

# **Listening: A Vital Skill**

**Ken Petress**

Listening is among our most consequential communication skills even though it is too frequently relegated to a lesser role in many educational, social, and political spheres. Listening is the awareness of, the tending to, the organization of, and the operationalization of data entering our nervous system via our hearing mechanism. Unlike hearing, which is a physiological passive activity, listening is an active cognitive process.

University faculty, staff, students, and administrators would all benefit from improving their listening skills. Faculty would be better able to: respond to student and staff concerns; detect subtle evidence of student learning, measure concern about students' personal progress, and detect nuances of insight. Staff members would be better able to respond to student and faculty needs when they listened more carefully to others' needs and reasons for those needs. Hurt feelings and perceived lack of worth shown to staff members could be mitigated in many cases through better listening and by clearer responses as a result. Administrators could make themselves better informed about campus attitudes and activities and its members' personalities and practices by better listening to those around them for information, feelings, and reactions to policy, institutional needs, and ongoing events. Lastly, students can learn more if they listen more intently to faculty and each other and form hasty judgments less often, think about responses prior to others' statements

being finished, and listen to entire messages rather than tending to partial ideas.

In job searches, interviewers routinely expect to be told that applicants are "good listeners." Incisive interviewers ask: "What can you tell me that offers evidence that an applicant is a good listener?" If the immediate response is silence, interviewers are entitled to and frequently do interpret that silence as evidence of (a) unpreparedness on the part of the person being asked or (b) a lack of ready evidence that the applicant is truly a good listener. Neither outcome is desirable. Following is a list of common good listener traits. See how many of these you commonly exhibit and try to attach these traits to clear examples of your own or others' behavior to be used when called on as a position applicant or as a reference for others.

1. Good listeners pay close attention to individual inferences, facts, and judgments **and** are able to later make useful and logical connections between what they have heard on multiple occasions.
2. Good listeners give clear non-verbal evidence to speakers that they are listening attentively. Such evidence includes: a forward lean toward the speaker rather than a too casual/dismissive lean away from a speaker; maintenance of eye contact; and a lack of dismissive or inattentive fidgeting.
3. Good listeners give clear verbal evidence to speakers that they are listening attentively. Such evidence includes: constructive feedback; being able and willing to provide speaker's content, intent, and feeling paraphrasing; being able to question for clarification, amplification, and refinement; and respectfully and relevantly probing or challenging statements/questions after a speaker's comments are finished.
4. Quality listeners and ethical speakers respect each other. Respect is shown, in part, by an inclusive, friendly, and sharing tone rather than an exclusionary, hostile, and condescending tone; the presence of attribution for claims

made rather than implicitly suggesting claims are universal or one's own when that is not true; and provisionalism in statements made as opposed to being dogmatic.

5. Good listening includes what auditors do with what they have received. Good listeners do not exaggerate, distort, repeat out of context, or unfairly juxtapose what others have said.
6. Quality listeners are able to detect, in speakers, atypical baseline communication -- by tone, vocabulary, sentence structure, and voice quality dimensions -- and are willing/able to seek out verification and reasons for such changes in communicator behavior. Not to check out atypical awareness is to accept what might be deception, confusion, or obfuscation.
7. Good listeners are able to determine -- either by what is said, inferred, or determined through probing -- a speaker's motive, personal involvement, self interest, intensity, and expectation(s) of listeners.
8. Good listeners are able and willing to offer speakers, when they have completed their turn, responsive, honest, clear, unambiguous, timely, respectful, and relevant acknowledgment to what they have said.

This is not an exhaustive listening skill list; however, it points out that listening is not to be taken lightly nor is it a simple matter. Listening is a skill; one that can be learned and improved upon no matter one's age, gender, education, or previous skill level. Like any other skill, if it is allowed to go unused, it will atrophy. By closely observing what good listeners in our midst do and how they do it, we can sharpen our own listening skills. Most good listeners know what they do and are typically willing to share their methods with interested others.

Good listeners stand out in a crowd; they are cherished by employers, teachers, friends, and others since they aid speakers make their points and convey meaning efficiently. Good listeners have advantages: they get promotions, they are more frequently

selected for power/prestige positions, and they are often better informed than are poor listeners. Improving your listening skills is never a waste of time; the benefits of listening improvement are tangible and vital to success and self worth.