



This is “Listening in Groups”, chapter 7 from the book [An Introduction to Group Communication \(index.html\)](#) (v. 0.0).

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Chapter 7

Listening in Groups

PLEASE NOTE: This book is currently in draft form; material is not final.

INTRODUCTORY EXERCISES

1. In order to communicate with others, you need to know yourself. Please complete a personal inventory, a simple list of what comes to mind in these five areas:
 1. **Your knowledge.** What is your favorite subject?
 2. **Your skills.** What can you do?
 3. **Your experience.** What has been your experience writing to date?
 4. **Your interests.** What do you enjoy?
 5. **Your relationships.** Who is important to you?

2. To be a successful communicator, it is helpful to be conscious of how you view yourself and others. Please consider what groups you belong to, particularly in terms of race, ethnicity or culture. Imagine that you had to communicate your perception of just one of these groups. Please choose five terms from the list below, and indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree that the term describes the group accurately.

Term Describes the Group Accurately = 1

Strongly Disagree = 2

Somewhat Disagree = 3

Neither Agree nor Disagree = 4

Somewhat Agree = 5

Strongly Agree = 6

Independent	Dependent
Hard working	Lazy
Progressive	Traditional
Sophisticated	Simple

Creative	Practical
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3. Now consider how you know someone is listening to you. Make a list of the behaviors you observe that indicate they are listening, and understand you. Share and compare the results with classmates.

Your mind is like a parachute. It works best when it's open.

- Anonymous

If speaking is silver then listening is gold.

- Turkish Proverb

Getting Started

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Communicating involves the translation of your thoughts and ideas to words. Speaking or writing involves sharing your perspective with others. Listening, therefore, involves making sense of what is shared with us, and can require all of our attention. A Cuban saying captures it best: "Listening looks easy, but it's not simple. In every head is a world." For us to understand each other we have to listen, and make sense of each other's perspectives. In order for us to work effectively as a group or team, we need to listen to each other, not just hear each other or wait for our turn to deliver a monologue, make our point, or convince others that we are right. Each group member brings a valuable perspective, indeed a world, to contribute to the team.

When group members interact, do you find yourself getting lost in your own thoughts. While text messages and other distractions can be powerful, the most distracting voice by far is our own internal monologue. If you silently talk to yourself, the action is a reflection of the communication process, but you play the role of audience. In your own head, you may make sense of your words and their meaning. You may have rehearsed your "lines" or what you want to say, and

completing miss the turns and contributions in the conversation. Then, when I hear what you said, what you meant may escape me. I might not “get it” because I don’t know you, your references, your perspectives, your word choices, your underlying meaning and motivation for speaking in the first place.

In this chapter we’ll discuss perspectives, and how people perceive information, as we learn how communication is an imperfect bridge to understanding each other. It requires our constant attention, maintenance, and effort. Listening is anything but simple or easy.

Sometimes people mistake hearing for listening. Hearing involves the physiological process of recognizing sounds. Your ears receive and transmit the information to your brain. Once your brain receives the signals, then it starts to make sense to you. This is the listening stage, where you create meaning based on previous experiences and contextual cues to make sense of the sounds.

Knowing your team involves understanding others, and their perspectives, to see if they understand your words, examples, or the frames of reference you use to communicate your experiences, points and conclusions. Ask yourself when was the last time you had a miscommunication with someone. No doubt it was fairly recently, as it is for most people. It’s not people’s fault that language, both verbal and nonverbal, is an imperfect system. We can, however, take responsibility for the utility and limitations of language to try to gain a better understanding of how we can communicate more effectively. We can choose to actively listen to each other, and ask clarifying questions instead of rushing to judgment or making statement.

As a communicator, consider both the role of the speaker and the group, and not only what and how you want to communicate but what and how your team needs you to communicate with them in order to present an effective message.

Take, for example, the word “love.” Yes, we recognize those four little letters all in a row, but what does it really mean? You can use it to describe the feelings and emotions associated with your mother, a partner, or perhaps your dog. Or you might say you love chocolate cake. Does your use of the word in any given context allow the audience to get any closer to what you mean by this word, “love?” The key here is context, which provides clues to how you mean the word, and what its use means to you. The context allows you to close the gap between your meaning of “love” and what the receiver, or group member, has in their range of understanding of the same word. Your experiences are certainly different, but through clues, contexts, and attempts to understand each other’s perspectives, we can often communicate more effectively.

Let's first follow the advice given by the character Polonius in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: "to thine own self be true." This relates to the notion that you need to know yourself, or your perspective, before you can explore ways to know others and communicate more effectively. You will examine how you perceive stimuli, choosing some information over others, organizing the information according to your frame of reference, and interpreting it, deciding what it means to you and whether you should remember it or just ignore it and move on. We can recognize that not everyone tunes into the same music, trends in clothing, or even classes, so experiences or stimuli can have different meanings. Still, we can find common ground and communicate effectively, if we only choose to listen to each other.

