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IFAS Leadership Development: Listening to Learn[1]

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Introduction

This article is part of a series IFAS Leadership Development, with eleven modules developed for use by Florida Cooperative Extension agents. They are designed for training agents and officers. Information and activities provided in this series will help Extension leaders in facilitating leadership development for their agents and officers. Handouts for audience use are labeled in the leadership development modules. These may be duplicated for use during training sessions. Each lesson is designed for a workshop approximately two hours long. Various parts of the modules can be shortened or expanded according to the needs of participants and availability of time.

Recommendations for Leader Training

Prepare to teach this lesson by reading and familiarizing yourself with the objectives, materials, handouts, and activities/exercises.

- Begin preparation several days in advance in order to secure whatever additional resources you need to make the lesson a "local" learning experience.
- Plan a learning environment with care so that the surroundings contribute to the achievement of the objectives.
- Begin on time and end on time. Schedule a break at about halfway through the lesson.
- With each lesson after the first one, ask participants what they did as a result of the previous lesson. Record these!
- Introduce each lesson with an overview of how it fits into the overall major leadership development program.
- End each lesson with a summary and restatement of objectives. Explain what the participants are expected to do with the lesson after they leave.
- Heighten anticipation for the next lesson by sharing a brief description of it, but be cautious not to give too much away.

Objectives

1. To learn why listening is an important communication skill.
2. To observe and use 10 listening skills.
3. To practice effective listening skills in group discussions.

Lesson Outline

Introduction and Overview of Objectives (10 minutes)

- *Listening to Learn*

Group Exercise and Discussion (20 minutes)

- *Simon Says*

Group Development Lecture and Exercise (40 minutes)

- *Listening Is a 10-Part Skill*
- *How Do You Listen?*

Group Exercise and Practice (40 minutes)

- *KIVA* (30 minutes)
- *Checklist for Improved Listening* (10 minutes)

Summary and Evaluation (10 minutes)

- *Skills for Good Listening*

Total Time: 2 Hours

Lesson Plan—Listening to Learn

Step 1—10 minutes

Use *Listening to Learn* to introduce the lesson.

Read over the objectives of this lesson and put them on the chalkboard.

Step 2—20 minutes

Use *Simon Says* to introduce hearing versus listening. You may make changes in verbal directions if you desire.

Step 3—40 minutes

Use *Ten Listening Skills* as overhead for lecture.

Use *Listening Is a Ten-Part Skill* as the background material for lecture.

Allow time for discussion between each of the 10 parts.

Pass out *How Do You Listen?*. Use *Listening Habits* Discussion as an answer/lecture/discussion background.

Step 4—40 minutes

Refer to *KIVA* and follow directions.

Pass out *Checklist for Improved Listening*. Ask participants to respond candidly. Do not take these up; these are personal assessments.

Use discussion questions at bottom of *KIVA*.

Step 5—10 minutes

Use *Skills for Good Listening* as concluding remarks.

Evaluate and adjourn.

Listening to Learn

"We hear only half of what is said to us, understand only half of that, believe only half of that, and remember only half of that."

Communication might be thought of as an idea transplant. From 300 to 1000 messages are sent a day. There is ...

- the message intended to be sent.
- the message actually sent.
- the message as the hearer interprets it.
- the response of the hearer based on what he or she heard.
- the reaction to the exchange of words, meaning and interpretation.

Is it any wonder that things get garbled along the way?

Studies show there are four kinds of communication: reading, writing, speaking, and listening. In a study conducted by the Detroit Public Schools several years ago, the personal communications of 68 people with different occupations were studied for two months. It was found that people spent the following time in communicating:

- 16 percent Reading
- 9 percent Writing
- 30 percent Speaking or Talking
- 45 percent Listening

People spend 75 percent of a typical day either speaking or listening. It has been noted in other studies that approximately 98 percent of learning in a person's lifetime is through the eyes and ears. Learning through the ears, or listening, takes approximately 45 percent of our time.

