

7-1-1998

## Chapter 12 : Listening

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### Recommended Citation

Power, Mary R., "Chapter 12 : Listening" (1998). *Working Through Communication*. Paper 13.  
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## CHAPTER 12: LISTENING

### A brief introduction to the field

Listening is a process in which the listener receives, perceives, concentrates on and assigns meaning to and responds with observable feedback to messages. Listening involves reception of both auditory and visual non-verbal messages. An Australian survey of employers' expectations of graduates' communication and literacy skills reported in Bate and Sharpe (1990. p.168) showed that employers required the following skills relating to listening:

- listening actively rather than passively
- checking that meanings are received as intended
- demonstrating an understanding by paraphrasing information, arguments and instructions
- using and interpreting body language effectively
- judging when to talk and when to listen.

Listeners assign meaning to what they hear by judging whether it is intelligible and whether it is fact or opinion and. Jargon and specialised language can render speech unintelligible to lay audiences. Listeners notice implied meanings and evaded issues in judging what they hear. Listening involves effort in choosing to remember and to adopt memory strategies to ensure that information is absorbed in a way that it can be recalled later.

Message presenters encourage people to listen to them if their messages are clearly organised with well ordered arguments, if they speak in a confident but not over-bearing manner and if they present their messages in ways calculated to help people to remember them—that is visually as well as orally, and with some redundancy or repetition to allow the listener to check their understanding. If the listener has a chance to ask questions or to interact with the material and apply it in discussion or analysis of stories or case studies, learning will take place.

Experienced speakers and teachers are aware that after about 15 minutes the attention of audience members is inclined to wander. Accordingly, they use techniques such as changing focus, changing activities or introducing audio-visual material to recapture attention.

Listening is an essential interpersonal skill as it reinforces people's desires to talk about themselves and their concerns and hence creates bonds between those who talk and those who listen. Naturally there is also an expectation that the interaction will be two-sided and that the other person will, in turn, pay attention and listen showing that he/she understands you. Good listeners have high social intelligence which means that they are aware of their own behaviour as listeners and they monitor their attention and feedback as they obtain information about how others understand and view the world.

Attention is affected by the relevance and difficulty of the subject, the limits of short-term memory, and the listener's motivation to work at anticipating the speaker's points and fitting them into previous knowledge, as well as by the speed and variation of tone and accent of the speaker.

## Team task

If our body language conveys our interest our conversations become more rewarding. The mnemonic S.O.L.E.R. summarises effective body language.

- S = Face the other person squarely
- O = Adopt an open posture
- L = Lean towards the other
- E = Maintain good eye contact
- R = Relax

With one other person concentrate on listening physically using the SOLER technique while they tell you about a problem they have had during the last week.

After five minutes move to another person and ask them to tell you about their family OR a problem they have had during the past week but do the opposite of what the SOLER mnemonic recommends.

In groups of four discuss the effects of these different behaviours and appoint a spokesperson to give a 30 second mini-speech account of your group using the introduction, middle three points with supporting examples and conclusion format you have used on pp. 17 - 20 for short speeches. As a group help your spokesperson gain the attention of the audience with an appropriate thesis statement (or main idea).

## Individual task

In the next day or two focus on looking at people when you speak to them and making appropriate eye-contact (which doesn't mean staring at them!). If you live at home try it out on your partner, parents or brothers and sisters. Instead of talking as you are walking away or from another room practise SOLER. Report the effects of this behaviour in your journal.

## Discussion exercise

Listening to others in a group situation.

**Instructions:** Form into groups of five.

Terrorists have hijacked a plane with eight hostages. In order to gain the right to refuel they have agreed to release four of the hostages. They will release whoever the Prime Minister nominates. The Prime Minister has nominated your group to select the four people. Rank the hostages from 1-4 for the people you would save.

The task of the group is to reach a consensus ranking of the four hostages to be released. This is an exercise in listening to others and in analysing others' reasoning. You are required to reach genuine agreement after involving all members in the decision-making.

1. Too Chen Bur, 47 is a professional gambler usually resident on the Gold Coast. He has imported \$15 million into Australia over the past two years and has lost most of the money in casinos. When he wins, he gives the money to the Boystown program for homeless youth.
2. John Rockard, 54 is a politician who has just been made Minister for the Economy. He is extremely outspoken in Parliament, attacking the opposition and demeaning them whenever possible. So far the economy is not doing well, but he claims that is because he has just begun to take charge. His slogan is "It's not the economy stupid, it's the stupid unions".
3. Naomi Dewi, 27 is an exotic dancer. She entered Australia nine years ago on a student visa and is currently traveling on a forged visa. Newspaper journalists have discovered that she has just discovered she is pregnant and was trying to bribe Too Chen Bur.
4. Sister Mary Frances, 66 is fit and healthy despite living and working in crowded inner city apartments with poor families unable to cope. She is on her way to accept a substantial contribution from a star of porn movies for a home for battered women and ex-prostitutes with Aids. Sister

Frances says “I don’t care where the money comes from, but I do care that these women can have a chance to recover their dignity”.

5. Michael Fourmile, 35 has just come out of jail determined to make good. Raised by white missionaries when his Aboriginal mother became ill, he went through a search for his identity when he was an adolescent which led him into drugs and drug dealing and violent crime. In jail he learned a great deal about Aboriginal culture and has become reconciled with his white foster parents who visited him every week for the 10 years he was in jail. In jail he did an open learning degree in Public Relations and Music. He made two highly successful recordings “We need to meld together” and “Pauline, we forgive you now and always”. He wants to use his talents to help young people find themselves.
6. Rilene Sortum, 48 is a rabble-rousing politician. She has pioneered “hate radio” in Australia, encouraging callers to abuse people they feel are un-Australian. She believes that every family should have a gun, that single mothers should be sterilised, that pensions should be halved and that business people who employ more than one worker ought to pay 15% tax.
7. Paul Nguyen, 23 is an Olympic swimmer. He trains daily for four hours and runs his four businesses in his spare time from studying for his MBA.
8. Jamima Haught, 21 is a well-known TV star and model. Her name has been linked with most of Australia’s eligible bachelors, but she says she is waiting until she is “a millionaire several times over” in her own right before she becomes “somebody’s wife”.

### Writing tasks

Write a paragraph using the format on p. 69 explaining what it is like to be a speaker or a listener in the SOLER and non-SOLER conditions in the team task.

“Listening is something that most people think comes naturally. It is, however, a skill that can be developed through training and reflection and through an understanding of non-verbal communication.” Develop an argument to support this statement and write a paragraph using the format on p. 69.

Write a paragraph using the model on p. 69 beginning “Being involved in the hostage exercise taught me several things about my behaviour in a group”. Explain your feelings during the conversations you held under each condition.

### Sources of information

Bate, D. & Sharpe, P., (1990) *Student writer’s handbook: How to write better essays*. Sydney: Harcourt Brace.