

Developments in Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 10, 1983

EFFECTIVE LISTENING: AN EXERCISE IN MANAGERIAL COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an experiential exercise that has been successfully used in principles of management courses to teach and emphasize the importance of effective listening skills in management.

A two-way flow of communication is certainly desirable, if not absolutely essential, for effective managerial performance. Transmission of information is necessary for coordination of activities; and receipt of information is necessary for control, and allows for better decision-making. The process of information exchange--communication--has been modeled to include: Sender -> Message -> Channel -> Receiver. Feedback (from receiver to sender) is usually desirable, although not technically necessary, for communication to take place. What keeps communication from being 100% effective, i.e., the interference in getting the message from the sender to the receiver, is "noise." Noise can be physical or psychological, additive or subtractive.

This exercise demonstrates to students how certain forms of "noise" can impair effective communication--especially the receiving of information--and how some noise can be minimized to promote more effective listening.

(Administration instructions and exercise materials are combined in sequence--exercise materials are enclosed in boxes.)

PURPOSE OF THE EXERCISE

This exercise was designed to give students the opportunity to: (a) evaluate their listening skills, (b) identify obstructions to skillful and perceptive listening, and (c) develop strategies to improve listening skills.

ADMINISTRATION

Introduce students to the exercise by having them read the following:

INTRODUCTION

Today, modern managers know that listening is as important as, if not more important than, effective transmitting of information. How well do you think you listen? This exercise is designed to give you the opportunity to assess your listening skills, and then to develop strategies to overcome listening deficiencies. Complete the parts of the exercise as directed. Your instructor is going to give you specific instructions to follow in a few moments. Make sure you use your best listening skills.

Part I

After students have had time to read the introduction, read these instructions to them--being careful NOT to read the italicized part with any more emphasis or inflection than any other sentence in the instructions:

"How well do you think you listen? Well, I am going to give you a test--yes, a three-minute timed test--to see how well you follow directions. Oh, the test won't count too much, but I am very interested in how well you do on it. When I tell you to, I want you to read everything before you do anything, and follow the directions on the test exactly. Please leave the test face down on the desk until I tell you to turn it over and begin. Remember it is a timed test."

When tests are all handed out, say: 'Are you all ready? Okay, turn the test over and begin.'

CAN YOU FOLLOW INSTRUCTIONS? (Time Limit: 3 Minutes)

1. Print your name in the upper left hand corner of this paper.
2. Sign your name in the upper right hand corner.
3. Above the title of this test, print your social security number.
4. Immediately above your social security number, print your area code and telephone number.
5. Add those two numbers together, and put a box around your answer.
6. Circle the word "corner" in sentence one.
7. Draw two boxes around your signature.
8. Put an "X" on each side of each box.
9. Put a circle around the entire second sentence.
10. Put an "0" in the lower left hand corner of this paper.
11. Draw a triangle around the "0" you just wrote.
12. Draw a circle around the word "corner" in sentence number six.
13. Put the name of your instructor in the lower left hand corner of this paper, next to the "0" and triangle you have drawn there.
14. Circle all of the odd sentence numbers.

Developments in Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 10, 1983

15. When you get this far, without raising your hand call out so your instructor can hear you, "I AM FOLLOWING DIRECTIONS."
16. Count from one to ten out loud in your normal speaking voice.
17. Loudly call out your last name when you get to this point in the test.
18. If you have followed all instructions carefully to this point, call out, "I HAVE."
19. Say out loud, "I AM ABOUT TO FINISH."
20. Now that you have finished reading carefully, do ONLY what you were instructed to do in sentence one.

Part 2

Ask students to answer the questions in Part 2 of the exercise. If a small group approach is used, you may want groups to discuss what they observed in the first part, and then answer the questions in Part 2. (10-15 minutes.)

Part 2

Use your personal experience as well as what happened with others in the first part of this exercise to answer the following questions:

- a. Some individuals were not successful in following instructions. Why not? _____

- b. What could the sender (in this exercise, the instructor) have done differently to increase the probability that the message would have been received more effectively (i.e., more accurately)? _____

Then, conduct a general discussion of Part 2. (5 minutes.)

Part 3

Have students complete Part 3. (10-15 minutes.)

Part 3

Develop a list of obstructions to skillful and perceptive listening. _____

Then conduct a general discussion on obstructions to skillful and perceptive listening. You may want to develop a master

list of the obstructions developed by the class by asking individuals or groups to call out items from their lists and recording them on a transparency or the blackboard.

Following is a list of three possible reasons for ineffective listening that may or may not have been identified. (5-10 minutes.)