Good listening takes a lot of serious practice. One way to practice is to concentrate for one minute out of every hour on one specific sound or what any one person is saying. At the beginning, most people will only be able to concentrate totally for a few seconds. It will take practice to hold complete concentration for just one minute. This will be harder than anticipated, but it can improve listening proficiency.

Concentration practice may not make perfect listeners, but it can make good listeners. The payoff is in better understanding, increased efficiency, and closer friendships.

Adapted from *Listen to Hear* by Inge McNeese, FCL Project Assistant, Extension Service, Ohio State University for the Regional Training Institute II, 1983.

Simon Says

Number of people: unlimited

Minimum time: 15 to 20 minutes

Materials: pencils and paper for each participant

Setting: lecture room or small discussion groups

Purpose

To see how well people listen to directions. It demonstrates that hearing and listening are not the same thing. One can hear but not really capture the meaning a person is trying to communicate.

Process

1. Give every person a sheet of paper and pencil. Tell them they will receive some simple directions they should follow by using the sheet of paper. They will be stated only once, and in a quick and clear manner. Participants must follow directions without any questions and not repeat any directions.
2. Read these directions, once loudly and clearly, but quickly.
    a. On the top of the left-hand side write the country's name where you live.

b. Along the right hand side write the name of the state you live in.
c. Draw a line from the top right corner to the bottom left hand corner.
d. Draw a line from the center of the top to the center of the bottom.
e. Fold your paper along the center line with the left side over the right.
f. Now draw a diagonal line from the top left corner to the bottom right corner and write your first name three times on the diagonal line.
g. Fold your paper into thirds and hand it to the person to your right.

3. After you have read the directions to the groups, and they have followed them, have everyone open the sheet they end up with and ask them to raise their hands if they think it is correct. You don't need to keep score, but usually 25 percent of participants will do everything correctly.
4. Start a discussion if one hasn't already begun. Suggested questions might be:
   a. Why do you think so many people didn't do the exercise correctly?
   b. Would anyone have done better if this were an important group task or item of business?
   c. What would have happened if it had been?
5. Use the exercise to lead into a discussion about hearing versus listening, and what it means to your group.

Adapted from *Working Together: A Manual for Helping Groups Work More Effectively* by Bob Biagi, Massachusetts Cooperative Extension Service, Citizen Involvement Training Project, 1978.

Ten Listening Skills—Checklist

1. Find an area of interest
2. Judge content, not delivery
3. Hold your fire
4. Listen for ideas
5. Be flexible
6. Work at listening
7. Resist distractions
8. Exercise your mind
9. Keep your mind open
10. Capitalize on thought speed

Adapted from *Are You Listening?* by Ralph G. Nichols, McGraw-Hill, New York, 1957.

Listening Is a Ten-Part Skill

Most people spend a good share of their lives listening. Success or failure throughout life often depends on how well or how poorly a person listens. Almost any job involves a certain amount of listening to instructions on how to do it, if nothing else. Tests of listening comprehension show that without training, the average person listens with about 25 percent efficiency. This low rating becomes even more deplorable since evidence shows that it can be very much raised through training.

Learning through listening is primarily an inside job, or an inside action on the part of the listener. What the listener needs to do is replace some common present attitudes with others.

1. Find an Area of Interest

The key to the whole matter of interest in a topic is the word use. Whenever individuals want to listen efficiently, they ought to say to themselves: "What's he saying that I can use? What worthwhile ideas has he contributed? Is he reporting any workable procedures? Is there anything that I can cash in on and make myself happier?" Such questions help screen what is being heard in a continual effort to sort out the elements of personal value. G. K. Chesterton spoke wisely indeed when he said,

"There is no such thing as an uninteresting subject; there are only uninterested people."

2. Judge Content, Not the Delivery

Many listeners blame inattention on a speaker by thinking to themselves: "Who could listen to such a character? What an awful voice! Will he ever stop reading from his notes?"

The good listener reacts differently. He or she may well look at the speaker and think "This man is inept. Seems as if almost anyone ought to be able to talk better than that." But from this initial similarity the good listener moves on to a different conclusion, thinking, "But wait a minute. I'm not interested in his personality or delivery. I want to find out what he knows. Does this man know some things that I need to know?"

