

# Effective Listening To Be a Good Leader

Nahhal Alazzam

**Abstract**— This article describes the effective listening in a workplace and how that effect an employee to be a good leader. Also, you will find the reasons why should any employees have good listening skills. Beside some techniques to become a good listener.

**Keywords:** listening, workplace, employee, hearing, manager, effective.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

When people talk of skill in the workplace they often divide these skills between soft skills and hard skills. The hard skills are things like fixing a computer, adding the right figures in accounting or inputting figure into a math formula or algorithm. People think of soft skills as calming down an angry co-worker, negotiating a deal or trying to interpret what the law means. I think by calling those types of skills, soft skills, it makes them seem not very important, or at least not as important as the hard skills. Most people in a business setting would put the listening in a category of soft skill. Most of people then think, "I'm not sure of what somebody means when he says soft skill. Does that mean something you have to guess about doing or feel? Do the soft skills not have rules like math or IT?" In business, if you miss something by not paying close attention, it can cost you a lot. For example, if your boss gives you instructions on how to buy a thousand desk computers and how to plug them in, your company could lose a lot of money if you buy just one hundred, or if you put them in the wrong place they could all be destroyed or cause electrical fire. As a result, this made the reader think, "Are there rules like hard rules for listening in the workplace?" You may be surprised if you realize there are some workplace listening skills.

## 2 DIFFERENT BETWEEN LISTENING AND HEARING:

There is a big difference between hearing and listening. When you are quiet, people will think you are listening. But, in order to hear what the other person is saying, you have to stop thinking about anything else and focus your attention on what is being said. A good listener is one who actually hears what is being said. Hearing is a physical ability while listening is a skill. Listening skills allow one to make sense of and understand what another person is saying. In other words, listening skills allow you to understand what someone is "talking about".

You can actually listen without hearing. There are several reasons for this. If you are planning your response while the other person is talking, there is no way you will hear what they are saying. Or you may daydream while another person is talking. This happens when you are not that interested in

what someone is talking about. Again, you will not be able to hear what is being said while your mind is preoccupied. Another issue is when you do not want to hear what is being said. In this case, you are hearing actually shuts down so you do not have to listen to something you do not want to. This can also happen when you do not agree with the person. Furthermore, the subject of talking is very important to attract attention. As a result, there are many reasons that will take away your listening attention such as:

- 1) You are too preoccupied: there may be a hundred things you have got to do and too little time to do it in. So, you tend to always have things on your mind, trying to figure out what you are going to do when, and as a result, cannot give the person talking to you your full attention.
- 2) Day-dreaming: you may have a tendency to let your mind wander when somebody is talking to you and take off into your own little dream world. Here is somebody telling you about how they are planning a holiday and you are already fantasizing about a nice beach and getting a good tan. You just cannot help it.
- 3) Lack of adequate sleep: if you are a poor sleeper or keep irregular hours, you could suffer the after-effects in the daytime. When you are groggy, it is difficult for you to concentrate on events or conversations.
- 4) Boring: there are some topics of conversation that are just plain boring, or people who talk in a monotone or get into a monologue, and that makes it very difficult for you to be alert to what they are saying.
- 5) You know it all: sometimes you think you already know what the other person is going to say before they can even say it. And this erroneous assumption can lead to serious repercussions. It is unfair to your partner or the speaker, to assume that what he/she is going to say is a foregone conclusion. Give him/her the attention they deserve.

**6) Thinking of your response:** sometimes, especially in situations of conflict, rather than giving the other person your full attention, you are already thinking up things to say in your defense. As a result, you are blocking yourself off from listening effectively.

**7) You love to talk:** you enjoy hearing the sound of your own voice or you always have so much to say. So you monopolize the conversation, rarely even taking on the role of listener, forget about being a good one.

**8) Distractions:** often, events, noises or diversions disrupt effective listening. We tend to get easily distracted with loud music, background noises, other people arguing or the television blaring. These can be major barriers to listening.

