

Listener Preferences and the Paradox of Working in Teams

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When challenging issues or problems arise, many leaders seek out the positive benefits of a joining a team rather than tackling a problem on their own. While understanding the value of working in teams, these same leaders frequently become frustrated with the time and energy required to manage differing personalities and conflicting points of view within teams. The contradictory nature of working with teams creates a paradox of both wanting and not wanting to work with others. Learning teams have high aspirations for their organization — 94 percent seek improvements in productivity, engagement and business agility, yet less than one-third achieve the results they desire. How can we do better? There are hidden dynamics that can hinder a team from functioning effectively – listening preference differences.

The Role of Listening in Teams

When teams form to solve problems, communication effectiveness provides both opportunities and challenges. If members concentrate on getting their ideas heard rather than on listening to what others have to say, team member relations deteriorate. In fact, team members who are listened to feel more valued and tend to contribute more frequently.

With an estimated fifteen million meetings taking place each morning in the United States, think about the time wasted due to ineffective listening. When information has to be repeated because one person doesn't listen, the time of all group members is wasted. In a six-person group, repeating five minutes of information wastes thirty minutes of time. When group members listen effectively, they decrease time waste and may even limit the number of meetings necessary.

Listening in a group involves more than just hearing. Listening is hard work and requires effort to do well. In the most successful groups, everyone takes mutual responsibility for communication and listening. Our role as a listener is to plan strategies to help us listen better and as speakers it is to plan strategies to help others listen more effectively.

The Power of the Listener: To Listen or Not

Most emphasis is placed on the role of speakers during meetings. Too often we forget that listeners are the ones who choose to listen or not. No matter how skilled, charismatic, or engaging a speaker is, the listener determines when, to whom, and how her or she listens. In actuality, listeners hold the power during small-group interactions.

Therefore, it is critical to understand the process of listening and to discover what encourages us to listen.

Listening Mistakes Occur in Groups

Group members often fail to listen effectively during group interactions because of diffusion of responsibility (Barker, Johnson, & Watson 1991). With diffusion of responsibility, accountability for the success of the group is shared among members. In small groups, members usually spend far more time listening than speaking. In a three-person group in which all members participate equally, for example, each person listens approximately two thirds of the time. In a ten-person group, each person listens 90 percent of the time. The social pressure to listen is not as strong in a group as it is in a dyad. During one-on-one conversation, poor listening can be detected easily. During meeting is it difficult to attend to all group members at once and ineffective listening goes unnoticed.

After ideas are shared, listeners judge what they've heard and determine whether or not to believe the message, agree with speaker, and/or retain the information. Listeners often value the relative importance of the individual parts of a message and the message as a whole differently. These assessments are based on the listener's perception of what the speaker believes is important as well as on the listener's values. When the group leader says, "Please get your comments to me as soon as possible," individuals react variously. Some respond immediately, others in a few days, and some may never respond.

Groups can be used to help ensure better decision making, but at the same time they can cause decision making to get bogged down. In addition, the nature of group processes both encourages and discourages mistakes. When energy is high and group members work to ensure quality decisions, groups are very helpful. However, when listening energy is depleted, many groups make poor decisions without being aware of the possible outcomes. Finally, different characteristics among listeners can serve both destructive and/or productive purposes. The next section examines differences among listeners.

How People Listen in Groups: Listener Preferences

Most of us find it easier to listen to some people than to others. Based on our preferences, we unknowingly make judgments and decisions that affect communication in groups. Some people prefer to hear from only credible sources, others want to be entertained, some focus on the others' needs, and still others want a speaker to get to the point as quickly as possible. Our listening preferences develop over a lifetime as a function of socialization and reinforcement. Understanding listener preferences patterns in the general population can help us identify people's preference traits. Based

on research results using the *Listener Preference Profile* (Watson, Barker & Weaver 1992; Weaver Watson & Barker 1993), approximately 40 percent of the general population uses a single-listener preference. Of this percentage, *people- and action-oriented preferences are the most prevalent*. About 25 percent of the general population has two listening preferences, and about 15 percent of the general population has three or four preferences. About 20 percent of the general population failed to indicate any listening preference.