Essentially, people "listen with their own experience." Should the conveyor be held responsible because the listeners are poorly equipped to decode his or her message? Not all messages can be understood, but

listeners can raise their level of understanding by assuming the responsibility of "listening with understanding."

3. Hold Your Fire

Overstimulation is almost as bad as understimulation, and the two together constitute the twin evils of inefficient listening. The overstimulated listener gets too excited, or excited too soon, by the speaker. Some of us are greatly addicted to this weakness. For us, a speaker can seldom talk for more than a few minutes without touching upon a pet bias or conviction. Occasionally we are roused in support of the speaker's point; usually the reverse is true. In either case, overstimulation reflects the desire of the listener to enter into an argument somehow.

We must learn not to get too excited about a speaker's point until we are certain we thoroughly understand it. The secret is contained in the principle that we must always withhold evaluation until our comprehension is complete.

4. Listen for Ideas

Good listeners focus on central ideas. They tend to recognize the characteristic language in which central ideas are usually stated, and then discriminate between fact and principle, idea and example, evidence and argument. Poor listeners are inclined to listen for facts in every presentation.

5. Be Flexible with Notetaking

Notetaking may help or may become a distraction. Some persons try to take down everything in shorthand, while the vast majority are far too voluminous even in longhand. Studies are not too clear on the point, but there is some evidence to indicate that the volume of notes taken and their value to the taker are inversely related. In any case, the real issue is one of interpretation. Few people have memories good enough to remember even the salient points heard. By obtaining brief, meaningful records for later review, listeners definitely improve their ability to learn and remember.

6. Work at Listening

Listening is hard work. It is characterized by faster heart action, quicker circulation of the blood, and a small rise in body temperature. The overrelaxed listener merely appears to tune in, and then feeling conscience-free, pursues any of a thousand mental tangents.

For selfish reasons, one of the best investments an individual can make is to give each speaker his or her conscious attention. Listeners should establish eye contact and maintain it, and indicate through posture and facial expression that the occasion and the speaker's efforts are a matter of real concern. By doing these things, listeners help the speaker to express himself or herself more clearly, and in turn profit from better understanding resulting from the improved communication achieved. None of this necessarily implies acceptance of the speaker's point of view or favorable action for his or her appeals. It is rather an expression of interest.

7. Resist Distractions

The good listeners tend to adjust quickly to any kind of abnormal situation; poor listeners tend to tolerate bad conditions, and in some instances even to create distractions themselves.

This is a noisy age in which to live. People are distracted not only by what they hear, but by what they see. Poor listeners tend to be readily influenced by all manner of distractions, even in an intimate face-to-face situation.

A good listener instinctively fights distraction. Sometimes the fights are easily won by closing the door, shutting off the TV, moving closer to the person talking, or asking him or her to speak louder. If the distractions cannot be met that easily, then it becomes a matter of concentration.

8. Exercise the Mind

Poor listeners are inexperienced in hearing difficult, expository material. Good listeners apparently develop an appetite for hearing a variety of presentations difficult enough to challenge their mental capacities.

Perhaps the one word that best describes the bad listeners is **inexperience**. Although they spend 40 percent of their communication day listening to something, they are inexperienced in hearing anything tough, technical, or expository. For years they have painstakingly sought light, recreational material. The problem they create is deeply significant, because such people are poor producers in factories, offices, or classrooms.

Inexperience is not easily or quickly overcome. However, acknowledging one's own weaknesses may lead to repairing them. Never become too old to meet new challenges.

9. Keep the Mind Open

Along with the blind spots that afflict human beings are certain psychological deaf spots that impair the ability to

perceive and understand. These deaf spots are the dwelling places of the most cherished notions, convictions, complexes. Often when a speaker invades one of these areas with a word or phrase, the listener turns his or her mind to retraveling familiar mental pathways criss-crossing the invaded area of sensitivity.

It is hard to believe in moments of cold detachment that just a word or phrase can cause such an emotional eruption. Yet with poor listeners it is frequently the case, and even with very good listeners it occasionally happens. When such emotional deafness transpires, communicative efficiency drops rapidly to zero.