**9) Unable to hear:** and rare is the case where there is a genuine auditory problem. If you figure this out on your own, seek medical help immediately.

But if you have to forge lasting relationships, be it friendship, business or romantic, you have to learn to do what it takes to listen. There is a good story about a friend of mine who went through a bad divorce.

My American friend got divorced and would talk to me all the time about it. It is fascinating because, while divorce is allowed in my country, it does not happen a lot; the Prophet Mohammed says it is the thing that is allowable but it is the most abhorrent to God. My friend named Darby said that even though she was divorced for more than five years her ex-husband would always take her back to court as he wanted to pay less support, wanted more time with his children, wanted to leave the state and take the children with him, it was always something else. The one day the judge says to hear you and your husband have to go to a mediator. It is someone who helps people who are getting a divorce or already divorced solve their disputes. She said she like the mediator because it is someone who really, really listened to both of them and that helped them a lot to solve disputes and it made her ex-husband listen to her! "How did this happen," I said to her, "how did the mediator help the husband listen?" "I do not know exactly, " she said, but now we do not go to court anymore. If a new dispute came up we use the mediator." When I was thinking about rules for listening I remembered her story and wanted to find out about rules for listening for mediators. There is a good book for mediators is called *Challenging Conflict-Mediation Through Understanding* and the authors are Friedman, G. Himmelstein, J. It has a lot of good ideas about effective listening and helping other people to listen to you when it is really important. One of the main things it talks about is something called looping. His Friedman's definition of it is "... demonstrating my understanding of what someone else is saying but to their satisfaction." (Friedman, G. p. 65). How it works? It is that you listen very carefully to someone.

Then, you say back to them what they said to you and you ask them if you got it right. That is an important part of looping—the most important part for Friedman. It is just not like a parrot, saying back to them exactly what they said to you. You say it back in your own words so you do not sound like a parrot, but the most important part is asking if you understood what they were saying correctly. The point is to show everybody involved a good way to listen and to understand. Friedman says that it is good, sometimes when you are looping to be told, "No, you did not understand." Why, if the goal is effective listening is it good to be told you did not understand? "When that happens it can become clear that the two parties are engaged in a sincere effort to move toward understanding." (Friedman, G. & Himmelstein, J. p.71). Another basic part of looping is to do this not to show that you agree with what the other party is saying. You loop to listen to show you understand the other person's view. (Friedman, G. & Himmelstein, J. p.69)

### 3 WHY YOU NEED GOOD LISTENING SKILLS

To be successful, all great leaders need to develop their listening skills. Effective listening skills should be required learning for anyone wanting to succeed in business. It is relevant to all professions and all situations where someone wants to be successful and connect with people in an authentic and comfortable way. Good listening skills make workers more productive. The ability to listen carefully will allow you to:

- Better understand assignments and what is expected of you;
- Build rapport with co-workers, bosses, and clients;
- Show support;
- Work better in a team-based environment;
- Resolve problems with customers, co-workers, and bosses;
- Answer questions; and
- Find underlying meanings in what others say.

Some people might think that such an example as divorce is not a good example for the real life workplace. When you are in a divorce, your emotions are involved, your children, your past, your whole life can feel like it is involved. When you are at work it is maybe not so important to listen so closely. However, you can get fired for making a serious mistake by not listening so closely. Then your children, your emotion and your life are involved. There is a story about a teacher who was instructed not to use a certain book in teaching his history class. The principal of the school said, "Do not use that book, it is not acceptable for this level of education." The teacher quoted from the book in one lecture and did not use an article or do any handouts based on the book. While he did not get fired he did get into a lot of trouble when the principal of that school found out he used one quote from the book. Therefore, maybe a good rule of listening when you are in the workplace is to do the looping. A good example of this would be to say to the school principal, "So, you do not want me to