7.1 Listening to Understand

PLEASE NOTE: This book is currently in draft form; material is not final.

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

1. Explain the importance of becoming an active listener and reader.

As the popular author and Hollywood entrepreneur Wilson Mizner said, “A good listener is not only popular everywhere, but after a while he knows something.” Learning to listen to your conversational partner, customer, supplier, or supervisor is an important part of business communication. Too often, instead of listening we mentally rehearse what we want to say. Similarly, when we read, we are often trying to multitask and therefore cannot read with full attention. Inattentive listening can cause us to miss much of what the speaker is sharing with us.

Communication involves the sharing and understanding of meaning. To fully share and understand, practice **active listening**¹ so that you are fully attentive, fully present in the moment of interaction. Pay attention to both the actual words and for other clues to meaning, such as tone of voice or writing style. Look for opportunities for clarification and feedback when the time comes for you to respond, not before. Remember we hear with our ears, but listen with our brain, and sometimes it is all too easy to tune out the messenger or their message.

Active Listening

You’ve probably experienced the odd sensation of driving somewhere and, having arrived, have realized you don’t remember driving. Your mind may have been filled with other issues and you drove on autopilot. It’s dangerous when you drive, and it is dangerous in communication. Choosing to listen or read attentively takes effort. People communicate with words, expressions, and even in silence, and your attention to them will make you a better communicator. From discussions on improving customer service to retaining customers in challenging economic times, the importance of listening comes up frequently as a success strategy.

1. Focusing your attention on the message you are hearing, without distractions or interruptions.

Here are some tips to facilitate active listening:

- Maintain eye contact with the speaker
- Don't interrupt
- Focus your attention on the message, not your own internal monologue
- Restate the message in your own words and ask if you understood correctly
- Ask clarifying questions to communicate interest and gain insight

When the Going Gets Tough

Our previous tips will serve you well in daily interactions, but suppose you have an especially difficult subject to discuss. In a difficult situation like this, it is worth taking extra effort to create an environment and context that will facilitate positive communication.

Here are some tips that may be helpful:

- **Special time.** To have the difficult conversation, set aside a special time when you will not be disturbed. Close the door and turn off the TV, music player, and instant messaging client.
- **Don't interrupt.** Keep silence while you let the other person "speak their piece." Make an effort to understand and digest the news without mental interruptions.
- **Non-judgmental.** Receive the message without judgment or criticism. Set aside your opinions, attitudes, and beliefs.
- **Acceptance.** Be open to the message being communicated, realizing that acceptance does not necessarily mean you agree with what is being said.
- **Take turns.** Wait until it is your turn to respond, then measure your response in proportion to the message that was delivered to you. Reciprocal turn-taking allows each person have their say.
- **Acknowledge.** Let the other person know that you have listened to the message or read it attentively.
- **Understanding.** Be certain that you understand what your partner is saying. If you don't understand, ask for clarification. Restate the message in your own words.
- **Keep your cool.** Speak your truth without blaming. Use "I" statements (e.g., "I felt concerned when I learned that my department is going to have a layoff") rather than "you" statements (e.g., "You want to get rid of some of our best people").

Finally, recognize that mutual respect and understanding are built one conversation at a time. Trust is difficult to gain and easy to lose. Be patient and keep the channels of communication open, as a solution may develop slowly over the course of many small interactions. Recognize that it is more valuable to maintain the relationship over the long term than to “win” in an individual transaction.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Part of being an effective communicator is learning to practice active listening.

EXERCISES

1. Pair up with a classmate and do a role-play exercise in which one person tries to deliver a message while the other person multitasks and interrupts. Then try it again while the listener practices active listening. How do the two communication experiences compare? Discuss your findings.
2. Select a news article and practice “active reading” by reading the article and summarizing each of its main points in your own words. Write a letter to the editor commenting on the article—you don’t have to send it, but you may if you wish.
3. In a half-hour period of time, see if you can count how many times you are interrupted. Share and compare with your classmates.

7.2 Types of Listening

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Identify four preferences and four purposes of listening.
2. Distinguish among the components of the “HURIER model” of listening.
3. Identify foundations for good learning, including the features of “dialogic listening.”
4. Identify several kinds of negative listening.

I’d invited my wife to accompany me to a professional conference in Portland. Since I was going to be making a presentation there, my colleague and co-presenter Sally was with us for the trip down and back.

Driving along the Interstate, Sally and I talked shop. What about our supervisor? Yak yak yak. What about our faculty union? Yak yak yak. And our plans for next year? Yak yak yak.

After 20 minutes of chatter with Sally, I realized that what we were discussing might not mean much to my wife. Being the considerate guy that I am, I paused and looked over at her.

“Sorry we’ve been talking so much about work. Thanks for listening.”

“I’m not listening,” she replied.

—Phil Venditti

Preferences, Purposes, and Types of Listening

People speak for various reasons and with various goals in mind. Likewise, the ways we listen vary according to our preferences and purposes. Several theorists have

identified types of listening which can help us understand our own behavior and that of others.