10. Capitalize on Thought Speed

Most persons talk at a speed of about 125 words a minute. There is evidence that if thought were measured in words per minute, a person could easily think at about four times that rate. It is difficult and almost painful to try to slow down thinking speed. Thus, one normally has about 400 words of thinking time to spare during every minute a person talks.

What is done with the excess thinking time while someone is speaking? Poor listeners soon become impatient with the slow progress the speaker seems to be making. So their thoughts turn to something else for a moment, then dart back to the speaker.

These brief side excursions of thought continue until the mind tarries too long on some enticing but irrelevant subject. Then when their thoughts return to the person talking, they find he or she is far ahead. At that point, it is harder to follow the speaker, and increasingly easy to take off on side excursions. Finally the listener gives up. The speaker is still talking, but the listener's mind is in another world.

The good listener uses the thought speed as an advantage by constantly applying his or her spare thinking time to what is being said. It is not difficult once one has a definite pattern of thought to follow.

Not capitalizing on thought speed is the greatest single handicap. The differential between **thought speed** and **speech speed** breeds false feelings of security and mental tangents. Yet, through listening training, this same differential can be readily converted into your greatest asset.

Adapted from *Are You Listening?* by Ralph G. Nichols, McGraw-Hill, New York, 1957.

How Do You Listen?

Purpose

The answers you give will help you discover where you may have developed listening habits keep you from being a good listener.

Process

Read each question. Do not try to second guess the intent. Answer with yes or no, according to your usual behavior.

1. Science says you think four times faster than a person usually talks. Do you use this excess time to turn your thoughts elsewhere while you're keeping general track of a conversation?
2. When somebody is talking to you, do you try to make him or her think that you are paying attention when you are not?
3. When you are listening to someone, are you easily distracted by outside sights and sounds?
4. When you are puzzled or annoyed by what someone says, do you try to get the question straightened out immediately ... either in your own mind or by interrupting the speaker?
5. Do certain words, phrases, or ideas make you prejudiced against the speaker so that you cannot listen objectively to what is being said?
6. Do you listen primarily for facts, rather than ideas, when someone is speaking?
7. If you feel that it would take too much time and effort to understand something, do you go out of your way to avoid hearing about it?
8. If you want to remember what someone is saying, do you think it is a good idea to write it down as he or she goes along?
9. Do you deliberately turn your thoughts to other subjects when you believe a speaker will have nothing interesting to say?
10. Can you tell by a person's appearance and delivery that he or she won't have anything worthwhile to say?

If you have answered no to every question, you are a rare individual—the perfect listener. Each yes shows a very specific listening habit to change if you want to improve your communication.

Adapted from *Listen to Hear* by Inge McNeese, FCL Project Assistant, Extension Service, Ohio State University for the Regional Training Institute II, 1983.

Listening Habits Discussion

Question 1—Skip and Jump Listening

Most people talk at the rate of 125 words per minute. Most people think at least four times faster than this. With concentration and practice, one can listen and understand as much as 400 words per minute. Since you think so much faster than people speak, your mind tends to wander to other things.

A good listener avoids mental wandering and concentrates on the speaker.

Paying close attention to voice changes, facial expressions, and gestures will also help increase your ability to concentrate on what is being said. You can develop better thought patterns by asking yourself questions such as "What point is the person trying to make?" Weigh facts and evidence given by a speaker by raising such mental questions as ... are the facts accurate, prejudicial, complete? Is the source reliable?

Question 2—Pretending Attention Habit

Most people learn at an early age how to pretend to be listening. They frequently do this when the subject is difficult to comprehend, or the speaker is a person they do not recognize as an authority, or they may have something else on their mind.

This non-hearing level of listening cheats you out of a chance to learn.

Question 3—Yielding to Distractions Habit

It takes conscious effort to screen out the distractions, whether they are audible, visual, or physical. Eliminate as many distractions as possible. If you cannot eliminate the distraction, fight it by concentrating on ideas presented by the person talking to you.

Listen at the thinking level.

