Listen up! Enhancing your listening skills

Have you ever thought about how important listening can be? Just consider that you spend 80 per cent of your waking hours communicating, and more than 45 per cent of that time listening to others—your spouse, children, friends, co-workers and acquaintances.



What is listening? Listening is more than just waiting for your turn to talk, and more, even, than just being quiet and hearing. Dr. Lyman K. Steil, a well-known authority on the subject, explains that listening involves four stages. First, you hear the message, then interpret, evaluate, and respond to it.

Studies have shown that most people understand, evaluate and retain approximately 50 per cent of what is said. And after two days, you remember only half of that. The end result is that you comprehend and retain only 25 per cent of what is said.

Listening improves your work and your life

In the workplace, the cost of poor listening adds up to dollars and cents. It can involve the cost of additional time spent in repeating instructions and having to redo assignments that were carried out incorrectly. Further, some workplace accidents involving physical harm to workers are the result of an individual not listening to directions or warnings before acting.

On a personal front, relationships with people can suffer if you don’t listen effectively or if you don’t have people in your life who will actively listen to you from time to time. We all need someone with whom to share our ideas, thoughts and feelings. If you don’t have a listener in your life, you can begin to feel lonely and isolated.

How would you rate your best friend as a listener? The magic of a warm and sincere friendship is usually one of the rewards of good listening. We are attracted to people who listen. They calm and support us.

Why don't we listen?

If listening is really this important, then why aren't we better listeners? The reasons can be many, including:

- **Lack of training.** We teach reading, writing and speaking in school. Adults take courses in speed reading, business writing and public speaking. Yet, despite all of our attempts at improving communications, we often neglect the communication skill used the most often—listening.

- **Hectic lifestyles.** Have you ever been too busy to lend a sympathetic ear to a child who has had a tough day at school or to really listen to your mate discuss his or her frustrations?

- **Too much responsibility.** Sometimes we don't listen to others because we think that they expect us to solve their problems. Yet, few of our friends and relatives really want us to organize their finances, find them new mates or solve their work frustrations. Leo Buscaglia, a well-known psychologist and author, put it this way: "When I ask you to listen to me, and you start giving advice, you have not done what I asked." Remember that there are times when people want us to listen to them and appreciate what they are going through, nothing more.

Listening styles

Before you can become a good listener, you must become a flexible listener. In other words, it's crucial to vary your listening style to suit the speaker, the subject and the occasion.

Consider your reason for listening. More often than not, your reason for listening will help decide on your style of listening. It is said that people listen for four main reasons:

- For pleasure
- To receive ideas and information
- To evaluate information
- To show empathy

If you listen to a business seminar the same way you listen to a TV comedy, you may not retain much from the seminar. And it stands to reason that the listening style you would use to evaluate information regarding a major purchase you are about to make is not the style you would use when listening to a friend's troubles.

Which of these listeners are you?

Taking a look at your listening habits is the first step towards becoming a better listener. Most of us have a number of listening faults. So don't be surprised if you identify yourself in more than one of these illustrations:

The biased listener. Usually, the biased listener isn't listening. The biased listener has tuned out and is planning what to say next, based on some fixed idea already decided on regarding the topic at hand (no matter what else is said by the speaker). When bias becomes prejudice, we may even tune out a person because of his or her age, accent or occupation. Are biases a barrier to your listening? If so, it may be time to make a deliberate effort to get rid of preconceived ideas, in order to give others a fair hearing.

The distracted listener. All of us fit into this category at one time or another. Distracted listeners allow internal or external distractions to prevent them from giving others their undivided attention. To become an attentive listener, you need to make a deliberate effort to tune out internal distractions and concentrate on what the speaker is saying. If this is not possible, it may be better to set another time when you can give your undivided attention.

The impatient listener. The impatient listener is one who interrupts and seldom lets people finish what they have to say. It can be easy to slip into this habit. If you find it extremely frustrating to listen to people who, perhaps, talk slowly, then you are probably an impatient listener. If this is your issue, notice how often you interrupt, and try and curb this habit. At first, you may find it difficult, but you'll be pleasantly surprised when the lines of communication open up.

The passive listener. The passive listener does not realize that listening is an active process. When we are engaged in conversation with this type of listener, we are never sure if our message is understood. Why? Simply because we receive little or no feedback. If you have a tendency to be a passive listener, try practising the traits of a responsive listener. These can include leaning slightly forward, establishing eye contact, and nodding or smiling when appropriate. An occasional remark such as "I see," "uh-huh" or "yes" can be used when the conversation is either face-to-face or by phone.

How are your listening skills?

You may realize that your listening skills need some improvement. Although you're not going to change a lifetime of these habits overnight, you can, with a little time and effort, learn to become a better listener.

Remember that listening is an important communication skill, and should not be overlooked.

You are probably so familiar with the phrase, "Think before you speak," so much so, that this advice is probably second nature to you. But this phrase is incomplete. For most of us, if we add a reminder that listening is a skill that should be practiced, the quality of our dealings with others could be greatly improved.

Although no one can be expected to have "perfect listening," this is one thing that we could wish to be better skilled at. A counsellor can help you to learn and apply the practice of good listening, to family, business and social situations.