

The Art of Listening



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Learning Seed Catalog and ISBN Numbers

VHS LS-1158-07-VHS ISBN 1-55740-818-1

DVD LS-1158-07-DVD ISBN 1-55740-817-3

Closed Captioning

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Using this guide and video program

Pages 2 and 3 contain brief summaries of the seven “laws” of better listening presented in the video. Use this handout for study, review, and discussion.

Page 10 contains a written exercise in listening for feelings. The first column explains the context for the statement made in the second column.

The third and fourth columns are left blank for student responses. The third column asks for the feeling “between the lines.” For example, the first statement reads, “Why do we have to study this dumb stuff?” The feeling expressed is very likely frustration. A listener who fails to hear the feelings behind the words might launch into an explanation of how a particular subject is a valuable skill for careers, etc. Although quite logical, such a listening response fails to address the feelings behind the words. One possible response would be, “It does seem stupid sometimes, doesn’t it,” or “You don’t see why we have to study that stuff.” These responses encourage the speaker to examine his or her feelings and encourage the person to continue speaking.

The “Listening For Feelings” worksheet can be given as a written assignment but should be discussed either in small groups or by the class as a whole.

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Summary

What communication skill could be more basic than listening? We spend more time listening than any activity except breathing, yet we listen at only a fraction of our potential. Because we believe ourselves good listeners, we seldom make an effort to improve. Think of this video as a long overdue course in “Better Listening for People Who Think They Already Know How to Listen.”

The Art of Listening teaches practical techniques to use immediately. It presents listening as a skill your students can learn, practice, and perfect.

This engaging program uses home and workplace situations to teach seven “Laws of Good Listening.” The program illustrates the surprising value of attentive silence, the need to find something of interest in the person speaking, and the importance of staying out of the speaker’s way. The techniques suggest how and when to take notes, the role of body language in listening, and the need to “listen between the words” for feelings. The program explores how people use different “filtering systems” to give the same message completely different meanings. Each “law” is a key toward improved listening and communication.

The Seven Laws of Better Listening

1. Spend more time listening

Let other people finish speaking. Resist the temptation to interrupt or anticipate what others will say. Listen even if you DO know what they will say. Poor listeners talk too much. A bright, quick thinking listener might want to cut the speaker short to demonstrate the ability to “understand” quickly. But such anticipation is viewed more as interruption or arrogance than intelligence or understanding. To listen *better*, listen *more*. Give the other person quiet attention.

2. Find interest in the other person

A basic barrier to listening is labeling a topic or person uninteresting. If you believe something to be dull and uninteresting, it will be. The skilled listener knows there are no boring subjects, only bored people.

A poor listener rehearses a response instead of listening. A “conversation” between two non-listeners is like two TV sets facing each other. A good listener finds a reason to listen, instead of an excuse not to.

3. Stay out of the way

A good listener keeps the communication path open. One way is to give feedback by asking open-ended questions.

Giving advice is setting up a barrier instead of listening. People who give advice mean well, but greater help often comes from an attentive ear.

Don't fear silence. People often reveal what's most important after a pause.

4. Listen to what people mean between the lines

A message has both content (words, for example) and feelings. Listening involves paying attention to both-the total meaning. A good listener knows the meaning of words is found in a dictionary, but the meaning of people is found in listening.

The Seven Laws of Better Listening, *continued*

5. Take notes

We think faster than we talk. This imbalance invites daydreams and distractions, but it also makes careful listening possible. It provides time to evaluate the message, and time to take notes.

Note taking is NOT only for the classroom. It can be helpful during telephone conversations, talking to a doctor, designer, tax advisor, lawyer, insurance agent, etc. If people comment on your note taking, explain that what they say is important to you and taking notes helps avoid misunderstanding.

A formal outline style is not required - create your own personalized style.

6. Assume the proper stance

Body position can influence feelings. Taking a posture that shows lack of interest (arms folded, slouched back, no eye contact, etc.) can create or amplify feelings of boredom. Assuming the stance of an attentive listener can actually improve listening.

The eye level of two people sends a non-verbal message. Two people with eyes at the same level send a message of equality. If one is much higher, the message is superiority. The person higher up can literally “look down on” the other. It reminds us of being little kids when the whole world loomed above. The lower person might feel “looked down upon,” and is forced to “look up to” the other.

7. Be aware of your filters

We all have built in “earlids” to filter out what we don’t want to hear. People have different filters based on their culture, upbringing and gender. Men and women often have different kinds of filters, and that causes listening problems. If you become aware of your own filters (even without changing them) you will improve your listening.

Research finds, in general, women like more details in conversation. Men tune out the detail and sometimes find this attention to details irritating. Women are more likely to value communication and its resulting intimacy of its own sake, while men see communication as information. Many women claim men have a “bottom line filter,” in which only the results or the solution matters.

Activities and Exercises

An Experience in Non-Listening

One person in each group is the “referee.” The other group members should carry on a three-minute discussion or conversation in which there is no listening (hearing is permitted, but no listening). The responsibility of the referee is to time the three minutes and to warn participant who might attempt to listen. The “conversation” can be on any topic the group wishes. Remember to observe the rules of “duo-logue”.

Each person should take a turn as referee. After three or four non-communication discussions, meet as a class, discuss the experience, and compare it to real life experiences. What kind of feelings does such non-communication generate?

Activities and Exercises

An Experience in Listening

This is one of the oldest, yet most effective exercises known to communication teachers to illustrate that listening is an active process. The exercise is a class discussion on some hotly debated local or national topic. Pick a topic of some interest to class members whether it be the validity of the death penalty, the abortion debate, or a local debate currently in the news.