Question 4—Supersensitive or Argumentative Listening

If you have firm convictions or prejudices, a person presenting a different opinion may unwittingly step on your mental toes. When this happens, you unconsciously stop listening and start developing arguments to defend your position. In the meantime, you may have completely missed the main points of the other person's comments.

A good practice is to learn to control your emotional reaction.

Hear the person out. Evaluate objectively the facts and opinions presented. Try to figure out why the person is saying what he or she says. You may learn an entirely new idea.

Question 5—Emotional Deaf Spots

Certain words can push your button and make you see red. They trigger an emotional reaction and you pull down a mental filter tuning the speaker out. You start thinking of unpleasant memories brought up by the use of one of these words or phrases. While you are recovering from this emotional reaction, you might miss important data the other person was trying to give you.

List those words and phrases that cause you trouble.

Analyze them to find out why they bother you. Recognizing your response, listing the words, becoming aware of your sensitivity, and learning to be objective will help you control your emotional reactions.

Question 6—"I Get the Facts" Listening

A speaker is presenting a series of facts. While you are trying to concentrate on fact one and memorize it, the speaker may already be discussing fact two or three. After several facts, you wind up with a few memorized, others garbled, and some missed completely.

Listen for ideas.

Weigh one fact against another. Look for relationships between the facts as the person is speaking, and you will find that he or she may be using several facts to develop one or two main ideas. You will be listening at the thinking level.

Question 7—"Skip the Difficult" Listening

If you quit listening when a subject is difficult to understand, it can become a habit. You could cheat yourself by **tuning out** things you might really want to know.

Make a point to concentrate on topics that require effort to follow.

Ask the speaker a question that will help clarify a point to understand a main idea. If you can't interrupt, make a note to ask the question when the speaker is finished.

Question 8—Paper and Pencil Listening

When you concentrate on taking notes you can only hear half of what is being said. Write down just enough to let you recall those ideas. A thoughtful person will have a prepared summary for you when a lot of detail is presented.

Develop the habit of listening for ideas.

Keep in mind that the more senses—yes, ears, mouth, nose, and touch—involved, the more effective communication becomes.

Question 9—Premature Dismissal

The habit of deciding in advance that a subject is not important. You close your mind to whatever the speaker has to offer. An open approach will help to correct this habit. If you listen closely, even an uninteresting or boring person may have an idea you can use.

Listen for these ideas.

Question 10—Deceived by Appearance or Personal Habits

Just because a person may not look like your image of an authority does not mean he or she isn't. Some of the greatest scientists, artists, musicians have not been impressive in either appearance or manner. If you must be mentally critical, wait for the person to speak. You will find by concentrating on what is being said that you will no longer be aware of the person's appearance.

Listen for ideas ... then be critical.

KIVA Exercise

Number of people: 6 or more

Minimum time: 30 to 45 minutes

Materials: movable chairs

Setting: space large enough to put chairs into concentric circles

Purpose

To help members **listen** to diverse opinions in the group. The structure provides time and conditions for discussion so that many points of view can be expressed. It generally builds a collaborative spirit and clarifies the **significant** points of agreement and disagreement.

Process

1. Arrange chairs in circles with each circle representing a different role or interest group. See Figure 1 for an example. The group convener might suggest one circle of County Administrator/Commissioners, one circle of County Staff (Extension, law enforcement, human services, etc.), and a third circle of Community Members. Instead of dividing up according to roles, the group may divide according to those strongly opposing the budget passage and those strongly supporting the budget passage.
2. Announce the amount of time to be allocated to each group.
3. Present a clear statement of the issue to be discussed.
4. Ask the group in the center to use its time to talk **without interruption from opposing points of view,** about their opinion, experiences, and wishes.
5. Rotate each group into the center and give it the same amount of time to explore the issue.
6. After all groups have talked, allow additional time for questions, clarification, and interaction among all participants.