Galanes and Adams Galanes, G., & Adams, K. (2013). *Effective group discussion: Theory and practice*. New York: McGraw-Hill. wrote that people fall into four possible orientation categories as they listen to one another in groups. **People-oriented listeners**², also known as “relational listeners,” direct themselves toward detecting and preserving positive emotional features of a relationship. For instance, best friends are probably people who practice nonjudgmental listening in an effort to understand and support each other. In a group, people-oriented listeners may share their feelings openly and strive to defuse anger or frustration on the part of other members.

Action-oriented listeners³, by comparison, prefer to focus on tasks that they and their fellow communicators have set for themselves. (Think back to chapter 1, where we differentiated between the “task” and “relationship” sides of group interaction). Action-oriented listeners will generally retain and share details and information which they believe will keep a group moving.

Content-oriented listeners⁴ are those who care particularly about the specifics of a group’s discussions. They tend to seek, provide, and analyze information that has been gathered through research. What they primarily choose to hear and to share with others, thus, is material that they consider to be factual.

Time-oriented listeners⁵ concern themselves above all with how a group’s activities fit into a calendar or schedule. They may listen and watch especially for signs that other group members want to accelerate the pace of the group’s activities. Their preference is usually for short, concise messages rather than extended ones.

- 2. Listening directed toward detecting and preserving positive emotional features of a relationship.
- 3. Listening which focuses on accomplishing group tasks.
- 4. Listening directed toward specifics and factual elements of a discussion.
- 5. Listening directed toward schedules, deadlines, and other time-bound features of a group.

In the real world, few people fit neatly and completely into a single category within Galanes and Adams’s typology of listeners. Instead, each of us embodies a mixture of the four preferences depending on the topic a group is dealing with, the developmental stage of the group, and other factors.

Like Galanes and Adams, Waldeck, Kearney, and Plax Waldeck, J. H., Kearney, P., & Plax, T. (2013). *Business & professional communication in a digital age*. Boston: Wadsworth. proposed four purposes which they believe people have in mind as they listen to others. First, we may want to acquire information. Students listening to class lectures are pursuing this purpose. Second, we may listen in order to screen and evaluate what we hear. For instance, we may have the radio on continuously

but listen especially for and to stories and comments which are relevant to our work or study. Third, we may listen recreationally, to relax and enjoy ourselves. Perhaps we listen to music or watch and listen to video images on a mobile device, or we might attend a concert of music we enjoy. Finally, just as Galanes and Adams indicated, we may listen because it helps other people or ourselves from the standpoint of our relationships. When we listen attentively to friends, classmates, or work colleagues, we demonstrate our interest in them and thereby develop positive feelings in them about us.

Beebe and MastersonBeebe, S.A., & Masterson, J.T. (2006). *Communicating in small groups; Principles and practices* (8th ed.). Boston: Pearson. cited Allan Glatthorn and Herbert AdamsGlatthorn, A.A., & Adams, H.R. (1984). *Listening your way to management success*. (Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman). as identifying the following three types of listening:

Type one: hearing. This is the simple physical act of having sound waves enter our ears and be transmitted into neural impulses sent to our brain. In 1965, Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel sang in “The Sound of Silence” about “people hearing but not listening,” and this is really what Glatthorn and Adams were referring to.

Type two: analyzing. Beyond simply receiving sound waves, listeners may employ critical judgment to ascertain the purpose behind a speaker’s message(s). In so doing, they may consider not only the content of the message, but also its stated and unstated intent, its context, and what kind of persuasive strategy the speaker may be using it as part of.

KellyKelly, M.S. (2006). *Communication @ work: Ethical, effective, and expressive communication in the workplace*. Boston: Pearson. offered a helpful elaboration on this type of listening. She suggested that “analyzing” may also involve discriminating—that is, distinguishing—between information and propaganda, research and personal experience, official business and small talk, and simple information and material which requires a listener to take action.

Type three: empathizing. Empathizing requires that a listener not only discern a speaker’s intention, but also withhold judgment about that person and see things from his or her perspective. Once this is accomplished, it may be possible to respond to the speaker with acceptance.

The Listening Process

Even though listening is a natural human process, and one in which we spend most of our communication time, it may not occur to us how complex the activity really is. Many authorities have proposed models which comprise what they consider to be steps in the process. We'll consider one such model.

Engleberg & WynnEngleberg, I.N., & Wynn, D. R. (2013). *Working in groups* (6th ed.). Boston: Pearson. described the **HURIER model**⁶, an acronym developed by Judi Brownell. Brownell, J. (2010). *Listening: Attitudes, principles, and skills* (4th ed.). Boston: Pearson Allyn & Bacon. That model proposed that, in listening, people first hear; then understand; next interpret (including the emotional grounds/status of the speaker); evaluate (including whether the message is meant to persuade, and if so whether it should do so); remember; and finally respond. Among the strengths of this model for application to group settings are that its steps take a group's goals into account and that it recognizes both the task and relationship elements of communication.

