

Effective Listening

Lesson Objective:	Comprehend the concept of effective listening.
Behavioral Objectives: At the end of this segment you will be able to:	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Describe the concept of effective listening.2. Identify the attributes of effective listening.3. Explain the five types of listening.4. Describe techniques to improve listening habits.5. Explain your responsibility as a listener.

Overview

NOTE: The material for this segment is based on Dr. John Kline's book, "Listening Effectively (1996, Air University Press.)

"Why are you teaching me about listening? I already know how to listen." Lots of people feel that way. But, while you may hear the words other people say, do you understand what they are trying to SAY? Moving past the words to hear the message is the hallmark of effective listening. So, do you?

As a commander, it is absolutely imperative that you learn to listen effectively: to your customers, to your members, to your bosses. The decisions you make will be based on the information others provide to you. You must be able to accurately understand the messages the people around you are sending to you. Effective listening, therefore, is a survival tool.

In this segment we'll take a look at effective listening. We'll discuss the concept of effective listening, identifying its critical and variable attributes. After, we'll examine the five different types of listening. Finally, we'll discuss proven listening techniques, so that you'll take the steps past hearing people, you'll listen to them.

The Concept Of Effective Listening

Effective listening defined

It's useful to think of listening as an active process rather than as a passive event. Listening, therefore, can be defined as a process of receiving, attending, and understanding auditory messages.

Attributes Of Effective Listening

Critical attributes

The process of effective listening has three critical attributes, as defined by Dr. Kline. The attributes are to: receive, to attend, and to understand the message being sent.

To **receive** means to be attuned to the sender - to be ready to listen. Physical deficits such as deafness often require prosthetic devices to assist. For those with sound hearing, the process is more mental. You have to want to listen. You must come to the conversation with few, if any, expectations or judgements over what may be said.

To **attend** simply means to pay attention to the person and message. As Dr. Kline points out, at any given time we are bombarded by messages. We must, therefore, prioritize the messages sent to us -- paying attention to what we believe is important and discarding the others. In effective listening, the thing to pay attention to is the person talking to you.

Attributes of effective listening

- Critical attributes
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- Variable attributes
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The most important facet is to **understand** the message being transmitted. When verbal messages are sent, both verbal and nonverbal signals are sent...

Verbal Barriers

There are two primary verbal barriers to effective listening:

- **Words mean different things to different people:** Sometimes, what you say may be misunderstood because the person you are speaking to assigns a different meaning or value to the words you choose. For instance, you might say, "John's a penny pincher," in reference to his frugal ways; and mean it in a positive way. John may misinterpret your meaning, and believe you mean "John's cheap" which is more negative.
- **Using different words saying the same thing:** By the same token, you may hold the same opinion as the person speaking with you, and not realize it because they are saying it differently. How many times have you said, "You know, I think we're trying to say the same thing?" Stop for a moment, and examine what the other person says to you, perhaps they are simply using different words than you would choose to get the same idea across.

Non-verbal Barriers

In addition, there are several non-verbal barriers to effective listening, and are as dangerous as the verbal ones:

- **Misinterpretation of action:** What does it mean when you are speaking with someone and they look at their watch, and quickly depart? They may either leaving because they did lose track of time, or they are sending you a non-verbal signal that they do not want to listen anymore. How would interpret someone yawning? It could be that they did not have a good night's sleep. Or it could be that they are bored. Pay attention to the non-verbal signals your audience is giving you, and search for their true meaning.
- **Misinterpretation of non-action symbols:** How people dress, where they live, the car they drive, and how they carry themselves all communicate messages about who they are. Dr. Kline gives an example about how one would interpret another's being late for an appointment. What do you think would happen if you showed up 20 minutes late for a job interview? The non-verbal message the interviewer may be receiving is that you are unreliable? That message surely will contrast with the message you want to send to the interviewer.
- **Misinterpretation of the voice:** It's natural for you to want to glean the speaker's mood from their voice, but it sometimes can be misleading. Some people naturally speak in a loud or shrill tone. If you are just meeting someone, or that someone happens to be your boss, you may believe that they are angry with you when they are really not. In contrast, others may have a naturally soft voice, or speak in a monotone, so you may not listen to the urgency in their message. Listen past the voice quality and seek the message.

In order to be an effective listener, you must master the skills of attuning yourself to the speaker, attending, or pay attention to, the message, and finally, you must take steps to truly understand the message being sent to you.

Variable attributes

In addition to the critical things you must do to become an effective listener, there are some things that may also be helpful, and required to ensure success. While not always necessary, they can greatly help the listening process.

First, you can respond to the speaker. This can either be done verbally, directly responding to the speaker to show that you do or do not understand what is being said; or non-verbally, with a nod, a questioning look, or other signal.

You can also remember what the speaker has said to you. Sometimes it is not necessary, since the message, while urgent, is only important in the short-term. Other times, you only remember the reference cited so that you can go back and get the information later.

