

Joint Collaboration

Can We Communicate without Listening?



Dr Margarita K. Kefalaki

President, Communication Institute of Greece

The answer is definitely no. We cannot effectively communicate without listening. Listening is not just being able to repeat what someone says, like a tape recorder that can duplicate our same words. Listening is what we actually absorb by an act of communication, which can actually make us understand and react.

'Don't Be Such a Poor Listener', is actually a chapter of Randy Olson's book (2018). The question is how not to become a poor listener, especially when too much information moves in the direction of misinformation, when we are 'running' so fast that we have little or even no time to think...

Randy Olson describes, through specific examples, how we can ameliorate the way we listen, the way we communicate our thoughts, the way we can truly be listened to. Three main rule to follow are proposed: a) Listen to what the other says, b) Be brief and simple, c) Repeat. It is clear that if we do not listen to what people say, we will never be listened to. It is not just a question of respect, but also of understanding and communicating. How can the other person listen to us, if we have not first listened to him or her, and vice versa? Additionally, have we ever imagined how many times we say the same thing with the person we discuss, but we insist that the other person is wrong? This is because we do not really listen to each other. We are so 'obsessed' with expressing our opinion, which we believe is the best alternative, that we do not listen. How many misunderstandings and even 'disasters' would we be able to avoid if we listened carefully and truly to the other?

Secondly, we have brevity and simplicity. Keeping things brief and simple is the best way to make ourselves comprehensible to the others. There are times that we search so hard to 'discover' difficult words and phrases and place it in our dialogues, that we lose the true meaning of communication. What is the purpose of saying something that the others would find difficult to understand or wouldn't understand at all?

Last, but not least, repetition is the most important and easy way to understand if the other has actually understood what we say. Repeating what we consider the most important part of what we say and asking the other to repeat back as well what he or she has understood, is one of the fundamentals of communication. Repetition is a crucial ingredient of fruitful communication/education.

How we can better communicate?

There are many researchers who have tried very successfully to answer this question. Wallwork (2016) describes the social skills we need to improve our chances of communication. Some of these skills, that I also consider essential, are to be able to listen carefully, react sensitively to what is being said, contribute and make the right comments when someone is telling a story, refer back to something that was said earlier, create an interpersonal bond, take turns in talking, collaborate with your interlocutor, embark on safe topics, and exit when required. This simple advice, if and when followed, could really help us better communicate. Listening carefully is nevertheless what we consider the most important ingredient of successful communication. But what does listening carefully really mean? This is what we will examine in the paragraphs to come.

Active listening

We use words to build relationships, exchange information, and communicate. Listening is necessary in order to communicate. Active listening involves listening with all our senses, giving our full attention to what someone says. In other words, it is the attentive listening to someone who speaks, understanding and reflecting back what the speaker says.

It is more than just hearing what the other says. You are attending to what the other person says without judging. To become better active listeners, we can follow some basic guidelines, like make eye contact while discussion, paraphrasing what has been said, and not interrupting (Gearhart, & Bodie., 2011). Additionally, facial expressions, voice tone, have also a role to play. Asking questions to clarify what is said and trying to be neutral while listening, are also important aspects of active listening.

It is true that only if you try to really understand what other people say, you are able to expect a fruitful discussion/communication. Superficial listening, can only lead to shallow discussions, and unsuccessful communication. When we listen, it is imperative to try and understand the person with whom we are talking. It is better to end a discussion, since we are not able to listen, than to pretend that we listen when we don't.

Achieve better communication

There are plenty of interesting recommendations of how to achieve fruitful discussion that could enhanced future interactions. Heinrich P. (2018) explains that we should focus on translation, speed and volume, information's reception, detail and purpose of communication, attitudes, objectives, subtext, and language awareness. As far as *translation* is concerned, we need to try understanding what the other really means by using a certain word or a phrase. *Speed and volume* involve the need to speak slowly and emphasis the key points. *The primacy of reception* is about checking the reception of information, to make sure that our message makes sense to the listener. We then have to

communicate a *unifying model* of information with detail. The *attitude affecting delivery* refers to awareness of how one's words reveal intention, personal beliefs, and shared feeling, or the lack thereof. Furthermore, we always need clear and appropriate *objectives* for our communication. *Subtext*, is that we need to pay attention to the back story, the world behind the words of the person we communicate with. Last but not least, *awareness of language* is a very important characteristic for fruitful discussions, since no matter how accomplished we are as communicators, there are many aspects of language of which we are not conscious. Wallwork (2016) recommends ways to generate successful conversations. Actually, someone can begin by making small talk on risk-free topics, like the weather for example, then show interest, ask open questions, ask follow-up questions, encourage their interlocutor to continue talking on the same topic, make "announcements" rather than asking all the questions, avoid dominating the conversation, feel free to interrupt people who talk too much, involve everyone in the conversation, avoid long silences, prepare for the social conversations at formal occasions, direct the conversation to areas where someone has a wider vocabulary or knowledge, and certainly, bear in mind cultural differences. Still, most of these steps would be impossible to follow if we do not learn to listen carefully to the other. We would for example been unable to ask follow-up questions or encourage our interlocutor to continue talking on the same topic, if we have not first listened to what he/she has said. And it is important to try to involve everyone in the conversation, avoid long silences, and direct the conversation into areas of interest to all.

ABT narrative template, is presented by Randy Olson (2018) as the tool that can not only strengthen our narrative skills but also lead us to an understanding of the power, importance, and process of listening. The author explains the "A" element in the search for how to improve as a listener, by recycling a story of a woman when she and her husband had a dinner in Western Australia with a group of business leaders. She was seated next to the CEO of a coal-mining company and began talking to him about climate change and the damage coal burning does to the atmosphere. Annoyed, he directed himself toward the other end of the table. She might have handled it better. The answer for Randy Olson (2018), is in the ABT, as the process of effective communication needs to begin with agreement. To be more specific, someone should first open up the lines of communication, before disagreeing with the other. The "A" of the ABT is for "And," which is proposed as the most common word of agreement. For that to happen, we need to listen carefully, we need active listening. We can start a conversation by chatting about something neutral. Through listening first and finding common ground of agreement, the narrative process can begin. Then, once a clear channel of communication is firmly established, it is finally time to introduce the source of contradiction (Olson, 2018).

There is no doubt at all, we first need to listen carefully, to have a chance of achieving effective communication and a fruitful exchange of ideas.

References

Active Listening <https://www.skillsyouneed.com/ips/active-listening.html> (access 21/9/2018)

Gearhart CC, & Bodie GD. (2011). Active-Empathic Listening as a General Social Skill: Evidence from Bivariate and Canonical Correlations. *Communication Reports* 2011; 24:86-98.

Heinrich P. (2018). Words, Words, Words. How to Develop Greater Awareness of Language in yourself, and the Group (pp. 185-200). In *When role-play comes alive, a theory and practice*. Singapore: Springer.

Randy O. (2018). Don't Be Such a Poor Listener. In Randy Olson (2018). *Don't Be Such a Scientist: Talking Substance in an Age of Style*. (pp. 157- 180) Second edition. USA: Islandpress.

SkillsYouNeed(2017) <https://www.skillsyouneed.com/ips/barriers-communication.html> (access 21/9/2018)

Wallwork A. (2016) Successful Conversations and Discussions. In Wallwork A. *English for Interacting on Campus*, (pp. 103- 119). Switzerland: Springer.