Foundations for Good Listening

Each of us can probably think of a few people whom we consider to be outstanding listeners. What makes them that way, and what attitudes and behaviors do they display in their listening that we most appreciate? Let's consider some answers that various theorists have offered concerning the strengths of good listeners.

First, the famous educator and philosopher John DeweyDewey, J. (1944). *Democracy and education*. New York: Macmillan. exhorted people to show what he called "**intellectual hospitality**⁷." By this, he meant "an active disposition to welcome points of view hitherto alien." If a person is willing to entertain perspectives outside his or her previous experience, listening can proceed on favorable ground.

6. A model of the listening process comprising hearing, understanding, remembering, interpreting, evaluating, and responding.

7. John Dewey's term for an active disposition to welcome new viewpoints.

8. Stewart and Thomas's name for ideal listening behavior, including four active, empathetic qualities.

Objectivity represents a related initial ingredient in good listening. As RohlanderRohlander, D.G. (2000, February). The well-rounded IE. *IIE Solutions*, 32 (2), 22. wrote, people should be prepared to weigh facts and emotional elements in their listening "on imaginary balanced scales."

Stewart and ThomasStewart, J., & Thomas, M. (1990). Dialogic listening: Sculpting mutual meanings. In J. Stewart (Ed.), *Bridges not walls* (5th ed.) (pp. 192–210). New York: McGraw-Hill. coined the term "**dialogic listening**⁸" to identify what they considered to be ideal listening behavior. They characterized dialogic listeners in these ways:

1. They are “deeply in” the transaction with those with whom they communicate.
2. They deal with present topics and concerns.
3. They consider the speaking and listening process to be a shared enterprise—“ours” rather than “yours” or “mine.”
4. They see speaking and listening as being open-ended and playful.

Whatever models they propose, and whatever vocabulary they use, all the authorities who write about listening share the belief that listening needs to be active rather than passive. We’ll provide specific steps later in this chapter for how to engage in active, positive listening.

Negative Kinds of Listening

Now for some unfortunate news. There is a rich array of ways to be a bad listener.



Adler and Towne Adler, R.B., & Towne, N. (2002). *Looking out/looking in* (10th ed.). Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace College Publishers. named and described several of these ways. The first is **pseudo-listening**⁹. You’ve seen this many times in your own life, and probably you’ve even done it. It’s the act of seeming to be listening while your mind is actually somewhere else. When you’re pseudo-listening, you may nod your head and emit periodic sounds of approval, just as you would if you were really paying attention, but those actions are for show.

Then there’s “**stage-hogging**¹⁰,” also known as “**disruptive listening.**” This is an active behavior—but the action isn’t good, since the listener attends only minimally to what the other person is saying and butts in persistently and repeatedly to insert views or express needs of his or her own.



The first panel of a “Far Side” cartoon by Gary Larson shows a man scolding his dog. He starts out by saying, “Okay, Ginger” and then goes on at length. Once or twice more in the harangue the man says Ginger’s name. In the second panel, the “speech balloon” of the master is altered to show what the dog hears: “Blah blah Ginger. Blah blah blah blah blah blah GINGER blah blah blah blah...” In this case, the fact that Ginger is a dog means that she can only detect the sound of her own name in her master’s speech. **Selective listening**¹¹ among human beings, on the other hand, consists in listening only to the parts of someone else’s communication that

9. Appearing to be listening but not really doing so.
10. Also known as disruptive listening. Attending only minimally and butting in persistently to insert views or express needs.
11. Listening only to the parts of someone else’s communication that are personally important to the listener.

EXERCISES

1. Do you consider yourself to be primarily a people-oriented, action-oriented, or content-oriented listener? Describe a time when you found yourself listening with an orientation other than your primary one. What caused you to use that orientation? What was the result?
2. Think about a time when you tried unsuccessfully to share an important message with someone. How did the other person respond? What “bad kind(s)” of listening behaviors did the person display?
3. Stewart and Thomas believe that listening should be “open-ended and playful.” What does this mean to you? Describe a time when you listened “playfully” and how others around you reacted.
4. Imagine that you’re in a group which is assessing its members’ performance and that you expect to be criticized because of a mistake you’ve made. What will you do to avoid defensive listening, sparring, or other bad kinds of listening?

7.3 Group Members and Listening

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Identify seven challenges of listening in a group as opposed to listening to one person.
2. Identify two advantages of group listening as opposed to listening to one person.
3. Identify pros and cons of listening in digital groups.

In the beginning, God made an individual—and then He made a pair. The pair formed a group, and together they begot others and thus the group grew. Unfortunately, working in a group led to friction, and the group disintegrated in conflict. And Cain settled in the land of Nod. There has been trouble with groups ever since. Sharp, D. (2004, February 24). Workgroups that actually work. *Business Times*, p. 10.

- Davis Sharp

I remind myself every morning: Nothing I say this day will teach me anything. So if I'm going to learn, I must do it by listening.