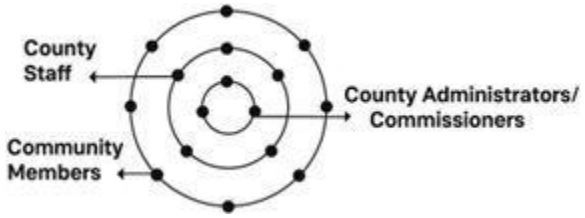

Figure 1. Different Points of View Diagram.
Credit: KIVA Exercise adapted from Northwest Regional Laboratory—PRI, Portland, OR

Discussion Questions

- Did the exercise help you to listen to opposing opinions more objectively?
- Was there a more cooperative feeling after doing this exercise?
- Did the significant points of disagreement become more clear?
- Did significant points of agreement become more clear?

Checklist for Improved Listening

How many do you practice?

- Do I give my listeners cues to know when to **tune me in**?
- Do I understand that I not only have the right to influence others, but they have the right to influence me?
- Do I understand that when I am talking I am learning little?
- Do I realize that people **speak** in many non-verbal ways and I must **hear** these communications too?
- Do I look for feedback to assure I am understood?
- Do I know that a person who feels understood tends to be less aggressive and less defensive?
- Do I understand that being a good listener does not mean that I must believe what I am hearing, or subscribe to the values of the speaker?
- Do I know my biases and prejudices so that they do not filter out certain messages?
- Do I avoid responding to emotionally charged words?
- When I disagree with something, or find something exciting, do I still listen carefully?
- If I am having trouble being understood, do I fault myself or the listener?
- Do I know when I may be intimidating listeners through threatening behavior?
- Can I tell when there is a hostile, emotionally charged atmosphere?
- Do I consider the person, as well as the situation?
- Do I listen for what is **not** being said?
- Do I listen for voice tones as well as words?
- Do I look as if I am listening?
- If I were a listener, would I listen to myself?

Prepared by Glenn Klein, Extension Education, Oregon State University, 1970.

Skills for Good Listening

One of the most important skills for working with and understanding other people is the skill of effective listening. When dealing with other individuals, there is a time to speak and a time to listen. When you speak or convey your ideas or thoughts, you are very active and involved. When you listen or try to understand the ideas or thoughts of others, you should be just as active and just as involved.

Following are some suggestions or tips that can increase your skills in listening and thus help you to better understand others as total individuals and not just their words.

1. **Stop talking.** You cannot listen while you are talking.
2. **Get rid of distractions.** Put down any papers, pencils, keys, etc., that you have in your hands, because they may distract your attention.
3. **Empathize with the speaker.** Try to put yourself in his or her place so that you can see what is trying to be communicated.
4. **Look at the other person.** The face, eyes, and hands will help you understand what is trying to be communicated. Make him or her feel that you are listening.
5. **Concentrate on what the speaker is saying.** Focus your attention on the person's ideas and feelings related to the subject.
6. **Leave your personal emotions behind, if you can.** Try to push your worries, your fears, and your problems out of the situation. They prevent you from listening well.
7. **Smile, nod, or grunt appropriately.** This signals the speaker that you are following along, but do not overdo it.
8. **Share responsibility for communication.** You as the listener have an important part. Try to understand, but if you don't, ask for clarification. Do not give up too soon or interrupt. Give the person time to express what he or she has to say.
9. **Listen carefully for the main points.** Concentrate on the main ideas. Do not get sidetracked by examples or side issues the speaker may use. Examine the examples to see if they prove, support, or define the main idea.
10. **Use the difference in rate constructively.** You can listen or think faster than another person can talk. Avoid assuming or jumping ahead. Use the time

difference to fully interpret and remember what has been said.

11. **Listen to how something is said.** The person's attitudes and emotional reactions may be more important than what is said.
12. **Be aware of the total person.** What are the likes and dislikes? What are the person's motivations? What things are valued? What makes him or her tick?
13. **Avoid hasty judgments.** Wait until all the facts are in before making any judgments.
14. **Don't argue mentally.** If you are trying to understand another person, hear him or her out. A mental argument sets up a needless barrier.
15. **React to ideas, not to the person.** Do not allow your personal feelings about the individual to influence your interpretation of what he or she is trying to say.

Acknowledgement

Original article written by Elizabeth B. Bolton, professor emeritus, UF/IFAS Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences.

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