person is comfortable, and you too if possible. Choose a room with comfortable furniture, but not too comfortable or one of you may fall asleep.

Sit at the same level: avoid a situation where you are sitting on a higher chair than the person talking to you.

Reduce glare: avoid a situation where one of you has to see the other person against a bright light or window.

Sometimes it is best to choose an open space, either outside or in a busy coffee shop. A person who does not know you well may not feel comfortable by themselves in a room with you. A busy coffee shop has enough background noise to keep the conversation private. However, don't choose a place where either of you will be well known or else it will be difficult to avoid interruptions.

Emotion and Fatigue

Anyone in a heightened emotional state tends to find listening much more difficult. One of the reasons why intense relationships can be so difficult after the initial stage of infatuation is precisely this. Even positive emotions can kill listening abilities!

Fatigue is the other killer of listening ability! Alcohol is also usually fatal.

Unless you have professional training as a counsellor, avoid trying to communicate when you or the other person is in a heightened emotional state, particularly when the emotions are negative: anger, frustration, loss or bereavement, insecurity or anxiety. Wait for a day or two: there will be other opportunities. On the other hand, don't suddenly break off a conversation if you think you're not listening well, or the other person has switched off: that can kill a relationship quickly! Just wait for a suitable moment to take your leave, or just apologise for being too tired *even if you think the other person is the one who is too tired or emotional and not listening!*

If you need to calm down quickly to improve your own listening skills there are several useful techniques you can practise. Moderate exercise for 30 minutes or more (e.g. walking), deep breathing, sleep, concentrating on something completely different (but not too demanding), or even taking a relaxed meal can help. If you are deeply religious, prayer can be very helpful.

Remember, too, that listening can be tiring because it demands your full concentration, particularly if you are not used to doing it for long periods. Take time out for a rest after 45 minutes or so.

Active Listening

This is a skill you can master, and it makes listening more fun and enjoyable. It is also very useful in a meeting: your active listening will help other people in the meeting to understand what someone is saying.

Active listening takes practice and can feel embarrassing at first. However, it sends a powerful message to the speaker that you are really paying attention and respect what they are telling you. The speaker will tell you much more than they otherwise would have done.

Respond gently to the talker

While you are listening, respond to the person who is talking. Smile when there is a hint of humour, put on a slight expression of concern when they look concerned or talk about a difficult situation. Reflect their pose: if they are sitting up leaning towards you, try to do the same. If they are sitting back with their legs crossed, try adopting a similar pose without being uncomfortable.

Maintain eye contact, but not necessarily with a fixed stare that could make the speaker uncomfortable. If the speaker's eyes wander a little, let yours wander too, but keep a close watch at the same time.

Minimal encouragement

Insert brief "minimal encouragement" phrases into the conversation like "Oh yes?" or "Really", or "Cool" etc. without actually interrupting the speaker.

Taking notes

Take notes if the conversation is important. However, in sensitive situations, always ask if it is OK to take notes first!

See my separate guide on efficient ways to take notes.

Attentive silence

If the speaker pauses, don't respond immediately: they may be thinking what to say next. Try 'attentive silence'. This simply means waiting for the person to go on talking. Silence is nearly always more effective than phrases like "Tell me more" or "What else did they say?"

Infrequent, open questions, clarification

Ask occasional, infrequent questions, and always use 'open questions'. A 'closed question' is one that will evoke a "yes" or "no" or "don't know" answer, or at least one of a small number of possible answers. An open question invites a longer more informative response. Instead of "Was Jane there?" ask "Tell me about the people who were there."

It's often important to ask clarifying questions. Sometimes you will feel afraid to admit you don't know what a word means, or you have forgotten about something really important that the speaker just told you. Bite your tongue and ask:

- "Could you tell me what you mean by that?"
- "Tell me what you mean when you use the word _____?"

- "I am sorry, I think I missed that, my mind must have switched off for a moment, could you tell me again please?"

Door openers

Sometimes, the speaker will be stuck, trying to think of words to describe what they want to convey to you. If attentive silence does not work, try a gentle 'door opener' in the form of an open question, possibly about something not entirely relevant. The effect is simply to get the speaker back into talking, telling you things which will be on their mind. Even if you take them off the track slightly, they will soon come back.

At the start of a conversation, try asking about people you both know. "How's Sam these days? What have you heard about him recently?"