use the Torah in this class because you feel it is not acceptable for this level of learning, is that right?" A response might be, "Yes, that is right. I respect other religions, but our third graders are not ready to go off and explore other directions." If the teacher asks a good question and listens to the full answer, now he is getting underneath the whole reason for the direction from the principal to do not use that book. This looping is important here because now we know why a leader does not want you to do a certain thing. Moreover, maybe the teacher could then say, "I was planning on using this one quote from the Torah, but maybe I can use this other one instead. It will not go over the heads of the third graders and it will show that we respect other ways of thinking" That way the teacher and the principal can open up a dialogue and it all started by looping. Friedman says, looping can have other great advantages as well. It can give each party the experience of being understood. It can show each party that the other's view can be understood. It can reinstate each party's idea in a way that can be easier to understand. Lastly, it models looping so that the other party can start doing it. Friedman, G., & Himmelstein, J (p. 69)

#### 4 WHAT TO DO TO BE A GOOD LISTENER

The most sought after skill that employers want is the ability to listen well. 85% of what we know is learned by listening. Experts agree that common components of good listening are:

- Focus - full attention & eye contact
- Atmosphere - minimal environmental distractions
- Wait your turn - resist the temptation to begin before the speaker is finished
- Analyze - look for the main message and ask questions to help
- Feedback - reiterate your understanding of the main points and give the speaker the chance to add or correct.

#### 5 SIGNS OF A POOR LISTENER

Besides being someone with no friends or a boss that no one likes there are other signs of a poor listener. Some obvious signs that someone is not listening are:

- Constantly interrupting
- Looking around the room or off into the distance
- Fidgeting or distracting hand movements – picking at nails etc.
- Talking on and on without pause
- Not seeking information or ideas through proper questioning
- Multitasking (as when on the phone and you can hear some people actually typing away!)
- When people start cutting you off,

- Answers with a response that is slightly off
- Lack of eye contact (most obvious sign)
- When something goes "In one ear, out the other" and they return 10 minutes or two days later asking for information about the conversation.

There is a book called, *The Drama-Free Office*, This book talks about four different types of people who bring negative drama to the workplace. They are the controller, the complainer, the cynic and the caretaker. The way anybody will deal with the four types based on listening. The writers of the book suggest different ways to handle these type of people who bring drama to the workplace. Cynics, for example, have to be arrogant or detached because they tend to be smarter than everybody else but also are vulnerable and want to feel confident in showing everybody how smart they are. The best way to deal with them is to acknowledge their good ideas, but not to let them control you through constant debate (Warner, J., & Klemp, K. p. 50). The interesting thing about this book as far as listening is concerned is that it, too talks about reflexive listening. This book does not go into as much detail about how doing the reflexive listening like the mediation book, however, it basically says the same thing about how to be an effective listener. "During this whole process, regardless of the other person's response, your vital role as manager is to listen and reflect back with the goal of truly understanding his views. You do not have to agree, just understand (Warner, J., & Klemp, K, p. 103). This book does talk about dealing with difficult people in the work place and it has nothing to do with divorce or child custody. Yet, it has the same general idea as the mediator book. That idea is effective listening in the workplace involves reflexive listening, that is, reflecting back what co-workers or bosses say to you and making sure that these people feel understood.

There is a real life example where a manager did listen to her employees and it helped the situation. A friend works as a manager at a clothing store designed for young women. The manager was ordering a lot of clothes that the younger workers thought were way out of style and would not sell in that store. Some of the young girls who worked there would giggle or groan when they saw the clothes coming in. The manager felt that she had good taste and knew what was going on with modern clothes. When the sales dropped by a lot she decided to call a team meeting. It is obviously a reflexive listen to understand, she did listen to the sales girls and got some ideas from them. During the meeting her pride was hurt because she did get the team to open up and some of the girls said

things like, “Nobody wants to wear those old lady dresses,” or “Girls these days like to wear skimpy clothes or tight close. They love to show off.” She did listen and she understood what they were saying and what the marketplace need. She ordered clothes with a good recommendation from young girls about their taste and what they need, simply, the sales went up.