Five Types of Listening

Listening can be broken down into five types, depending on the message of the sender and intent of the receiver. The five types are:

- a. **Informative:** In this type, the listener is primarily concerned with understanding the message. In order to be more successful, listeners should hone their vocabulary, concentration, and memorization skills.
- b. **Relationship:** This type of listening refers to the improvement of relationships among people. It's the kind of listening where the listener allows the speaker to "vent;" to talk out a problem or situation. In this type of listening, it's important to pay attention to the speaker, and to be supportive: to keep the message in confidence, and to not be judgmental. It's also important to glean whether the speaker wants you to suggest a solution, or simply to listen.
- c. **Appreciative:** This type of listening refers to the listening we do for the pure enjoyment of it. Each one of us spends much money on cassettes, CDs, and concerts, as well as much time listening to the radios in our cars, because we enjoy music. Many of us also enjoy a good comedy act. The message of the song or routine may not be important to us, but we like the musician, music style, or comic. In this type, listening is a form of relaxation.
- d. **Critical Listening:** In this type, we listen to form an opinion or make a decision. In forming an opinion or making a decision based on a message, we pay attention to three things: the speaker's credibility, the logic of the argument, and the psychological appeal of the message. If one of those areas is lacking, we may make the judgement based on that void.
- e. **Discriminative:** By this type we don't mean excluding speakers based on any trait. It can mean to be able to pick out the electric guitar from the bass in a song, or to filter words from static on the radio. What we mean by discriminative listening is the ability to identify and filter verbal and non-verbal cues, to get to the bottom of the message. This type of listening, as Dr. Kline has said, is the foundation to all other types of listening, because we can use it to infer both the speakers message and their intentions.

Five types of listening	
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➤	A _____
➤	C _____
➤	D _____

Now that you can define what effective listening is, and are familiar with the different types of listening, it's time to discuss different techniques that you can use to improve your listening skills.

Effective Listening Techniques

There are several simple, yet extremely effective techniques you can use to improve your listening skills. Dr. Kline, in his book, groups these techniques into three major categories: **what you think, what you feel, and what you do** about listening. Let's take a look at each of these in more detail.

Thinking about listening

There are six specific things you can do to better think about the listening process:

- a. **Understand the complexities of listening:** Listening is a complex process, and some of the information claiming to discuss listening as a process is really only myth. In addition, listening can be complicated as a process, with different types and techniques to be used in different situations. Make it your business to learn the process of listening. This segment is only the beginning. To learn more, pick up the book, *Listening Effectively*, the primary source for this segment.
- b. **Prepare to listen:** Get ready to listen – physically and mentally. Preparation can be broken down into long, mod, and short term. In the long term, practice listening to difficult material and increase your vocabulary. Learning new words will expand your capacity to listen. In the mid term, prepare effectively before you listen in a specific situation. Use reference and background material to “make yourself smart” about the topic. In the short-term – open your ears as soon as the speaker begins. Cleanse your mind of outside material. Act as if the person speaking is the only person on Earth.
- c. **Adjust to the situation:** The speaker may have an accent, the room may be “loud”, and there may be competition for your attention. Whatever the case, adjust yourself so you can pay full attention to the speaker.
- d. **Focus on ideas and key points:** Don’t focus on the technical facets of the presentation or key in to a thought you particularly liked or disliked. Listen for the main points. Don’t miss the forest through the trees.
- e. **Capitalize on speed differential:** Thought is faster than speech. Because you can process faster than the speaker can speak, you have more time to process the material.
- f. **Organize the material for learning:** In your mind, organize the speaker’s words to answer these questions, “What is the speaker’s point? What ideas should I remember? How does this information relate to what I already know?”

Thinking about listening	
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Feeling about listening

Adjusting to how you feel about listening will go a long way towards improving how you listen. Here are six steps:

- a. **Want to listen:** This tip is straight-forward. You can’t listen effectively to someone if you don’t want to. It pays for you to be honest with the speaker if this is so. If you must reschedule the conversation (if possible), be sure to set up a time when you can listen, and be sure to prepare to listen.
- b. **Delay judgement:** Listen to the whole message. Many times, especially with bad news, we tend to rush to judgement before the whole story. And we might miss important details – ones that can be critical to the decision. Hear ’em out, and pay attention to the “why’s” behind the message.
- c. **Admit your biases:** Don’t let the speaker, subject, situation, or characteristics get in the way of the message. Don’t become star-struck because the speaker is a hero or a treasured subordinate. By the same token, don’t discount a message because you don’t like something about the person or subject matter. Those things don’t matter. The message does.
- d. **Don’t tune out “dry” subjects:** What’s dry to you is critical to someone else. And you won’t know if the message is critical unless you’ve heard it.

Feeling about listening	
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➤	D _____
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➤	E _____

- e. **Accept responsibility for understanding:** You have to put in at least as much work in understanding the message as the speaker does in getting it to you. The onus is on him/her to communicate clearly, and on you to take it in.
- f. **Encourage others to talk:** You can't listen if you are talking. And you can't listen if people can't talk to you. Encourage others – give positive feedback, ask questions, share information, but keep confidential that which the speaker wishes to keep private. Finally, make people comfortable talking to you, set the mood for speaking.

Doing about listening

Doing refers to specific skills you should master when working on your listening technique. These are six of the most crucial.

- a. **Establish eye contact with the speaker:** Establish eye contact with the speaker. Be sure your eye contact reflects a willingness to listen. Don't shoot them the "evil eye."
- b. **Take effective notes:** Whatever method you use for notes, focus on the main points.
- c. **Be a physically involved listener:** Use good posture, follow the speaker, and use your face. If you feel like smiling, do so. Use your hands for notes and applause. Participate in the listening process. These actions not only keep you involved, but provide valuable feedback to the speaker who is watching you.
- d. **Avoid negative mannerisms:** Fidgeting, looking at your watch, tapping a pencil, etc., only serve to distract the speaker and leaves them with the impression that you are not being open to them.
- e. **Exercise your listening muscles:** Expand your vocabulary, learn a different language – expand your capacity to listen.
- f. **Follow the "golden rule":** "Do unto others..." Ask, "How would I want others to listen/respond to me if I were speaking?" Answer these questions honestly, and you can't go wrong.

Doing about listening	
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Listening is an active process, and requires your full participation. In his book, Dr. Kline states that listening characteristics are highly desired among Air Force managers. Are you an effective listener?