



THE BUSINESS OF LISTENING

How building a culture of listening can help organizations develop more productive, effective workforces.



Most SMBs consider communication training a core priority, and with good reason. According to SIS International Research,¹ 70 percent of small to mid-size businesses **claim that ineffective communication is their primary problem**. SIS also reports that a business with 100 employees spends an average downtime of 17.5 hours per week clarifying communication. This translates to an annual cost of \$524,569.²

These statistics highlight why many SMBs are spending significant resources on communications training. From customer facing messaging to internal team communication, companies are consistently investing in communication improvements. Despite this investment, companies continue to lose money³ due to miscommunication.

The Science of Listening

One possible explanation is that companies are so focused on how thoughts and ideas are being said that they forget how their messages are being heard. Remember, talking is only 50 percent of the communication equation – the other 50 percent is **listening**. But despite the importance of listening to effective communication, it's an area of communications training that companies consistently under develop, if not overlook entirely. In fact, while listening is the communication skill we use most,⁴ it is also the skill we are traditionally taught the least about. This gap in training underscores one reason that business communications training so often falls short of producing lasting, measurable outcomes: it only supports 50% of the communication equation.

It turns out that, because each human brain is different, no two people hear the same thing exactly the same way. Different people habitually listen to and for different types of information. While most of us recognize that every individual speaks and expresses his or herself in a way that is totally unique to them, researchers have concluded that this same rule applies to listening. In fact, cognitive researchers are now beginning to understand that each individual interprets what they hear based on habits learned over a lifetime. As such, there are no "good" or "bad" listeners, just different ways that listeners interpret, value and categorize what they hear.

**95% of people think that the primary responsibility for effective communication rests with the speaker, but speaking is only 1/2 of the communication equation:
Speaking + Listening = Communication⁵**

The most thorough listening assessments measure both the content and relational components of an individual's listening to determine his or her unique listening profile through a series of questions that evaluate:

1. While listening, does the individual tend to filter the information heard:
 - a. Inwardly – how it relates to them personally, or
 - b. Outwardly – how it relates to others
2. Is the individual more inclined to listen for:
 - a. Facts and details, or
 - b. The big picture and conceptual ideas

This method of evaluation shifts the focus away from the notion of good/bad listening and toward an individual's listening preference. This kind of understanding can be helpful when considering the listening skills needed in a specific role. For example, the listening that supports a client-facing customer service position is very different from that of a technical engineer or accountant.

The results of a well-designed listening assessment can show how an individual listens, including what they pay attention to, what they're prone to ignore and what behavior they're likely to demonstrate as a result of their listening preferences. This new knowledge opens the door to understanding and valuing the unique perspectives that each individual brings to the table and then ensures their listening is appropriate to their circumstances.

Because listening is a changeable habit, assessments can also lay the groundwork for companies to anticipate the effect that their employees' listening habits might have on workplace interactions or customers and proactively coach them toward any changes that might suggest more effective communication.

Listening, Value and Cultural Transformations

As modern work settings begin to recognize Listening Intelligence as a crucial factor in successful management, team cohesion, and even bottom-line results, company cultures are being changed for the better.

One reason an investment in listening can be so powerful to cultural transformation is because it taps into the intrinsic motivation of employees. Research shows that when a company invests in "high commitment" human resources efforts, such as employee development and skills training, employees believe that the organization values them. This, in turn, increases their willingness to work hard, and it also may enhance the organization's **productivity**⁶ – creating a relationship where employees work harder because they have a greater sense of job satisfaction⁷ and commitment to the organization.⁸

Core to all of this is the notion of value. Feeling valued by others is one of the most central needs we have as human beings. This basic human need extends beyond personal relationship into the workplace. Employees want to feel valued⁹ and, when they do, they exhibit better job performance and loyalty. One of the most effective ways to demonstrate employee value is to marry the benefits of "high commitment" HR with the inherent value associated with listening.

What is Listening Intelligence?

Different people habitually listen to and for different types of information. Once we become aware of our habitual filters, we can examine our blind spots and start listening for and recognizing an expanded range of input. Additionally, we can begin to speak into other people's listening preferences to enhance the chance that we are fully understood in our communication. This greater awareness and ability is what we call Listening Intelligence.

65% of disengaged employees cite "not feeling valued" as a core reason for their dissatisfaction.

The Listening Intelligence Opportunity

As the primary interface for training and development within most companies, HR directors have the unique opportunity to create a culture of listening within their own organizations, which promotes all of the positive benefits outlined above.

By utilizing an advanced listening assessment and subsequent coaching, HR professionals can:

- Develop more targeted, customized training programs and coaching techniques based specifically on the listening preferences of their workforce, and
- Better address listening-based communication issues and increase collaboration and productivity.

Conclusion

Companies that communicate effectively on average experience lower turnover,¹⁰ higher levels of productivity¹¹ and less financial loss.¹² But as they focus on improving communications, companies must expand their view to include listening as a core function of communication. Not only will Listening Intelligence and training give employees a sense that their company values their contributions and wellbeing, but it will foster a positive cultural shift toward greater collaboration and productivity. HR can take the lead in this process, helping usher in a new emphasis on teamwork, culture and effective communication.

This white paper was sponsored by BRIO Enterprise, developers of the ECHO Listening Profile. For more information about BRIO or the ECHO Listening Profile, visit our website at EchoListening.com.

Guide for Building a Listening Culture

Step 1: Walk the Walk - HR professionals should first become aware of their own listening preferences so they have first-hand experiential understanding. This approach promotes organizational buy-in and provides the practitioner with deep foundational knowledge that enables them to recognize the listening habits of their workforce, and identify communication patterns that need to shift for the benefit of the company.

Step 2: Limited Deployment - Instead of trying to implement Listening Intelligence company-wide, it is best to begin with one particular group. This could be the leadership team (to further demonstrate buy-in) or a particular department that would most benefit from better communication. Assessing listening preferences and comparing them in such groupings will shed light on the many different ways that listening preferences have been subtly influencing group dynamics and provide the HR professional with real-world experience to bring to the workforce at large.

Step 3: Transformational Training - Once Listening Intelligence has been more widely deployed in an organization, HR professionals can design and develop training content that speaks into the varied listening preferences of their audience, making it more engaging and effective.

Citations

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