Another book that had some interesting things to say, about the workplace is called *The Hands-Off Manager*. The whole idea of this book is that an employee will get a lot better at their workplace if the manager can empower them to do the job themselves instead of always hovering over them and micro-managing them. (Chandler and Black, 2007). This book does not talk about reflexive listening really specifically. However, it does have a lot in common with the other books mentioned in this paper because it emphasizes a manager who tries to understand the employee. One of the ways this book presents in how doing that by actually not managing. The writers say you should coach the employees, not manage them. “Managing is focusing on projects, but coaching is completely different. Coaching is a conversation between two individuals. Coaching is about two people achieving synergy in a beautifully hands-off way.” (Chandler, S., & Black, D. p. 184-185). Here again understanding is the goal. “When you are coaching the first thing you do is seek to understand the other person. You do not first seek to be understood.” (Chandler, S. & Black., D., P 184). The writer further states “Therefore the first stage of the coaching session is the intake. You ask your gentle questions and you get in touch with the intentions and the inner motivations of the person you are coaching. So, first of all you want to listen, ask more questions and let them talk (Chandler, S. & Black., D. p. 184) It seems clear from this book that effective listening can really help to motivate people to work together, then through understanding instead of the old model of a hierarchy with bosses on top directing people what to do and the lower people just understanding the boss's directions.

As a manager it seems like coaching, is a better way to go than just directive managing. I have had a boss who just told me what to do and I was not happy in that job. I did want to be a good worker and that is very important to me. However, if the boss really wants to listen to you an employee might have some good ideas to help the whole company. If a boss simply tells you what to do and how to do it you try to understand that and do it to make the boss happy and not get fired. That is all I did in that job. I think I could be a lot more effective if people try to understand me and my ideas and that would motivate me to help the company even more.

## CONCLUSION

The whole idea of a soft skill must be that it is not something a manager or an employee can quantify like a math formula or putting the number in the right column like an account. A soft skill is more like something you feel than a hard and fast rule. Nevertheless, it seems that to use this soft skill you have to do some hard thinking. What questions do you ask and what are some of the best ways to really, truly listen to understand? The looping method is a good tool, but how do you best put that into practice in the workplace? How do you make sure that you can listen and focus on how the other person is feeling and not focus on yourself and what you want the other person to do? I would like to do some more research to answer these questions, but what has become really clear to me is this: listening to understand is a very effective, essential tool in the workplace. If the bosses and the co-workers can do this, the workplace would be a lot more efficient and maybe even more human and fun for everybody.

ER

## REFERENCES

- [1] Chandler, S., & Black, D. (2007). *The hands-off manager*. The Career Press.
- [2] Friedman, G., & Himmelstein, J. (2008). *Challenging conflict mediation through understanding*. American Bar Association.
- [3] Golden, B. (2009, August 20). There is a difference between listening, hearing. *The Press*.
- [4] McKay, D. R. (N/A). Here's why you need good listening skills. *Career Planning*. Retrieved from:  
[http://careerplanning.about.com/cs/miscskills/a/listening\\_skill.htm](http://careerplanning.about.com/cs/miscskills/a/listening_skill.htm)
- [5] Vaz, L. (2002). Are you a poor listener? *Futurescopes.com*. Retrieved from:  
<http://www.futurescopes.com/communication/7/are-you-poor-listener>
- [6] Voboda, J. (N/A). Active listening skills. *Management Strategies, Inc.* Retrieved from: [http://www.ioansvoboda.com/listening\\_skills.htm](http://www.ioansvoboda.com/listening_skills.htm)
- [7] Warner, J., & Klemp, K. (2011). *The drama free office*. Austin: The Greenleaf Book Group Press.

IJSER