- Larry King

All listening takes energy, concentration, and fortitude. To a degree that will depend on the topic and the listener's individual personality, it also requires self-sacrifice, since at least part of the time that we're listening we may need to stifle the urge to question, correct, interrupt, or even silence a speaker.

Listening in a group is especially portentous. If you do it well, you can learn a great deal, present yourself in a favorable light, and contribute to a positive atmosphere and high level of productivity on the part of the group.

Poor listening in a group, on the other hand, can lead to serious negative consequences. Take the case of a group numbering six members. For every time it has to retrace its ground for five minutes and repeat things because of poor listening, that's 30 minutes of time wasted. Furthermore, misunderstandings among group members can be spread and magnified outside the group to the point that its image and effectiveness are weakened. When we get to chapter 12 we'll examine this danger and some of the other things that can go wrong when groups of people take part in formal meetings.

Challenges of Listening in a Group

Although all of us get practice at it for years as students and eventually as employees, listening in a group isn't easy. It presents more of a challenge to each member, in fact, than does listening to one other person at a time. Why? We'll consider seven reasons, all of which stem from the inherent differences between groups and pairs of people.

First, in a typical one-on-one conversation you're probably going to listen about 50% of the time, right? Compare that to your participation in a group, in which you're likely to spend between 65% and 90% of your time listening. Steil, L.K. (1997). *Listening training: The key to success in today's organizations*. In M. Purdy & D. Borisoff (Eds.), *Listening in everyday life* (pp. 213–237). Landham, MD: University Press of America. If you listen with the same depth of energy and concentration in the group that you do with a single conversation partner, you're going to get tired out a lot more quickly.

Second, unless you know each of the other members of a group very well, you may not adequately gauge their knowledge and perspectives on a given topic before it's discussed. This may make you less likely to be receptive and responsive to their views on a topic, especially a contentious one. You may also have to work harder to understand their viewpoints.

Third, it may be difficult to keep up with changing levels of engagement on the part of other members of your group. People's attention and involvement may fluctuate because they're anxious about the circumstances of a discussion, about a particular message that's being sent, or even about extraneous factors in their lives that come to mind. At some moments in a group's activities, everyone may be attentive and actively involved; at others, they come and go both mentally and physically. Because all the members are rarely simultaneously "firing on all cylinders," you'll need to work particularly hard to distinguish between vital messages and routine, mundane, or irrelevant ones.

Fourth, in a group you have less of an opportunity to influence others' thoughts and actions than you do in one-on-one communication. Deciding when to cease listening and interject your viewpoints so that they'll be most likely to be received positively by the largest possible proportion of group members is hard, especially if conversation is fast and free-wheeling.

Fifth, listening for long periods prevents you from releasing some of your own energy. Because you speak less in a group than in a one-on-one conversation, this build-up of energy may frustrate you and interfere with your ability to process what other people are saying.

Sixth, in a group you have lots of time to daydream. People talk at about 100–150 words per minute, but your mind can process information at up to 600 words a minute. Wolvin, A., & Coakley, C.G. *Listening* (3rd ed.). Dubuque, IA: 1988. You may not be compelled or feel a need to listen actively all the time that a group is interacting, nor do you have to worry about other people's assessment of your behavior if you're not the one speaking at a particular time. Thus, you'll be able to fill in the gap between other people's talking speed and your own thinking speed with thoughts of your choice...or with thoughts that just float into and out of your consciousness. You may even be tempted to surreptitiously glance at reading material unrelated to the group's activities, or to send or receive text messages.

Seventh, it may be harder to listen in a group because of the existence of **social loafing**¹⁵. This is the tendency for each member to devote less energy to a task than she or he would alone because it's possible to let others take responsibility for getting things done.

Advantages to Listening in a Group

Now that we've reviewed some of its challenges and pitfalls, we should note that listening in a group offers potential benefits as well. Let's consider two major kinds.

The first big advantage to listening in a group is that it embodies the possibility of taking one of the characteristics that we earlier said could be used negatively—i.e., that you have time and opportunity to think about and react to what you hear—and using it in a positive way. Rather than using that surplus time to daydream or plan a rebuttal to other group members' messages, you can try in your mind to empathetically interpret the messages and decide whether and how to respond in ways that promote the well-being of the speakers and the whole group. Here's an illustration with a cross-cultural dimension (and with the person's name changed):

15. The tendency for each member of a group to devote less energy to a task than she or he would alone because it's possible to let others take responsibility for getting things done.

Yukio Sakai was a young Japanese man enrolled in a college public speaking class. Whatever went on in class, Yukio watched and listened raptly...and silently. Often the instructor posed open-ended questions to the group as a whole, such as, “What do you think John did well in his persuasive speech?” When such questions were posed, almost anyone in class except Yukio would pipe up with an opinion. To a casual observer, Yukio would seem to be “just sitting there.”

