

# Effective Listening

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In the work place, many of us sit through a presentation, but drift off, miss critical information, and ask embarrassing questions that puzzle the speaker because he or she had already covered that information. In meetings, we sometimes tune out the speaker and think about other issues that intrude upon our thought process. Worse--and perhaps most obvious to others--we sometimes don't always effectively listen to people during our face-to-face communications.

The most effective managers listen well. In studies, employees indicate that one of the most important attributes of a manager is the ability to listen. Of course, that makes sense when we stop and think about it. Who likes to be ignored?

Many executives would argue that listening is their most important mode of communication. Certainly, of the four modes of communication (writing, reading, speaking, and listening), listening is the mode we use most often. People receive formal training of some sort, usually in school, to learn to how to read and write. Many people seek professional training for formal speaking situations such as presentations or speeches. Listening, however, remains the one mode of communication many people believe

they can handle with no distinct strategies or training.

**Here are 12 strategies to help you become a more effective listener:**

**Strategy #1:**

**Prepare ahead**

When you attend a lecture, a presentation, or a meeting, do some advance reading or research on the topic to develop a framework for your listening. This strategy allows you to connect similar ideas when you hear them and helps you make associations among related information. When I take on a new client, I even try to learn something about the company and the person because I find it helps me connect and link information as I listen to people explain the potential project.

**Strategy #2:**

**Pick a front-row seat**

Where you sit affects your ability to listen actively. I tell my business students that the best listeners always select a front row seat at presentations and meetings--and then I smile and make deliberate and meaningful eye contact with my students sitting in the back row of my lecture room. They all find something interesting on the floor at that exact moment. I'm a people watcher, and I've been known to pay more attention to the people in the stands at a ball game than I do to the

game on the field—so I know I’m easily distracted by what people around me are doing. In restaurants when I want to pay close attention, I take the seat that faces the wall, so I have fewer distractions and can focus on the client I’m there to meet. Bottom line: find a seat with nothing between you and the speaker.

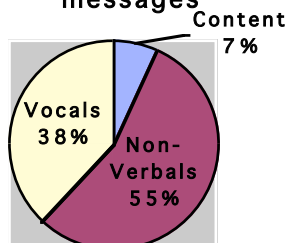
**Strategy #3:  
Look like you’re listening**

It may sound strange at first, but looking the part and displaying good listening behaviors keeps the speaker engaged, but has the added benefit of keeping you more alert and engaged because it takes a conscious effort to look like you’re listening. Force your self to make eye contact, give affirmative nods, use appropriate facial expressions that are in synch with the speaker’s comments. We do this all the time when we are genuinely engaged in conversation with friends.

**Strategy #4:  
Read the person speaking**

Looking away from the speaker creates multiple opportunities for distractions and day-dreams. On the other hand, watching and reading the speaker provides you with rich additional communication channels that help you interpret the message the person is trying to deliver. In fact, according to research on oral communication, nonverbal communication accounts for 55% of the perceived message, and vocals account for another 38%, leaving 7% for the actual content.

**Non-Verbals & Vocals  
account for 93% of oral  
messages**



People take cues from facial expressions and the tone of voice to assemble or compile the complete meaning of a message. Here are two exaggerated examples. A person holding his nose after saying, “That’s a lovely perfume,” alters the meaning with gesture. Now, take the sentence: “I didn’t say THEY cheated. It carries a different interpretation than, “I didn’t say they CHEATED.” By changing the word you vocally stress, you can create five different interpretations with this one short sentence. So, be aware that listening involves the than words alone.

**Strategy #5:  
Evaluate the content--but not the speaker**

Reading the speaker and evaluating the speaker are two different activities. You should be considering, evaluating, and assessing the content of the message to determine the potential benefit derived from the person’s message. Unless you’re an executive speaking coach, you should not waste time counting filler words and assessing the quality of the performance because it distracts you from listening to the message.

**Strategy #6:  
Reserve your judgment**

You have to suspend your judgment as the speaker talks to encourage your listening to positions with which you might tend to disagree. To be an effective listener you have to first take in what the speaker says before you evaluate it. Poor listeners judge too quickly and frequently tune out the speaker as a result of that hasty judgment.

**Strategy #7:  
Jot down rebuttals**

Jotting down potential rebuttals allows you to let go of the rebuttal and encourages a quick return to your effective listening mode. After you have had a chance to evaluate the complete

idea, you can always pose a question to the speaker.

**Strategy #8:**

**Find yourself a hook**

For the most part, the person talking is not responsible for keeping you engaged--you have to shoulder that responsibility. So, as you listen, train yourself to be on the look out for nuggets of information you might find interesting, appealing, or useful to keep you engaged and listening actively. Using this strategy, I've discovered it's rare that I meet a person and don't learn something interesting when listening.

**Strategy #9:**

**Focus on the macro idea(s)**

Good listeners focus on the speaker's ideas or a macro level (as opposed to every word or on a micro level). This strategy helps you concentrate, serves to organize the speaker's content, and aids your comprehension.

**Strategy #10:**

**Take notes sparingly**

Taking a few simple notes on significant ideas and thoughts allows you to remain focused on the speaker. When you try to take notes like a court reporter, capturing every word, you end up missing important information because you can not write as fast as the person can speak.

**Strategy #11:**

**Summarize mentally**

Summarizing mentally creates memory rehearsal opportunities that pay huge dividends. Think of this as talking to yourself. You might say things like: "Oh, I see; what he means is ABC. And, that seems to connect to his point about XYZ."

**Strategy #12:**

**Offer thoughtful feedback**

Encourage the speaker with comments and probing questions and you will become a more engaged listener. Adopting this habit, forces you to listen in order to formulate intelligent comments and questions.

(Note: For additional guidelines on effective listening, see the *Communication Audit for Listening* at the Communication Consulting Group web site: [www.ccg-usa.com](http://www.ccg-usa.com))