

Week 3

DEVELOPING LISTENING SKILLS

- Listening and response alternatives
- Active listening: How to paraphrase
- Learning how to listen: The importance of listening
REQUIRED READING
- Becoming a good listener: Ten bad listening habits
REQUIRED READING

Listening and Response Alternatives

Below are 12 statements made by various people. Read each statement as if you are a listening friend. Read each response alternative (A thru E) and decide which response you would be most likely to give in that situation. Mark your response in the space provided as well as the 'Type' of response it is (as given in the column to the right of the response alternative you chose).

	A	Type	B	Type	C	Type	D	Type	E	Type
vid 1										
	I determined to be a success and I know I can do it if I just work hard enough. I may have to work 18 hours a day and stay chained to computer, but if that's what it takes, I'll do it! My home life and my family may suffer, but it will be worth it in the end, I'll be a success and that's all that matters.									
Response: _____ Type: _____	You seem to be a person who wants badly to succeed at your job. That is understandable, but it may stem from your insecurity about your own competence and ability	I	I guess we all at some time or other go through a period where we want to achieve success. Lots of people worry about whether their family will suffer while they work so hard. I am sure everything will turn out alright for you and your family	S	I think you are right. Hard work always pays off. Keep at it!	E	You see yourself as a very ambitious person but you are unsure whether you want your family to suffer because of the long hours you believe you will have to work in order to be successful.	U	Can you tell me a little bit why success is so important to you? What will you do when you have achieved this success? Will you be happy? Will it give you what you want out of life?	P
vid 2										
	This working is driving me crazy. It seems as if I spend all my waking hours working! I don't have any time to relax with my kids and family. No matter how hard I work, I never seem to catch up. I have so many responsibilities. I don't know how I am going to get everything done.									
Response: _____ Type: _____	Don't feel so bad, I'm sure that if you just keep at it, you'll get things done and have the leisure you need.	S	You're obviously trying to do too much. What you need to do is cut down on your commitments so you'll have more free time.	E	You feel frustrated and angry that your work doesn't get finished and you can't enjoy your family and friends more. You work hard but your responsibilities always seem to increase faster than your ability to meet them.	U	Can you tell me more about the specific nature of your responsibilities, the way you schedule your time and how you acquire new responsibilities?	P	How you spend your time probably reflects your true values. Perhaps you prefer your work over your family and friends? Could it be that you consider your work more important than enjoying life?	I

	A	Type	B	Type	C	Type	D	Type	E	Type
--	---	------	---	------	---	------	---	------	---	------

er 1

er seem to have the time to do the things I enjoy. Just as I am ready to go and enjoy a nice game of golf or tennis, my brother reminds me of some writing that I need to do, or my wife saddles me with household chores. It's getting harder and harder to get the fun out of life that I expect to have. It's

essing!	Wanting to have fun is OK, but don't you think you should do some work too? I certainly wouldn't play golf if I thought that later I would regret not having worked. Life does have responsibilities	E	It's upsetting that your work and household responsibilities are increasing to the extent that you don't have time for the fun and recreation that you want.	U	Maybe your leisure activities are just a way of getting out of the unpleasant jobs you should do.	I	I'm curious, how much time do you spend on your favorite sport?	P	Your in a busy time of life right now, I bet you'll have more time as you get older	S
---------	--	---	--	---	---	---	---	---	---	---

er 2

er seem to get anywhere on time. I don't know why. People bug me about it and sometimes they get pretty angry. I try to keep a schedule but it never seems to work out. I have an important golf game coming up and I'm afraid I am going to be late for it. I don't know what to do to change.

r onse: e	In other words, you feel frustrated with yourself because you always seem to be late and somewhat worried about how other people react to your lateness.	U	I'm wondering if you have investigated ways of managing your schedule more effectively? How often are you late? Are there some things you are always late for and some things you are never late for?	P	You are obviously not very organized and off course people will be angry when you treat them with such inconsiderateness. Perhaps you should ask someone more punctual to pick you up when you have an important engagement.	E	I really wouldn't worry. Being late is not so bad. I am sure no one's really angry about such a little thing as arriving late.	S	Being late is sometimes caused by passive-aggressiveness, where you want to punish other people but you are also afraid to take responsibilities for your actions.	I
-----------------	--	---	---	---	--	---	--	---	--	---

	A	Type	B	Type	C	Type	D	Type	E	Type
--	---	------	---	------	---	------	---	------	---	------

nk 1

ver have any luck with cars. Ever car I have ever gotten has been a lemon. Not only have I paid a ll fortune for the cars but just as they are out of warranty, something goes wrong. The car I have / needs a new engine. What's wrong with me? Why should I have all the bad luck?

ur onse: — e —	You're wondering if it is your fault somehow that every car you own breaks down and has to have costly repairs. All the money you have to pay for car repairs depresses and angers you	U	Your anger at the poor quality of cars you have owned in being turned against yourself and experienced as depression. Aren't the companies that made the cars to blame?	I	What kind of cars do you buy? How many cars have you owned?	P	Everyone has bad luck sometimes. I am sure the next car you own will be more reliable. It's really not your fault that all the cars you have owned have turned out to be lemons. No one can tell how much repair a car will need when they first buy it.	S	You're always buying foreign cars. What you need is an Australian car with a good warranty.	E
----------------------------	--	---	---	---	---	---	--	---	---	---

nk 2

ver seem to have any money. I have a good-paying job, but it seems as soon as I get my paycheck, it's gone! Then I have to scrimp save for the rest of the month. Now my car needs a new engine and I don't know where I am going to get the money to pay for it!