If the instructor directly asked Yukio one of the questions, however, what usually happened was that he replied without the slightest hesitation. Furthermore, his answers conveyed insight, sound reasoning, and common sense. It would have been a mistake to take his apparent lack of activity at any given moment as a sign of incapacity.

As we discovered earlier in our chapter on intercultural and international group communication, someone from a high power distance culture such as Japan’s may not outwardly react to messages from an authority figure such as a college instructor. What appears to be the person’s inert passivity, however, could actually be thoughtful analysis and reflection. (Of course, you don’t have to be Japanese to practice those good habits).

The second advantage to listening in groups is a product of the fact that there will always be more diverse perspectives and more interaction in a group than in a dyad. People can be fascinating, can’t they? And many times the product of discussion among different people, with their different backgrounds and values, is something entirely unexpected. What this means, if you’re a curious person at all, is that you should find lots to keep you entertained and educated as you listen to people in a group setting.

Listening in Digital Groups

As we mentioned earlier, digital groups can communicate either synchronously or asynchronously; that is, in real time or with delays between messages. If you use synchronous tools, such as Skype or some other form of audio or video conferencing, the same challenges and advantages apply to digital groups that we’ve already presented. The only difference may be that you and the other group participants aren’t physically in the same place.

On the other hand, group members who exchange oral messages asynchronously may confront more intense pros and cons. Davis, M., Paleg, K., & Fanning, P. (2004). *How to communicate workbook; Powerful strategies for effective communication at work and home*. New York: MJF Books. The good news is that you’ll have even more time than in a face-to-face group discussion to review and think about messages before

reacting to them, which may yield wiser and calmer responses. The bad news is that the freshness and spontaneity of listening to each other's comments in real time will be lost, which could tend to homogenize people's attitudes and make it less likely for "aha moments" to take place.

Furthermore, if other group members can't actually see you when you're communicating, you may feign attentiveness or behave in unorthodox ways. One of the authors remembers being part of a group that was conducting a phone interview with a candidate for a job at a university many years ago. When the person in charge of the interview started the exchange by saying, "We know it may be uncomfortable for you to have to do an interview without being able to see us," one of the candidates said, "That's all right. I'm sitting here on my couch naked, anyway."

KEY TAKEAWAY

Listening in a group presents significant challenges but can also pay important dividends.

EXERCISES

1. If you're enrolled in college courses, do a little measuring in one of your next class sessions. Use a stopwatch to measure exactly how long you and one or two other students actually spend speaking during the class period. Ask a classmate to do the same for the instructor. Afterward, compare the measurements. What did you learn from the results?
2. Pick two groups of which you're a member. How would you compare the level of participation of their members in group discussions? How do their members' listening practices compare? In which group do you find it harder to function as a listener? Why?
3. The next time a group you're part of meets, watch and listen for the person who says the least. Does the person appear to be listening? If you feel comfortable doing so, ask the person afterward how much of the time he or she was attending closely to the discussion. Does the person's answer fit with how you'd assessed his or her behavior?
4. "To become a leader, you need to talk; to stay a leader, you need to listen." Do you agree, or not? What examples can you give to support your viewpoint?

7.4 Strategies to Improve Listening in Groups

PLEASE NOTE: This book is currently in draft form; material is not final.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Identify physical actions which contribute to good listening.
2. Identify effective pre-listening behaviors.
3. Identify what to do and what to avoid doing when listening in a group.

The greatest compliment that was ever paid me was when one asked me what I thought, and attended to my answer.

- Henry David Thoreau



Listening to people keeps them entertained.

- Mason Cooley

First Things First

In the last few sections we've established that listening is a vital skill in groups. Now let's review two fundamental points before we discuss specific steps for doing it well.

The first point is that before you can listen, you have to stop talking. This might seem self-evident, but in a culture like that of the United States, in which talking is highly valued, we may tend to overlook it.

The second point, though less obvious, is just as important. It is that both senders and receivers—both speakers and listeners—are responsible for effective listening. Listening actually transcends the mere reception of messages by listeners and imposes obligations on both senders and receivers in what Waldeck, Kearney, and

PlaxWaldeck, J. H., Kearney, P., & Plax, T. (2013). *Business & professional communication in a digital age*. Boston: Wadsworth. called “**sender-receiver reciprocity**¹⁶.”

Senders should choose their messages according to the context or occasion. Furthermore, they should consider what media they will use to communicate them—for instance, face-to-face interaction or synchronous or asynchronous transmissions—and be mindful of the implications of their selection.

For their part, receivers must make an effort to listen, be prepared to provide feedback, and manage their responses to ensure relevance and civility. They should also practice what Beebe, Beebe, and IvyBeebe, S.A., Beebe, S.J., & Ivy, D.K. (2007). *Communication: Principles for a lifetime* (3rd ed.). Boston: Pearson. labeled “**social decentering**¹⁷”—i.e., “stepping away from your own thoughts and attempting to experience the thoughts of others.”