Effective Communicators Adapt to Different Situations

Because of our preferences, we get in the habit of listening in only one way in most listening situation. While we don't usually think about changing the way we listen, listening would be more efficient and enjoyable if we did. Wouldn't it be more appropriate to *modify* our listening rather than expect others to adapt to us? Think of different listening needs when serving as a juror, chatting with a group of friends, planning a family vacation or participating in a natural work team. Some require critical- and others social-listening skills. We need to learn to adjust our preferences to meet the needs of unique listening situations.

Listener Preferences: Pros and Cons

As you read the following descriptions, keep in mind the reminders we previously described and remember that there is no "best" listener preference. Each preference is described using both positive and negative characteristics to help provide a balanced perspective. As you read about characteristics for each preference, check the ones that remind you of yourself.

People-Oriented. People-oriented listeners are most concerned with how listening influences their relationship with others. They listen to understand the emotional states of others, giving their undivided attention. While listening, they usually remain nonjudgmental. In addition, when confronted with personal problems or crises, others seek out people-oriented listeners. Open to most types of people, people-oriented listeners can get overly involved with others and waste a lot of time. At times, people-oriented listeners lose their objectivity when listening.

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| Positive: | Caring and concerned about others
Nonjudgmental
Provide clear verbal and nonverbal feedback signals
Identify emotional states and moods in others quickly
Interested in building relationship |
| Negative: | Over-involved with feeling of others
Avoid seeing faults in others
Internalize/adopt emotional states of others |

Intrusive to others
Overly expressive when giving feedback

Action-Oriented. Action-oriented listeners concentrate intensely on the task at hand. They often prefer to listen in outline form and find it difficult to listen to people who are disorganized. The action-oriented listener is an appreciated member of most meetings because he or she encourages others to stay on task and to present information in a logical, organized way. At times, because they appear to be task-driven, action-oriented listeners come across as impatient and not very interested in building relationships with others.

- Positive: Get to the heart of the matter quickly
- Give clear feedback concerning expectations
- Concentrate energy on understanding task at hand
- Help others focus on what is important
- Encourages others to be organized and concise
- Negative: Tend to be impatient with rambling speakers
- Jump ahead and move to conclusions quickly
- Get distracted easily by unorganized speakers
- Ask blunt questions of others
- Appear overly critical

Content-oriented. Content-oriented listeners tend to carefully evaluate everything they hear. At times it appears that they are looking under a microscope to dissect information. They refer to listen to experts and highly credible sources. Content-oriented listeners have the ability to see all sides of issues and enjoy listening to challenging or complex information. At times, this listening style may hinder spontaneous discussions and creative exchanges of ideas. Content-oriented listening is often preferred by people with technical degrees or interest.

- Positive: Value technical information
- Test for clarity and understanding
- Encourage others to provide support for their ideas
- Welcome complex and challenging information
- Look at all sides of an issue
- Negative: Overly detail-oriented
- May intimidate others by asking pointed questions
- Minimize the value of nontechnical information
- Discount information from unknowns
- Take a long time to make decisions

Time-oriented. Time-oriented listeners are clock-watchers and encourage others to be the same. They are direct in how they value time and often are impatient with others who waste it. While they encourage efficiency and time management, their self-imposed time constraints stifle discussion. Time-oriented listeners must be careful not to interrupt or discount relationships with others. Time-oriented listening is usually valued during meetings. However, these same traits may be troublesome at home or with friends.

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| Positive: | Manage and save time effectively
Let others know listening time requirements
Set time guidelines for meeting and conversations
Discourage wordy speakers from wasting time
Give cues to others when time is being wasted |
| Negative: | Tend to be impatient with time wasters
Interrupt others, putting a strain on relationships
Let time affect their ability to concentrate
Rush speaker by frequently looking at watches/clocks
Limit others' contributions by imposing time pressure |

Now that you have learned about the four listening preferences and their positive and negative traits, decide what you consider to be your strongest preference. During meetings it is best to work to keep positive listener characteristics in the forefront. By understanding when and what factors are likely to call out certain preferences, you are in a better position to have a choice.