r onse: — : —	Tell me more about how you manage your money. Have you tried budgeting? What are your major expenses?	P	You're feeling depressed on account of your chronic lack of money and your uncertainty over how you are going to pay for your needed car repairs.	U	You are wasting your money on non-essentials. I think if you tried keeping a budget, you would be able to manage much better.	E	I'm sure the money for your new car engine will turn up. Don't worry, you have always managed in the past.	S	Depression such as you are feeling often comes from a feeling of being helpless to solve your problems. Once you feel that you have some control over your financial problems, you'll feel better.	I
---------------------------	---	---	---	---	---	---	--	---	--	---

	A	Type	B	Type	C	Type	D	Type	E	
--	---	------	---	------	---	------	---	------	---	--

My older brothers pick on me constantly. They are always telling me what to do and I get pretty tired of them always harping at me to stand up straight or checking out my dates before I go out. What's worse is that they tell my dates things about me that are embarrassing. I've complained to my mother and she tells them to stop, but they just keep on.

ur ponse: — e —	How often do you have serious talks with your brothers? Have you tried telling them how you feel?	P	You feel angry at your brothers because they pick on you, tell you what to do, are inconsiderate of your feelings, and want to pass judgment on your choice of dates. Is that it? And you also feel helpless to change the situation don't you?	U	I think you ought to be more understanding about your brothers, after all, they wouldn't do it if they didn't care about you.	E	Relax! Older brothers often act like that for a while, it's traditional! Once they see that you've grown up, they'll get off your back.	S	You resent being treated like a child. Part of establishing your independence as a person is feeling angry at people who don't treat you like an adult.	I
-----------------------------	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---

the 2

te to bring my dates home to meet my family. I don't mind my boyfriends meeting my parents but I wish there was some way to p my older brothers out of the act. The way they give my dates the third degree scares them away. It's embarrassing!

ur onse: — e —	Embarrassment is often caused by older siblings, especially when they view you as a little girl. You have to plan to get them to start seeing you as an adult and start treating you as one.	I	It sounds as if they are pretty inconsiderate. Most people have siblings who embarrass them at some point, but your brothers sound as if they are really our of line.	E	Just wait, I bet that soon you'll meet someone who won't be scarred of your brothers.	S	You feel angry about the way your brothers embarrass you by questioning your boyfriends and you want to avoid such situations while at the same time allowing your parents to meet your dates.	U	Just what do your brothers do to your dates? What specific questions do they ask?	P
----------------------------	--	---	---	---	---	---	--	---	---	---

	A	Type	B	Type	C	Type	D	Type	E	Type
--	---	------	---	------	---	------	---	------	---	------

in When I was younger, I used to fight my parents because I wanted to get married. Now I'm married and I keep thinking how good it was to be single and have no responsibilities to tie me down. I can't go anywhere anymore without a bunch of kinds clinging to me. It's rough and there's nothing I can do about it.

onse:	I understand how you feel. I often feel that way too, but before long your children will grow up and then you'll have all the freedom you want.	S	Lets explore how you arrange your time. How often do you wish to go somewhere without your children? How often do you hire a babysitter?	P	You feel resentful and trapped because being married and having children don't allow you the freedom to go places and do things when you want to.	U	You say you fought your parents to get married, now you feel resentful about the loss of freedom. Could it be that your are really angry at your parents for not trying harder to stop you from getting married in the first place?	I	Sounds to me as if you are stuck. You'll just have to put up with the situation until your children have grown up.	E
-------	---	---	--	---	---	---	---	---	--	---

1 eally depressed. I have a good job and I make an adequate salary, but I'm not happy. I guess working is not all it's cracked up to have some money saved. I did not do too well in school before, but maybe I will quit work and go back to school. I don't know I should do.

nse:	How long have you felt this way? Have the feelings just started recently, or have you always felt depressed about what you were doing?	P	In other words, you are depressed and puzzled because your job isn't fulfilling, but school wasn't either and they are the only two alternatives you see yourself as having.	U	Depression is often anger turned against oneself. Perhaps you are angry at yourself for not feeling fulfilled by what you are doing?	I	If you didn't do so well is school before, you probably won't do any better now. You should be satisfied with having a good job, many people don't you know!	E	Lots of people have trouble making up their minds. There are a lot of people who don't like their jobs and who really don't want to go back to school. You don't need to feel depressed.	S
------	--	---	--	---	--	---	--	---	--	---

	A	Type	B	Type	C	Type	D	Type	E	Type
--	---	------	---	------	---	------	---	------	---	------

le
 wish I could find a way to finish college without going to classes. I register each quarter and I intend
 go, but I get sidetracked and end up dropping out. I have been enrolled for six years! My parents
 would kill me if they knew how many credits I still need to graduate.

ur ponse:	It sounds as if you are just wasting time and money. You should probably just stop trying to go to school and get good job instead.	E	You feel guilty because you keep letting your parents think you are trying to finish college when in fact you are doing other things. It bothers you not to meet their expectations.	I	Possibly, if you tell me a little more about how you get sidetracked and what it is that you do while being sidetracked, we can get a clearer idea about what is involved.	P	Many people have trouble finishing college. It is not unusual. Maybe you should quit. Your parents will understand if you explain things to them.	S	Lets see if I understand you correctly. You're upset because you can't seem to finish college even though your parents really want you to, and you're worried about how they would react if you quit going to school. Right?	U
--------------	--	---	--	---	--	---	--	---	--	---

nces

n't know about my children! David works too hard, Roger plays too much, Frank is always broke, Edythe married someone none of
 ave met, Helen got married too early, Keith quit school to work and now wants to go quit work to go to school, and Dale isn't close
 radiuating even after six years at college. You do your best and look how they turn out! It's enough to make a person want to give

ur onse:	You're worried about your children yet feel helpless to change them. Each child seems to have some problem, you are unsure how well their lives will turn out.	U	Can you explain further how you feel about your children?	P	Don't worry, I'm sure they'll turn out alright. All parents must worry about their children some time or other.	S	Tell your children to straighten out, wither they listen to their mother otherwise they aren't worth talking to!	E	You have certain expectations for each of your children, and they aren't living up to what you expect. These expectations are upsetting you.	I
-------------	---	---	--	---	---	---	--	---	---	---

Scoring

In this exercise, there were five different categories of responses you could have made. They were:

E Evaluating

Giving advice and making a judgment as to the relative goodness, appropriateness, effectiveness and rightness of what the sender is thinking.