Image from <http://www.public-domain-image.com>

The Physical Side of Listening

As we’ve already pointed out, good listening is an active process. As such, it requires energy. In fact, listening is work—and not just mental work, either. To do the work of listening, which generally consumes the majority of your time whenever you interact with a group, you should be sure you’re physically primed and ready to go. To confirm that your body is really prepared for high-quality listening, you should first check your posture. Assuming that you’re seated, sit up straight and lean slightly forward. Not only does good posture allow you to remain relaxed and alert, but it makes it more likely that other people will see you as competent and confident. Burgoon, J.K., & Saine, T.J. (1978). *The unspoken dialogue: An introduction to nonverbal communication*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Next, notice your breathing. Be sure you’re inhaling and exhaling deeply. Also, identify any aches or pains that may interfere with your ability to take in other people’s messages. See if you can shift into a position which will allow you to remain comfortable and attentive throughout the communication process.

Pre-listening

How much time and effort you put into getting ready to listen will depend among other things on what kind of group you’re in, how well you and the other members know each other, and what topics you’re dealing with. Sometimes you’re talking

16. The mutual obligation of speakers and listeners to create and understand meaning together.

17. The act of stepping away from one’s own thoughts in order to try to experience the thoughts of others.

about light or superficial matters—like “Where shall we get together after we complete our project?”—and you can just dive into a conversation without any particular thought to getting ready to listen.

There will be occasions, however, when you ought to stop, consider, and plan your listening carefully. Let’s say you’re in a student government group considering requests for activity fee money, for instance, or a screening committee involved in hiring a new person to join your business. In cases like these, when careful, accurate listening will be at a premium, you should probably take some or all of these preparatory steps:

Assign listening tasks to people. Because social loafing is more likely when members aren’t held accountable for their behavior, Thompson, L. (2008). *Organizational behavior today*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education. you may want to ask individuals to listen for different kinds of information or divide a long period of listening into segments, each of which has a designated “major listener.”

Confirm (or reconfirm) your group’s norms with respect to listening. Remind yourselves about how you plan to take turns speaking.

Identify any potential contextual barriers to listening. Kelly, M.S. (2006). *Communication @ work: Ethical, effective, and expressive communication in the workplace*. Boston: Pearson. Such barriers may include the location in which you’re communicating, the cultural identity of group members, and the mixture of genders represented in the group.

Remind the members of the group that they should recognize their own biases, including their tendency to interpret information in the light of their beliefs. Hybels, S., & Weaver, R.L. (1998). *Communicating effectively* (5th ed.). Boston: McGraw-Hill. Perhaps note that each group members is tuned in to a special mental radio station, “**WII-FM**¹⁸,” which stands for “What’s in it for me?”

Decide whether it’s all right for group members to take notes or make audio recordings during the upcoming communication. If it is, decide whether you’d like to name one or more members “primary note-takers” or recorders.

Determine how often and when you plan to take breaks. Remember that “the mind can absorb only what the seat can endure.” Even though parts of a lengthy discussion may be engrossing, when the time for a scheduled break comes your listening ability will probably be rejuvenated if you pause at least long enough for people to stand and stretch for 30–60 seconds before proceeding.

18. An imaginary radio station whose call letters stand for “What’s in it for me?”

Listening Itself

All right. Let's say the members of your group have physically and mentally readied themselves to listen, and you've begun a discussion. What do you need to do as the process unfolds? Here are some important dos and don'ts:

In listening, do...

1. Determine your purpose in listening, and keep it in mind. Thinking back to earlier in this chapter, are you listening to acquire information, to evaluate messages, to relax and enjoy ourselves, or to demonstrate empathy?
2. Identify the levels at which group members are communicating their messages—e.g., emotional, political, or intellectual.
3. Assess the relative significance of people's comments and listen for main ideas rather than trying to take in everything on an equal plane. To help you do this, you may want from time to time to mentally summarize the message(s) you're listening to.
4. When possible and appropriate, urge other members of the group to speak, especially those who are less dominant. Say things like "Please go on"; "Tell me more"; "Care to expand on that?" Remember that each person has a unique perspective that can add to the group's ability to consider ideas and make decisions.
5. "Listen with your eyes." Observe people's body language and other nonverbal cues carefully, since those physical manifestations may add to or sometimes contradict their spoken words.
6. Show interest in others' messages through your own nonverbal actions. Establish and maintain eye contact. Smile. Adopt an open posture. Avoid fidgeting or slouching.
7. Use "**interactive questioning**"¹⁹. Lumsden, G., & Lumsden, D. (2004). *Communicating in groups and teams; Sharing leadership* (4th ed.). Belmont, CA: Thomson. Ask open-minded and open-ended questions to clarify ideas & information; to probe a speaker's reasoning and evidence; and to expand incomplete information. Use and ask for examples so that the speaker can connect your questions with his or her own world of experiences.
8. Use tentative clarifying/confirming statements: e.g., "It sounds like..."; "You seem to think that..."; "As I get it, you..."
9. Make polite, "targeted" interruptions Lumsden, G., & Lumsden, D. (2004). *Communicating in groups and teams; Sharing leadership* (4th ed.). Belmont, CA: Thomson. to get answers to pressing questions, or if you'd like establish your place in line to speak next. Be judicious and infrequent with interruptions, however.