Suggestions for working with People with Differing Preferences

The best listeners are aware of their own preferences as well as the preferences of others in the group. Since good listeners know how to read listener preferences, it is important to adapt messages to the preferences of the group members. Those who adapt how they listen to other people's preferences gain the advantage of being heard. Just as we tend to get in the habit of listening in only one way, we also tend to speak with others in habitual ways. To make the most of interactions, think of the best ways to package information so others will listen. Adapting to others' preferences in different listening situations takes practice. Our listening preference habits in particular environments can be deeply entrenched. For example, Albert, an action-oriented listener, has been working on developing his people-oriented listener preference traits. He decided to demonstrate more of the people-oriented traits in a meeting with his peers. At the beginning of the meeting, he made sure to be more relational by asking more personal questions, showing interest in other people's ideas, and attending to nonverbal cues such as vocal inflections and facial expressions. Toward the middle of

the meeting, Sarah, an advertising competitor, mentioned her success in getting two new clients, one of which was Albert's. Discovering this information created stress in Albert. Immediately his body orientation and way of relating with the group went back to his action-oriented preference. Forgetting his people-oriented goals, he started interrupting others and began ignoring group member contributions and nonverbal cues.

Adapting to Listener Preferences in Groups

When three or more people gather, they are likely to have multiple and/or different listener preferences. To work effectively, try to get a feel for other group members. If possible, think about the make-up of your listeners in advance. Your goal is to decide how you can best help you listeners "stay tuned" to what you have to say. You may not have to make group assessments on the spot. Consider getting to meetings early. Mingle with others to get an impression about what listening strategies will work best. Based on the reactions, you can determine whether to use a more people-, action-, content-, or time-oriented delivery.

You might assume your goal should be to keep each person listening to you all of the time. While this might be ideal, it is unrealistic to expect to make every listener happy throughout a meeting. As a speaker, often the best you can do is to decide who your target listeners are.

While preparing a presentation for a club meeting, for example, Freida analyzed her listeners carefully. She knew seven people would attend. The president and primary decision maker, Tom, is a contact- and time-oriented listener. Two committee chairs and voting members, Carmen and Ralph, are almost exclusively action-oriented listeners. Gina, a people-oriented listener, is the secretary and frequently influences Tom's decisions. The other two members often avoid listening situations but are required to attend and vote. Delivering a generic presentation would hurt Freida's cause. In this case, she decides to focus on Tom and Gina as her listeners. She has fifteen minutes but plans to have a ten-minute talk with handouts and visual aids. For Tom, she organizes her thoughts carefully, quotes credible sources, and supports each point with facts. For Gina, she uses the names of group member, personal examples Gina is familiar with, and nonverbally gives her special attention by smiling and looking in her direction frequently. She is energetic and ask for involvement whenever possible.

Balancing Strengths and Weaknesses of Differing Listener Preferences

At times, you may have the opportunity to form a group of your own. If you do, what ration of people who have listener preferences should you include? Most leaders unknowingly choose people with listener preferences similar to their own. Unfortunately, when group members listen in the same ways, problems occur.

Having various listener preference types in a group can be frustrating but can also serve to enhance creativity and group decision making. In fact, groups with heterogeneous listener-preference and personality compositions are likely to perform most effectively (Barker, Whalers & Kibler 1991: Shaw 1981). When you're asked to form a group, then consider your goals and objectives; these, along with an understanding of listener preferences, should help you design a group to maximize your efforts.

Conclusion: The Paradox of Group Member Listener Preferences

This paper has described listening, listener preferences, and suggestions for improving listening in groups. When we leave college, we have more associations with groups. In Business, groups or teams are the fundamental unit of work. Schools insist on individual effort much of the time. Businesses by contrast, require team effort and the ability to read, shape, and listen in group environments. Paradoxically, just as we may seek to join or avoid participating in groups and teams, at different times, we may seek to listen or avoid listening. Even so, group decisions benefit from an awareness of listener preferences and use of effective listening skills.