I Interpreting or analyzing

The receivers intentions are to teach, to tell the sender what his or her problem mean, to inform the sender how the sender really feels about the situation or impart some psychological knowledge to the sender.

S Supporting or reassuring

The receiver wants to reassure, be sympathetic or reduce the intensity of the sender's feelings.

P Probing or questioning

Probing by asking questions indicating that the receiver wants to get further information, guide the discussion along certain lines or bring the sender to a certain realization or conclusion the receiver has in mind.

U Understanding or paraphrasing

Indicates that the intent is to understand the senders thoughts and feelings. This response asks the sender whether you (the receiver) have understood what the sender is saying and how they are feeling by paraphrasing the senders comments in your own words.

Calculate the amount of responses you made for each type of response alternative in the table below to discover the most common type of listening responses you make. Read Pages 224 – 229 of Reaching Out to understand the effect that your type of response has on your relationships.

Type of response	Number of responses				
	Evaluating	Interpreting	Supportive	Probing	Understanding

EXERCISE : ACTIVE LISTENING—WRITTEN CONFIRMATION

This exercise gives practice in making reflective responses. By using written, rather than verbal, responses, participants can go slowly and can revise their attempts more easily. It is important to take the statements one at a time, so that class members can apply their developing skills to succeeding statements.

STRUCTURE OF EXERCISE

Group Size. Unlimited.

Time. Thirty minutes.

Materials. Pencils and paper.

Process.

1. Explain that all the statements on the "Active Listening" response form are comments made by an employee to his or her boss. Everyone is to write a brief response, pretending to be the boss speaking to the employee. The response must identify the feeling the employee seems to be experiencing or expressing, as well as a restatement, in *different* words, of what

the employee said. Be sure to explain that the response is *not* to include any justification or explanation, just a restatement of what the employee said and appears to be feeling.

2. Ask everyone to write a response to the first item *only*. Allow about three minutes. Then ask for volunteers to read their responses. Call on a few other class members. Discuss briefly which responses best meet the requirements in step one.
3. Repeat step two for each of the ten statements. By the tenth statement, everyone should be writing accurate responses with little difficulty.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Are some feelings harder to *identify* than others? Why? Are some harder to *reflect*? Why?
- What would happen if the feeling was incorrectly identified?
- Could a conversation be based on active listening responses? Do you think this would be difficult, or easy?

ACTIVE LISTENING

Statement	Feeling	Response
1. John is really getting to me because of the way he insists on doing the Tomkins' job <i>his</i> way.		
2. I'll either do it or have it done on time—you can count on it!		
3. If you didn't keep giving us these unexpected rush jobs, there wouldn't be so many errors!		
4. I really thought the report was so good it would get top management's praise, let alone approval. Now, it seems that they just don't care.		
5. Why don't you get off my back!		
6. What's this about me being scheduled for overtime on Saturday? I worked <i>last</i> Saturday, and it's not my turn this week!		
7. I read over your procedural proposal. We tried a procedure like that two years ago; it didn't work then and I don't know why it would now.		
8. I can think of better ways to spend my time than in these pointless, endless meetings!		
9. Can you tell me about this appraisal session coming up? Will all the problems of the past year be reviewed?		
10. You shouldn't bawl me out in front of everyone! What will they think?		

LEARNING HOW TO LISTEN

The Importance of Listening

How important do you think it is to be able to listen well? One way of answering this is to think about how much time people spend actually listening. If you were to keep a record of how much of your day was spent listening compared with reading, speaking or writing, you would probably find that you spend more time listening than you spend doing all of the other three activities. One writer has demonstrated the implications of this by saying that we listen to the equivalent of a book a day, speak about one book a week, read a book a month and write a book a year (Loban, in Wolvin & Coakley, 1992). Since we spend so much of our time listening, it is clearly important to be able to do it well. You might also think that because you spend so much of your day listening that all this practice would make you good at listening. Unfortunately this is probably not true.

One reason we tend to be poor listeners is that most of us have received no formal training to help us to listen effectively. It is interesting that educational systems around the world spend the largest amount of time developing children's reading skills, but as adults this will be the least used of the different types of communication skills. Whereas the most commonly used skill – listening – is not generally developed by educational systems. As a result of this most of us have under developed skills in this area. Hence many of the problems we encounter with others are caused by their, and our, inadequately developed listening skills.

Another reason many of us are not good listeners is that we seem to think listening happens automatically – like breathing – and requires no conscious effort. Our poor listening skills may also be caused by the fact that we have not learned to value the importance of being a good listener. For example the ability to listen well is usually undervalued by parents - many boast about the child who talks early but not about the child who is a gifted listener.

Listening is not Hearing

As psychologists have long recognised (Adler, Rosenfeld & Towne, 1995) hearing is a physiological process and involves sound waves hitting the eardrum and causing vibrations, which are transmitted to the brain. Listening occurs when the brain reconstructs these electrochemical impulses into a representation of the original sound and gives them meaning. Hearing is automatic – unless it is stopped as a result of using earplugs, or because of injury, or illness – but listening is not. Many times throughout each day we hear but do not listen. An example of this could occur if your car develops a strange noise in its engine. You might hear the noise but unless you attach meaning to the sound you have not listened. When your car breaks down late at night it occurs because you heard but did not listen. Much of our lives are spent hearing but not listening. Most of us deliberately refuse to listen to boring stories, people who nag or complain, the sound of noisy traffic or the neighbour's lawn mower. At other times we think we are listening but in fact we are not. Thus we can sit by the television, supposedly listening to the news but if at the end we are asked to briefly describe what news stories were featured, we are often unable to.