19. Open-minded, open-ended questioning which serves to enhance mutual understanding among group members.

10. Paraphrase. Don't just see if you can accurately reflect what a person is saying; see if you can determine if your understanding of the person's "inner world" is accurate and whether you see things as the other person is experiencing them at the moment.
11. Respond after listening, sincerely and constructively. Focus on content, ideas, & analysis rather than on personal matters.
12. Allow for, and be careful how you interpret, silence. Keep in mind that people may have many reasons, positive or otherwise, for not speaking at a particular time.

In listening, don't...

1. Let listening be a dead end, in which you receive messages and don't react at all.
2. Allow the listening behavior of others to sway your own. If they're inattentive, don't lose your own focus; if they're especially positive or negative, don't lose your objectivity or critical ability.
3. Cut off or put down a speaker.
4. Interrupt excessively.
5. Pose "**counterfeit questions**"²⁰—belligerent statements masquerading as questions simply because they end with question marks.
6. Allow the tone of someone's message, or how agreeable you find the person to be, to color your interpretation or reactions to it.
7. Express your interpretations of other people's messages excessively. Why not? First of all, your interpretation may be wrong. Second, even if you're right, you may arouse a defensive reaction that in turn leads to unproductive argumentation.

No matter how often you listen to people, and no matter how many groups you may be part of, each new listening situation will be unique. It's your responsibility, shared with your fellow group members, to see that in each new conversation or discussion you exercise proper practices and skills in your listening.



KEY TAKEAWAY

To listen well in a group, it's important to prepare properly and heed several dos and don'ts.

20. A belligerent statement which appears superficially to be a question because its end with a question mark.

EXERCISES

1. Observe a televised, recorded, or live group discussion. Identify the listening processes which furthered understanding and those which impeded it. What suggestions would you make to the members of the group to improve their listening? Which person in the discussion listened most effectively, and how did she or he accomplish that?
2. Visit the website of the International Listening Association (<http://www.listen.org>) and read an article in one of the Association's online publications. What discoveries did you make in your reading? How will you apply the discoveries to your future group interactions?
3. Who's the best listener you know? What does the person do (or not do) that makes him/her so effective? Give an example of how the person has listened well.

7.5 Summary

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We discussed many ways to gain a better understanding of your group members. To begin, it is important to understand yourself: your attitudes, beliefs, and values. It is also helpful to understand the processes that influence perception and listening. There are many individual differences in the ways people perceive things. Demographic traits such as age, gender, and employment can determine people's interests, needs, and goals. Effective communication involves recognizing these differences in perception and practicing fairness in delivering your message to your group or team. Finally, an important dimension of group communication is the ability to receive messages from others through active listening.

CHAPTER REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Interpretive Questions

- a. How does listening limit or expand our view?
- b. How does our internal monologue influence our listening?
- c. In what ways, if any, are all group members the same?

2. Application Questions

- a. What are some of the ways people demonstrate listening among people you know? Identify a target sample size (20 is a good number), and ask members of your family, friends, and peers about they know someone is listening to them. Compare your results with those of your classmates.
- b. What impact does technology and specifically the cell phone have on listening? Investigate the issue and share your findings.
- c. Investigate two ways to learn more about your group members and share them with your classmates.

Additional Resources

Explore the website of the National Association for Self-Esteem. <http://www.self-esteem-nase.org/>

Forum Network offers a wealth of audio and video files of speeches on various topics. Listen to a lecture titled “Selective Attention: Neuroscience and the Art Museum” by Barbara Stafford, Professor of Art History, University of Chicago. <http://forum-network.org/lecture/selective-attention-neuroscience-and-art-museum>

Explore the website of the journal *Perception*. <http://www.perceptionweb.com/>

Visit this About.com site to learn more about the Gestalt principles of perception. http://psychology.about.com/od/sensationandperception/ss/gestaltlaws_4.htm

Visit About.com to read an article by Kendra Van Wagner on the Gestalt Laws of Perceptual Organization. <http://psychology.about.com/od/sensationandperception/ss/gestaltlaws.htm>

Visit the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s site to read about demographic traits and their relationship to environmental issues. <http://www.epa.gov/greenkit/traits.htm>

Philosophe.com offers a collection of articles about understanding your audience when you design a website. http://philosophe.com/understanding_users/

Read more about active listening on this MindTools page. <http://www.mindtools.com/CommSkill/ActiveListening.htm>

Consider these academic survival tips provided by Chicago State University. <http://www.csu.edu/engineeringstudies/acadsurvivaltips.htm>

A collection of articles and other resources to assist in improving listening and other communication skills. <http://conflict911.com/resources/Communication/Listening>

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