Mid way through, you can take the speaker back to something he or she mentioned perhaps briefly in passing, like "Tell me about that woman you said was hanging around the office with Wendy....".

Paraphrasing

This is probably the most important 'active listening' skill to master, and it takes practice. At first it seems embarrassing. Never mind, keep trying even though you may feel rather embarrassed.

After the speaker has said something that's important to understand accurately, ask them to listen to your own understanding of what they just said, in your own words, and tell you if it's right.....

"If I have heard you correctly, what you have just told me is _____. Have I understood you correctly?"

or

"Did I hear you correctly when you said _____?"

This is particularly helpful in meetings, especially if you are the meeting chair. If you are not sure you really understood what the speaker was saying, the chances are the other people present are also unsure, and have probably misunderstood what was said. By asking for clarification, or better, paraphrasing what you think the speaker just said, you will help other people understand more accurately.

You might think it takes extra time and trouble and you feel that you will annoy the speaker by doing this. Mostly you will make the speaker feel more re-assured that you are really trying to understand what he or she has said.

Road Blocks

There are some things that really disrupt face to face communication and tell you that the other person is not listening well. Train yourself to notice these things, and remind yourself that we all make these mistakes more often than we should!

Criticising, name calling

You are listening to someone and they tell you about a difficult situation or conversation. You say "I don't think it was a good idea to say that." In a more extreme version "You idiot! Why did you do that?"

The speaker will feel embarrassed and will be reluctant to tell you what really happened because no one likes direct criticism, being told they did something wrong.

If you really think they could have handled a situation better, try this: "That must have been tough for you! I'm not sure I would have been able to handle that." This can quite easily prompt a response along the lines "Oh no, I'm sure you would not have mucked it up like I did."

If asked directly for advice and criticism, provide it, but gently.

Diagnosing or praising evaluatively

You are listening to someone and they tell you about a difficult situation or conversation. You say "You must have been tired or pissed out of your mind to say that!"

Quite possibly true, but once again, this is unlikely to make the speaker comfortable enough to tell you what they still have not yet told you and are perhaps reluctant to talk about!

Praising someone for doing "the right thing" can also block communication, because the speaker might be silently thinking "I must have been a dumb idiot to have said that!".

You will find other spoilers and road blocks on the listening skills worksheet at the end of these notes.

Improving your Listening Skills

Practice is one way. To practice effectively you need a reference channel to check how accurately you have listened.

Try listening to lectures and taking detailed notes: see the separate guide about taking notes for ways to take accurate notes with minimal effort.

Then compare your notes with written hand-outs and notes taken by other people attending the lecture. Try and understand why you missed some things or misunderstood. Try sitting closer to the lecturer so you can hear better.

Use paraphrasing more often, explaining that you are trying to improve your listening skills. Make notes when your listening was inaccurate so you can try and learn why.

The best aspect to this kind of practice is that any improvement can be very rewarding. Relationships will improve and you will learn more easily and with less effort and fewer mistakes.

Another way to learn more about listening skills is to watch other people. Try using the listening skills worksheet that follows. Make sure you do this discretely, or ask permission first because many people can be quite offended if they think you are trying to watch them too closely.

Finally, read the book "People Skills" by Robert Bolton. At \$25 it is a very worthwhile investment. Even if you have read it before and studied these notes, read it again....every time you will learn something new. Even good listeners are still learning after a lifetime of practice.

Listening Skills Worksheet

This exercise is designed to help you notice listening skills and help one of your peers know more about their listening. Watch the discussion, focusing on only one person at a time, and note particular instances of listening skills (good and bad). When you pause to note an instance, you will have to miss the next minute or so of the discussion, but it is important to make good notes so you can recall the instance later. Make notes for this person so they can learn from what you notice about their listening skills.

Your Name: _____ Person being watched : _____

Listening Skills

Posture

Appropriate body motion

Eye contact

Effect of environment

Door openers

Minimal encouragement

Infrequent questions

Attentive silence

Spoilers and Road Blocks

Criticizing

Name calling

Diagnosing

Praising evaluatively

Starting reply before speaker has finished

Thinking about something else, eg the next reply (shows because reply is not relevant to what speaker has just said)

Ordering

Threatening

Moralizing

Excessive or inappropriate questioning

Advising

Diverting attention

Logical argument

Reassuring