Listening is Difficult

Listening is difficult because there are many factors or barriers, which interfere with our ability to hear what others say to us. Trying to cope with these requires time, concentration and hard work. Some of the more important barriers to listening are:

Information Overload The amount of speech we encounter each day makes it impossible to listen carefully to everything we hear. Each day we probably spend five or more hours listening to people talk, and another three to five hours listening to the radio and television. This means that we cannot stay totally focussed for all of these hours and at different times our thoughts wander.

Personal Concerns At other times we do not hear because we are absorbed by personal concerns and these can be more immediately relevant than the message others may be sending. These personal concerns could be your holiday plans, the shopping you need to do on the way home, or the argument you had with a work colleague earlier.

“Noise”. Our physical and mental worlds present us with a variety of distractions and these often make it hard for us to pay attention to others. This “noise” can be the physical sounds from nearby traffic or other people’s conversations. Or it can be the psychological “noise” caused by our values and emotional states. As we all know we are more likely not to hear correctly when we are upset or angry or listening to someone who is criticising something we value. Other barriers to listening well can be fatigue or other forms of discomfort.

Reasons for Listening

Our reasons for listening are varied but usually can be categorised in terms of one of the following:

To Understand and Remember Information

It is clearly important for all people to be able to understand and remember what others tell them. In fact at university and at work the ability to listen is a major key to success. Listening also helps us to be more successful in our personal life: being able to remember information about those we like makes it possible for us to develop friendships with them.

To Build and Maintain Relationships

Listening is often a powerful way to improve the quality of our relationships. If you wish therefore to build a good relationship with someone you need to actively listen to him or her. If on the other hand you wish to weaken your relationship with someone then an effective way to do this is to stop listening to this person. When someone refuses to listen to us we are often left with feelings of inadequacy, whereas listening promotes feelings of acceptance and trust. This may be because when we listen we are showing that person that what is important to him or her is of interest to us. Moreover listening demonstrates that we are prepared to invest time and effort in order to hear what the person has to say and most people recognise that this is difficult for busy people.

This means that whether you are prepared to listen, when a friend or colleague seems to be upset about something or has a problem, will play a major role in how good your relationship with this person will be. Many people are quick to give their opinion, advise or to analyse if friends or family appear upset about something or someone. They think that this will help. My suggestion is initially just listen, if later on you need to express an opinion it will be a better-informed opinion because you will understand the problem better.

To Help Others

When a close friend or member of your family is eager to talk to you, it is sometimes because he or she is experiencing strong emotional feelings about someone or something. Effective and active listening involves trying to understand what a person's message means, what *she* is feeling rather than offering your own ideas or telling her what to do. There is clear evidence that when people listen to us with understanding and concern it helps us solve our problems. This does not occur because telling others means they fix our problems but occurs because talking about problems helps us to understand the problem and see solutions. Therefore you need to listen to people you care about when they experience problems, as this allows them to develop their abilities to solve problems. Often the problems, which cause us most concern, are the small, everyday upsets, and not the major worries such as what career should I choose.

To Evaluate Messages

Sometimes we need to listen critically – in other words hear the speaker's words, understand the ideas but not necessarily accept them. Critical listening can also help us to listen to our own words, and enables us to evaluate our own ideas.

If you listen critically you are more likely to realise some relevant information is missing from the explanation of why an employee is late or why your sister needs to borrow your jumper. Therefore listen carefully and ask specific questions and your employees, friends and siblings will probably give you accurate information. It is not so much that others do not tell the truth, but rather that they can omit important facts, and in your role as a supervisor or manager you need to develop the ability to ask the right questions.

Different Types of Listening Responses

Good listeners understand what is said to them but more importantly they know how to respond to it. As you will be aware we are told many things during a day and the right response will depend in part on who is telling us, and what they are telling us. This means that different situations require different responses and these can be called *passive listening*, *active listening* and *directive listening*.

Passive Listening Response.

Sometimes the best way to respond to what you have been told is to say nothing, particularly if you do not wish to encourage the speaker. For example if a work colleague tells you for the tenth time about how unfair it is that he has not been promoted, you will probably say nothing. This is because you don't want to encourage the speaker to continue, nor do you wish to promote an argument. In this situation you will use what is called *passive listening*. This means that you attend to what the speaker says, respond non-verbally (e.g. nod your head or show sympathy) but do not respond verbally. In this situation passive listening is used as an avoidance strategy but it can also be used when it would be inappropriate to butt in and ask questions.

Many of us have had the experience where we have tried to tell a joke or a funny story and the person we are telling keeps asking questions such as – How many people did you say? What were their names? As a result the story ceases to be funny. At times as a listener the most appropriate way for you to respond is to be like a well-behaved member of an audience – responsive but make no interjections.

The problem with passive listening is that although it allows people the opportunity to be heard, it does not guarantee that they have been understood.

Active Listening Response

In most interpersonal exchanges listeners provide feedback, which seeks to clarify or extend what the speaker has said. This is called *active listening*. When you use active listening you try to understand the speaker's thoughts and feelings but do not offer comments of your own. Whilst active listening has been used extensively in counselling situations, it is valuable whenever someone wishes to enhance personal and professional relationships. Thus research demonstrates that couples who listen and show they understand each other's feelings are more satisfied with their marriages than are couples who express less understanding (Pearson, 1993).

Whilst there are a number of strategies you can use to help you to listen actively, active listening requires more from you than knowledge of a set of strategies. It is an approach that requires listeners to suspend their judgement, make no evaluation and seek to understand both the obvious message and the more subtle underlying messages. Three types of active listening - paraphrasing, questioning and empathising will be described. These will provide you with a set of tools: if you practise and learn to use these then in time you will become a better listener. It will, however, take some time before you become confident paraphrasing, as this is probably the most difficult of them all.