THREE MAJOR FAILURES THAT OBSTRUCT SKILLFUL AND PERCEPTIVE LISTENING

1. Failure to pay attention to what is being said:

*A listener may find himself or herself thinking about one problem while the talker is discussing another

*A listener may decide that the subject being discussed is boring, so he or she takes "a mental 40 winks"

*A listener may let a speaker's voice, appearance, or mannerisms distract him or her so much that what is being said is not being heard

2. Failure to think open-mindedly about what is being said:

*A listener may decide beforehand that he or she knows what someone is going to say, and that becomes all that is heard, regardless of what is actually said

*A listener may shut off his or her thinking process as soon as a word or phrase is heard which evokes a "conditioned response"

*A listener may only give peripheral attention to what is being said while thinking of something to say as soon as he or she gets the floor

3. Failure to hear the implications of what is being said...and of what is not being said. Listeners often fail to develop sensitivity to what lies beneath the surface of things they are being told; they convince themselves that everything is open, businesslike, and practical in the work situation

Developments in Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 10, 1983

Part 4

Have students individually complete the 'How Do You Listen?' questionnaire. (5-10 minutes.)

(Instructor's note: "Note-Taking Faults" is a habit that is not generally clear, and will probably have to be explained to the students. When a person becomes so preoccupied with writing what someone is saying that many other Important Ideas are missed, the person is exhibiting "note-taking faults." From a student's perspective, "bare-bones" notes should be taken during class and "fleshed out" after class. In industry, if it is important that notes be written, the receiver may want to stop the sender by saying "Just a minute, I need to get that down so I can keep it straight later," and after the notes are made, "OK I've got that, please continue." The possibility of using a tape recorder during the meeting, so a verbatim transcription may be made later if necessary, might also be considered.)

HOW DO YOU LISTEN?						
Evaluate your personal listening skills by completing this form.						
Listening Habit	Frequency					Score
	Almost Always	Usually	Sometimes	Seldom	Almost Never	
Avoiding new experience	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]	_____
Faking attention to the speaker	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]	_____
Avoiding difficult material	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]	_____
Welcoming or creating distractions	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]	_____
Finding fault with the speaker	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]	_____
Listening only for details	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]	_____
Getting overstimulated by some point in the talk	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]	_____
Letting bias or prejudice interfere	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]	_____
Note-Taking Faults	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]	_____
Failing to relate speaker's ideas to your own situation	[]	[]	[]	[]	[]	_____

Score 2 points for Almost Always, 4 for Usually, 6 for Sometimes, 8 for Seldom, and 10 for Almost Never. A total score of 90 or above indicates an extraordinarily good listener, 70-90 a good listener, and below 60 indicates a need for listening training.

From "Are You Sure You're a Good Listener?" *Supervisory Management*, (February, 1969), pp. 33-36.

Then conduct a general discussion on the "How Do You Listen?" questionnaire. (5-10 minutes.)

Part 5

Ask students to meet in groups to answer the questions posed in Part 5:

Part 5

Describe what a person can do to become a (more) skillful listener.

Record student reactions to Part 5 on a transparency or the blackboard, and use as the basis for a brief discussion.

Additional information on the question of becoming a skillful listener that might be included in the discussion follows:

BECOMING A MORE ASTUTE LISTENER

1. Realize that listening has to be an active exercise, not a passive reception--concentrate on listening.
2. Realize that words are used almost as frequently to conceal as they are to reveal.
3. Realize that not only the words, but also the emotions behind the words--that are disclosed in the pitch of voice, the volume, the inflections, the hesitations--must be listened for.
4. Realize that there is profound meaning to body postures, gestures, facial movements, and other forms of nonverbal communication.

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NOTES ABOUT THE EXERCISE

Administration

While this entire experience can be completed by students working individually, discussion of many of the items by small groups of students will often provide a synergistic experience that will increase individual as well as group learning.

Handouts are necessary for parts 1 and 4. The introduction will probably work better, especially in regards to the reading of the instructions for part 1, if it is also handed out. Parts 2, 3, and 5 may also be prepared in handout form, or may be presented via overhead or blackboard.

Discussion and Sample Results

Part 1 "sets the stage" for the rest of the exercise. Students should come to recognize that some people (and not only students!) become so excited when the words "exam" or "test" and "won't count too much" are mentioned, they block out subsequent information, in this case including the instruction . . . read everything before you do anything. -Test anxiety is something many people experience that may inhibit or detract from their performance on the very activity about which they are anxious. Students should also come to realize that the instructor could have presented the instructions in a way that did not create stress (e.g., avoiding use of the word "exam" or "test"). The instructor could also have repeated the message, perhaps using different words. Opening up feedback channels, or two-way communication, and really encouraging students to ask questions, might also have reduced problems. Being an effective listener can include initiating feedback when appropriate.

In part 3, the instructor should expect students to identify some of the ideas presented in the subsequent table.

In part 4, every student should be able to (and be encouraged to) find some aspect(s) of their listening that can be improved.

After the students make suggestions on how to become better listeners (in part 5), the instructor should discuss the ideas presented in the subsequent table.

CONCLUSION

This exercise has been effective in stimulating student interest and involvement. It points out to the student the importance of communication in business, and emphasizes the fact that communication involves receiving as well as transmitting information effectively.

There are many books and articles dealing with effective communications and listening skills; students should be encouraged to pursue the topic further.