Observe one ground rule during the discussion: before you state an opinion, you must summarize what the last speaker said. The summary must be in your own words (a content echo, not a word-for-word echo) and satisfy the speaker that you did indeed understand. Only when the previous speaker agrees you have summarized his or her statement can you proceed. If not, further explanation is needed until a summary is accepted. During a summary, do not state new information or present your own opinion.

This exercise sounds easy, but it is quite difficult for most people. The exercise clearly illustrates the difficulty of good listening. It also teaches that good listening requires concentration and effort.

A variation on this exercise is to divide the class into smaller groups of about six. This allows more people to speak and summarize.

Activities and Exercises

Listener for a Day

Select a day to be a Super Listener. During this day practice all seven of the “Laws for Better Listening.” Make a concentrated effort to be attentive to others, to ask open ended questions, to stay out of the way, assume the stance of an attentive listener, and to be quiet. Report what you learned about listening and yourself as a result of this one day experiment.

Activities and Exercises

Listening, Self-Awareness, and Speech Patterns

This group activity is designed to increase awareness of one's listening ability and the effects of speech patterns on communication and feelings. The exercise has seven rounds, each consisting of a few minutes of conversation between partners. Conversation is restricted in each round to one particular speech pattern. After each round partners discuss the effects of the restriction on their conversation.

The teacher or group leader asks everyone to select a partner for face to face conversation. Allow a few minutes for each round of conversation and about five minutes to discuss the conversation.

Round 1: Talk to each other using only it-statements. No questions allowed. Have each sentence begin with "it". Example: "It's a nice day." Allow time to discuss feelings after the "it" conversation. Conversation should be as normal as possible within the limits of the restriction.

Round 2: The restriction this time is to begin each sentence with a "you". Once again no questions, only statements. After the conversation, discuss how you felt both as sender and receiver of "you" statements. Compare feelings to those from "it" statements.

Round 3: This time use only "we" statements. Once again discuss feelings and compare to the previous two rounds.

Round 4: Use only sentences beginning with the word "I" this time, but do not begin a sentence with "I think."

Round 5: This round has two parts.

Part one: One person asks a question beginning with "why" and the other answers with a statement beginning with "because." Ask only here and now questions and allow partners to switch roles halfway through.

Part two: Again a question-answer sequence. This time begin the questions with "how" or "what" ("How come" is forbidden since this is a version of "why".) There is no restriction here on answers. For discussion compare the effects of "why" questions to "how" and "what" questions.

Activities and Exercises

Listening, Self-Awareness, and Speech Patterns, *continued*

Summary: After all seven rounds allow time for the entire group to discuss the experience. By careful listening, participants should be aware that each restriction produces different feelings. This exercise should illustrate that a good listener has to listen “between the words” to the feeling content of any message. Here are some insights gained by other groups who have tried this activity:

Round 1: An “it” externalizes the subject and places the speaker in some vague out-there land. “It’s time to stop” means “I want you to stop,” but the “it” is more comfortable than the “I”. “It” language tends to alienate and decreases the chance for real contact.

Round 2: The receiver of a “you” statement is often put on the defensive. The “you” often refers to some vague plurality rather than the other person. The sender can still feel comfortable and safe since he/she is still talking about something out there.

Round 3: A “we” diffuses experience since “we” is really an abstraction. “We should cut the next class” might mean “I want to cut the next class but don’t want to do it alone. “ “We” can create unity or provide the illusion of unity where none exists.

Round 4: “I” statements tend to be more direct and are the most likely to contain honest feelings. A good listener pays careful attention to “I” statements since they are most revealing.

But not every sentence beginning with “I” is a true “I” statement. A true “I” statement is one of self-revelation.

Round 5: The “why-because” pattern rarely leads to productive communication. Even a two-year-old knows that endless “why” questions keep conversations going but usually lead nowhere. Asking “why” will often spark a heated debate. Even scientists now realize that if you describe the “what” and “how” in as much detail as possible, the “why” will be solved.

Activities and Exercises

He Said, She Said

The program observes that people have different “perceptual filters”, and males and females often have different “perceptual filters.” Divide the class by gender and discuss how males and females differ in their communication and listening habits. Here are some quotes to spur discussion:

It’s not unusual to find men saying to women, “Would you just get to the point!” Women are more likely to value communication and its resulting intimacy for its own sake, men are more likely to see communication as information.

Women often listen more to understand, men listen to solve problems.

To men, conversations are jockeying for position. “Is the other person trying to one-up me or put me down? To women, conversation is a negotiation to reach consensus or give support. “Is the other person trying to get closer or pull away?”

To a woman, talking is often relaxing. To a man talking is often a kind of display; a chance to compete or demonstrate skill or superiority.

Listening for Feelings

<u>Situation</u>	<u>Statement</u>	<u>What Feeling is Expressed</u>	<u>Possible Response</u>
School (teacher speaking)	"Why do we have to study this stupid stuff?"		
After viewing a film	"It was a bore."		
Family meal (child speaking)	"But I don't want any dinner"		
Group discussion	"You talk too much. That's rude."		
Teen-age boy to friend	"She's really hot, but she seems so aloof."		
Child of any age	"My parents make me go to church but I don't want to go."		
School	"Those sophomores are the worst in the school"		
Home (mother speaking)	"I'm sick and tired of picking up your clothes."		
Work (one employee to another)	"That slacker Ralph got a promotion without even working hard."		