Paraphrasing

When you paraphrase you restate, in your own words, what you think the speaker said and if relevant, what he or she feels and wants. You are probably thinking, "Why would I want to do that?" There are many reasons why we paraphrase. We paraphrase in order to:

- *Clarify meanings.* Paraphrasing can help to sort out misunderstandings, as is shown in the following simple discussion between a manager and an employee:

Manager: I need you to complete the report on next year's budget as quickly as you can.

Employee: You want me to concentrate on completing the work on the budget as soon as possible. Therefore rather than working on the marketing campaign I should concentrate on preparing the budget.

Manager: No, I don't want you cease working on the marketing campaign. Instead look at what work others could do on the marketing campaign so as you can still be involved in the marketing campaign but are able to finish the budget by the end of the month.

In this example the manager and employee had different interpretations of "quickly". These misunderstandings were resolved because the employee paraphrased what the manager had said. This example also demonstrates that when we paraphrase we restate, using our own words what we think has been said; we do not repeat exactly what the speaker said. If we did this it would sound silly.

- *Understand thoughts, feelings and wants.* Paraphrasing can also help you to understand what others are feeling, their thoughts and wants and as a result increase that person's sense of acceptance. So when others you care about indicate to you that they have a problem or are upset about something, attempt to paraphrase. As the following discussion between two sisters shows, paraphrasing is used to try and clarify both what the other person says and also feels.

Joanna: I hate school.

Sister: You're really feeling upset about school at the moment.

Joanna: I sure am. I never want to go again.

Sister: You're so angry you feel like never going back to school.

Joanna: That's right. (Pause) But I know I need to. Anyway if I didn't go, I'd miss out on seeing my friends.

Sister: You'd be sorry not to see your friends.

Joanna: Yes. But I really hate Mr Thompson. He's always forcing us to do work.

Sister: Sounds like you don't really hate school, but that it's sometimes hard to do what Mr Thompson wants.

Joanna: Yes you're right but I guess all he is really doing is making me do something again because he thinks I can do it better.

You can appreciate how much more Joanna received from this discussion than she would have if the response had been, "Don't be silly. You'll never amount to anything if you don't go to school." As you will notice during this conversation, whilst restating factual information, Joanna's sister was also focussing on Joanna's thoughts, feelings and wants. This means that sometimes your paraphrasing may be inaccurate. For example consider the following comments a work colleague makes about her husband:

"I am fed up – Jack has worked late every night this week. When he finally gets home, he grabs his dinner, goes into his study, and continues working until 12.00. I don't think he's spoken more than three sentences to me all week. It was so different when we first married, Jack couldn't wait to get home then and we'd talk for hours over dinner."

You might respond to this by saying to her, you seem unhappy (feeling), because you think that Jack doesn't care about you any more (thought) and you want him to spend more time at home talking to you (want). She might answer, "No it isn't the long hours – I know he has to work like that at the moment. I just want him to show me I'm still important to him." There are of course other ways you might interpret these comments – and only the speaker can tell you whether your interpretation is correct or not.

As you will realise paraphrasing has one major problem: it takes time, effort and concentration to do well. It is much easier and quicker to offer the speaker a quick piece of advice and end the discussion. Remember, however, that if you refuse to listen and make comments such as "Don't be silly" it can have a destructive impact on your relationship. This means that you are better to have no discussion than a negative one. Alternatively you could try and make another time when you will have the time to have a proper conversation with a friend or work colleague.

- *Encourage elaboration or gather more information.* Paraphrasing can also be a valuable way to obtain more information. As you will see in the conversation with Joanna, gradually information emerged as Joanna discussed her concerns about school. By paraphrasing what Joanna said her sister allowed Joanna to gradually become clearer about what was worrying her, and important information emerged.
- *Defuse anger.* People tend to become angry and upset because they think others do not understand them. Imagine a conflict between a parent and her fifteen-year-old daughter. The parent has told her daughter that she cannot stay at her friend Chloe's house, because no parents will be there and the most responsible person will be Chloe's nineteen-year-old brother. The exchange between parent and daughter has become more and more angry, with both of them becoming more determined to "win" the argument:

Daughter: You don't care about me. All my friends will be there. Of course their parents trust them – not like you. You've never trusted me.

At this stage the parent could repeat what he or she has already said:

Parent: I don't care who is going. You're not and I am not discussing it any more.

Alternatively the parent could try paraphrasing:

Parent: I know you feel embarrassed and angry. You think I don't trust you but it's not that. I am worried about you. That's all. If something went wrong would there be anyone there who'd know what to do?

Paraphrasing can help in some situations because it can short-circuit a defensive spiral. The daughter in the scenario above will probably still be unhappy but she at least knows that her parent can see her point of view and has shown involvement and concern for her. It also communicates clearly and unambiguously why the parent does not wish her daughter to stay at her friend's house and can enable a more constructive discussion of the real issues to occur.

Questioning

Whilst asking questions can lead to greater understanding, you need to make sure that you ask the right questions. Many questions people ask us do not demonstrate active listening. Questions can in fact be used to convey criticism – such as “Are you finally ready?” Questions can try to “trap” you into being dishonest about your feelings, as can occur when someone says, “You don't like my boyfriend do you?” Or questions may seek a “correct” answer – i.e. one confirming the speaker's earlier decision. An example of this might be the question, “Which shoes go best with this dress?” and you know the speaker will only be happy if you say “The red ones.” In all of these examples you will notice that these questions were more like statements because they did not in fact request information.

Therefore in order to use questions to help you to listen actively, you need to ask them with an open mind. This means you ask questions because you genuinely want to understand the other person's viewpoint. In other words you must have the right attitude to asking questions and not be asking the questions in order to advise, criticise or pry. Some acceptable reasons why an active listener might ask questions are:

- *To clarify meaning.* Sometimes you will be unsure what the speaker means by a particular word. For example people can mean many different things when they say someone has been “unfair”, “mean” or “unkind”. As active listeners we want to know what the person means and will ask questions such as, “What do you mean?” or “How was he unfair?”
- *To understand thoughts, feelings and wants.* Active listeners often want more than facts: they want to know how someone feels. So we ask questions such as “How would you feel about changing jobs?” “How did you feel when I said I'd been transferred?” “Were you hoping for something different?” “What did you feel when I said I couldn't come to your birthday party?”
- *To encourage elaboration or gather more information.* Sometimes people are hesitant or unsure and you need to encourage them to tell you more if you are to understand the problem. To do this you might ask questions such as “I'm not sure I understand – can you go through that again?” or “Can you tell me more about that?” At other times you may feel some important details are missing and you might ask “But what happened before then?” or “What else did you do?”
- *To encourage self-knowledge.* At times asking questions can help people understand more about themselves and how to solve their problems and you might ask, “So what could you do?” or “What would be an ideal solution?” The major value of this approach may be that it indicates that you think your child can think for himself, whereas telling him how to solve a problem suggests that he is incapable of doing so.

You will need to be careful when you question it is easy to ask too many questions and within a very short time your discussion turns into a cross-examination and the person you are talking to, stops talking.

Showing Empathy

This occurs when a listener accepts and acknowledges the legitimacy of the speaker's perspective. It probably has two components – a capacity to understand another's feelings and the ability to communicate this. When we show empathy we:

- *Accept that other people have the right to feel the way they do.* In other words you do not suggest to someone that he or she "Stop worrying", "Don't be upset" or "It's silly to feel like that". There is considerable evidence to suggest that such comments are unhelpful – most of us are not able to stop worrying because someone tells us to. Whereas it does help if we "acknowledge, elaborate and legitimise the feelings and perspectives of a distressed person" (Samter, Burleson & Murphy, 1987, P. 280).
- *Do not minimise the significance of the situation.* Sometimes people wish to make a distressed person feel better by minimising the importance of a situation by saying – "It's only a _____ (e.g. job, game, test)". If you do this you are not showing empathy, and the likely response from the other person will be "You obviously just don't understand me." In fact the person is right. Remember that for the person who has not received a promotion at work, it isn't "just a job" (Burleson, 1984). For this person the lack of promotion is a negative and hurtful message, particularly if she thought she had performed well at work. Therefore to interpret this from your perspective, as a friend or colleague, is not helpful.
- *Accept the extent of people's current emotions.* Accept how someone feels now, rather than telling him or her "You'll feel better tomorrow". Whilst pain, embarrassment, grief, and despair do tend to become less intense with the passage of time, focussing on the future prevents you for showing empathy for how a person feels now. Most of us know that in ten years time we'll feel better, but it can be very comforting to know that someone understands the level of emotional intensity we feel now.
- *Resist offering unsolicited advice.* Many people erroneously believe that when someone tells them of a problem he or she is asking for advice. Often, however, we want someone to listen to us with understanding and be a "sounding board" for our ideas. The other problem with advising is that if you are preparing words of advice you will probably be unable to listen to what is being said and will not be able to show empathy.
- *Resist becoming defensive.* It is easy to become defensive when family or friends talk about their problems and to say things such as "Don't blame me" or "I've done my best to help you". If you are busy justifying your own past behaviour you are clearly unable to understand or assist this person to solve the current problem.

The way in which you show empathetic listening will depend upon the situation and your relationship with the other person – there are no clear rules for you to learn but these guidelines may help. This means that sometimes you may say nothing – just put your arms around the other person to comfort him. Or you may say very little – perhaps only "Uh-huh", "Mmmm" or "Yes – I see". Or you may use a phrase such as:

It's clearly been a long week
 I think I can imagine how you must feel
 Sometimes I've felt like that too
 I can see that comment really hurt you

Regardless of the language you use, your non-verbal responses must agree and complement what you say. This means you need to show your interest with appropriate eye contact, facial expression and posture and sometimes touch. Empathetic listening does not need to be intense – you don't have to cry every time a friend is sad or unhappy. Nor do you need to agree to show empathy: empathy is accepting the others' feelings and acknowledging their right to feel that way, it does not necessarily indicate acceptance of their views.

Using Active Listening

Although the different active listening skills of paraphrasing, questioning and empathising have been discussed separately, there is considerable overlap between them and many conversations require the simultaneous use of all three techniques. However, the most important of these skills is the ability to show empathy: without this you will be unable to either successfully paraphrase or question.

In order to improve your active listening skills remember:

- *Active listening takes time.* Only try and do it when you know you have the time. If you cannot commit the time or are unable to make the effort it requires it is better not to attempt it, as you could lose another's trust.
- *Do not impose your ideas on others.* Active listening means accepting another person's feelings and believing that he or she has the ability to solve the problem.
- *Focus your attention on the speaker.* Do not become defensive or move the conversation on to yourself. For example if someone talks about finding something difficult, it is rarely helpful to start talking about how many difficult situations you have had to struggle with.
- *Alternate active listening responses with other types of listening responses.* If you only paraphrase you are likely to irritate the other person. In order to sound natural you need to mix active listening with the other responses you have probably used in the past, and which are described below.

Directive Listening Response

A directive response either states or implies what you think the speaker should do. There are four different types of directive responses: *supporting*, *analysing*, *advising* and *evaluating*. Since these probably represent listening responses you already use less attention will be given to these than was given to active listening.

Supporting

There are times when all people want from you is to know that you understand how they feel. In other words they may want you to show support for them or they may want to know that you agree with them. Sometimes others need encouragement and a supportive response will be the most useful response you can provide. The following statements demonstrate this type of support:

You're right that was unfair.

Let think about ways to try and sort this problem out.

I don't care what your tutor thinks, I know you tried really hard.

The worst is over – you'll find everything becomes gradually easier.

I know you're going to do a great job.

You know I'm always here to help – ring me anytime.

Sometimes people find supportive comments particularly helpful if they put things into perspective. If, for example, a friend tells you he has failed an accounting test you might initially show empathy by saying "I know you're upset and disappointed that you failed". This could then be followed by a comment such as "You may not feel this now but you probably now know what you need to do before your next accounting test. So don't see this as all bad." In other words others, like all of us, may find comfort if their attention is moved

from the specifics to “the bigger picture”, particularly if it offers the possibility of future success.

Analysing

Sometimes listeners interpret what is said to them and may say something like – “I think what’s bothering you is that she’s ignored you” or “I think the problem started earlier than that”. Interpretations can sometimes help people consider alternative explanations or clarify confusing situations. If your interpretations are wrong, they will cause problems, not solve them. Even when correct your interpretation may not help, particularly if the other person interprets your analysis as you showing your superiority.

So offer interpretations tentatively, and only if there is a strong likelihood that you are correct and when your motive is truly to help (not show how clever you are).

Advising

When anyone approaches us with a problem the most common reaction for all of us is to offer advice but this is probably much less helpful than people generally think. For example research with bereaved people showed that when they were offered sympathetic advice this was rated as helpful only 3% of the time (Davidowitz & Myrick, 1984). There appear to be a number of reasons why advice can be unhelpful. Firstly the advice you give may not be the best way to deal with the problem. Or your suggestion might be right for you but not necessarily right for someone else. Giving advice can also make it easy for others to avoid taking responsibility for the solution – after all it was not their suggestion. You may even find that years later someone will blame you because he followed your suggestion and it did not work out. Finally people often do not want advice, and if you insist on forcing it on them, it will be resented and certainly not accepted.

This means that when offering advice, try and ensure that it is correct, that it is wanted and likely to be followed, and that you will not be blamed if the advice does not work.

Evaluating

An evaluating response passes judgement on the speaker’s thoughts or behaviour and this may be favourable (“That’s a good idea”) or unfavourable (“That approach won’t work”). Irrespective of its nature evaluations imply that the person making the judgement is qualified to do so. Therefore evaluating responses are generally more appropriate in a workplace setting than a social situation. Whilst your positive evaluations may be incorrect, it is normally negative evaluations not positive evaluations, which people resent. These negative evaluations may be purely critical (e.g. “I told you that was a bad idea”) or may be intended to be constructive (e.g. “No that’s not right – remember the procedure you need to follow is written here.”). If you want to make an evaluative response remember that it is only likely to be helpful if the evaluation has been requested and if the evaluation is genuinely constructive, and neither designed to belittle an employee nor used as a weapon.

Which Listening Response Is Best?

Unfortunately there is no simple answer to this question but in most discussions with your friends or family you are better initially to use active or passive listening responses rather than directive responses. In spite of this there may be times when a friend or work colleague really needs some direction and wants your support, praise or advice.

To help you decide which approach is better think about the *situation* and ask yourself what will be helpful with this problem. If this person is to solve this problem is it your advice she needs? Or is it your encouragement? Or will active listening provide him or her with an opportunity to solve the problem himself? Are you prepared to spend the amount of time

needed to listen actively? Finally think about *yourself*. Most of us tend to use one or two ways of responding. Sometimes this is because we have particular strengths, at other times we seem to rely on responses we have used before, in spite of the fact that these have previously been unhelpful. Therefore if your immediate response is to be judgmental or to offer advice think about whether these strategies have worked in the past. If not then try something different.

References

Adler, R., Rosenfeld, L. & Towne, N. (1995). *Interplay: The process of interpersonal communication* (6th Edn). USA: Harcourt Brace College publishers.

Davidowitz, M & Myrick & Myrick, (1984). Responding to the bereaved: An analysis of 'helping' styles. *Death Education*, 8, 1-10

Pearson, (1993). *Communication in the family* (2nd Edn). New York: Harper Collins

Samter, W., Burleson, B.R. & Murphy, L.B. (1987). Comforting conversations: The effects of strategy type of evaluations of messages and message producers. *Southern Speech Communication Journal*, 52, 263-284.

Wolvin, A.D. & Coakley, C. (1992). *Listening* (4th Edn). Dubuque, IA: W.C. Brown.

BECOMING A GOOD LISTENER

Becoming a good listener primarily consists of discarding your bad listening habits and replacing them with good listening skills. Check and see if you have any of these bad habits – if you do they need to go.

TEN BAD LISTENING HABITS

These have been identified as the most common and worst faults evident amongst people who are poor listeners. These bad habits often damage relations at work when they occur in formal meetings, but their effects can be even more damaging in less formal listening situations at home, at school, in social situations and at work. Whilst some of these faults will probably not interfere with the way you listen to your child, they may interfere with the way you listen at other times, so they are a useful set of skills to acquire.

1. I Can't Listen if I'm Not Interested

Bad listeners often decide a topic is not sufficiently interesting to command their attention and they use this as an excuse to wander off on a mental tangent. For example your child may be complaining about another child. You have heard these complaints before, have talked to his teacher about the problem and she has told you there is nothing to worry about. You don't want to hear all the complaints again and you do not in fact listen but start thinking about other things. If, however, you are going to help your child resolve this problem you need to be prepared to listen to him. Therefore you need to change your attitude and decide to listen. This means that good listeners accept that they have heard much of this information before, but decide to find out if the speaker has anything new to tell them - any information they can use. Therefore the key to good listening is that three-letter word **use** and the active approach to listen which it implies. Good listeners are sifters, screeners, and winnowers of the wheat from the chaff. They are always hunting for something practical or worthwhile to store in the back of their mind to put to work in the months or years ahead.

2. I Can Only Listen to Speakers I Respect

Bad listeners like to criticise the way a speaker looks, acts, and talks, rather than listen to what is being said. Good listeners may make some criticisms of the speaker but they force themselves to try and pay attention to what is said, not how it is said. After a few minutes, good listeners become oblivious to the speaker's mannerisms or his/her faults in delivery. They know that the message is ten times more important than the clothing in which it is dressed.

3. I Can't Listen If I'm Upset

Listening efficiency drops to zero when listeners react so strongly to one part of what is being said and means that they miss what follows. Therefore try and ensure that you follow this important rule of good listening: **withhold evaluation until comprehension is complete - hear the speaker out.** It is important to understand the speaker's point of view fully before you decide to accept or reject it. This means that you need to keep your emotions under control.

4. I Always Like To Listen For The Facts

Facts are important but poor listeners seem to spend too much time trying to remember facts and miss the relevance of these facts. This means that they do remember some of the facts, but they garble others and completely lose most of them. They are also unable to tell you why these facts were important and what they demonstrated. Whereas good listeners listen for the speaker's main ideas and use them as connecting threads to make what is being said understandable. In the end they have more facts appended to those connecting threads than the cataloguers who listen only for facts. It isn't necessary to worry too much about fact as such, for facts have meaning only when they strengthen an argument.

5. I Like To Develop A Mental Outline Of Everything

There's nothing wrong with formulating a mental outline of what has been said - provided the speaker has an outline and follows it. The reality is that probably no more than a half or perhaps a third of even formal speeches are built around a carefully prepared outline, and certainly informal conversations are not planned in this way.

Good listeners need therefore to be flexible. They adapt their listening and recording to the organisational pattern of the speaker - this may be an outline, a summary, some key facts and principles - or whatever else is useful.

6. I Make Sure I Look As If I'm Listening

Faking attention by keeping your gaze fixed on a speaker does not guarantee good listening. Having adopted this pose, poor listeners seem to think that if they have shown a speaker the courtesy of appearing to listen, they do not need to feel guilty if their mind then wanders off at a tangent. Good listening is not a relaxed and passive activity. It's dynamic; it's constructive; it's characterized by a slightly increased heart rate, quicker circulation of the blood, and a small rise in bodily temperature. It's energy consuming; and it's plain hard work.

7. I Have to Admit I'm Easily Distracted

Poor listeners are easily distracted and can create disturbances, which interfere with their own listening efficiency and that of others. They squirm, talk to others, shuffle papers, examine their fingernails and watch what is going on around them. They make little or no effort to conceal their boredom or disinterest. Whereas good listeners try to adjust to whatever distractions there are and soon find that they can ignore them. Certainly, they do not distract others.

8. I Listen Really Well Provided The Message Is Simple

Often poor listeners have avoided listening to serious presentations on radio or television and tune out of complex discussions. There is always plenty of easy listening available, and this is what these people have chosen to listen to. However, the habit of avoiding listening to speakers who explore even moderately difficult concepts handicaps anyone who needs to use listening as a learning tool.

9. Certain Emotion-Laden Words Stop Me From Listening

Some words come with such emotional baggage that they cause listeners to tune a speaker right out. This can occur whenever words such - religion, politics, terrorism, and affirmative action - are used. It can also occur if someone is talking about your child and uses words such as - bully or learning difficulties. These can be so emotionally laden for parents that they may be unable to hear anything else the speaker says.

It has been suggested that there is a need to identify the one hundred greatest trouble-making words in the English language. If everyone knew what these words were, it would be possible to discuss them openly, and stop them from interfering. It's clearly foolish to let a word or symbol for something to prevent us from being able to listen.

10. My Thoughts Sometimes Stop Me From Listening

Australians speak at an average rate of 125 words per minute in ordinary conversation but when talking to an audience they slow down to about 100 words per minute. How fast do you think you can listen? Or, to put the question in a better form, how many words a minute do people normally **think** as they listen? If all their thoughts were measurable in words per minute, the answer would seem to be that the **thinking** speed of most listeners averages 400 to 500 words per minute. This as you can imagine can cause listeners a problem. The difference between the speaker using 100 words per minute and the **thinking** speed of the listener at 400 or 500 words per minute is a trap. It gives listeners a false sense of security and causes them to lose concentration and become tempted by their irrelevant thoughts. However, with training in listening, the difference between thinking speed and speech speed can be made a source of tremendous power. Listeners

can hear everything the speaker says and not what s/he omits saying; they can listen to what is being implied and do some evaluating as the speech progresses. In order to do this, good listeners must consciously practice three skills in concentration:

- **Anticipate the next point.** Good listeners try to anticipate the points a speaker will make in developing a subject. If they guess right, the speaker's words reinforce their guesses. If they guess wrong, they'll have to do some thinking to discover why they and the speaker failed to agree. In either case, their chances of understanding and remembering what was said is nearly double what it would have been if they had simply listened passively.
- **Identify supporting material.** Good listeners try to identify a speaker's supporting information. After all, a person can't go on making points without giving listeners some of the evidence on which the conclusions are based, and the bricks and mortar that have been used to build up the argument should be examined for logical soundness.
- **Recapitulate.** With the tremendous thinking speed that everyone has, it is easy to summarize in about five seconds the highlights covered by someone talking for about five minutes. When a speaker pauses to have a drink of water or takes a deep breath, the experienced listener makes a mental summary. Half a dozen summaries of the highlights of a fifty-minute talk will easily double the understanding and retention important points in a talk.

Source: Adapted from Ralph G. Nichols, R.G. (1960). *The Supervisor's Notebook*, Scott, Foresman & Co. Vol. 22, No. 1, Spring.