



# Listening in Groups

## CHAPTER OUTLINE

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 THE CHALLENGE OF LISTENING IN GROUPS

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The ability to balance effective speaking with appropriate listening affects every facet of group life. When communication researchers ask experienced personnel managers to identify the communication skills that they consider important for employees working in group settings, effective listening often tops the list of critical communication skills.<sup>1</sup> Bonnie Jacobson, author of *If Only You Would Listen*, believes that “the main skill required to build an effective work team is keeping your mouth shut and giving your team members the chance to give you their point of view.”<sup>2</sup>

Listening is more difficult in groups than it is in almost any other communication situation. There are multiple speakers, multiple perspectives, and multiple goals. You are expected to listen and, at the same time, to be able to respond, on the spot, to unexpected news, unusual ideas, and conflicting points of view. Instead of concentrating on what *one* person says and does, you must pay attention to *everyone's* reactions. In a group discussion, a short daydream, a side conversation, or thoughts about a personal problem can result in missed information, misinterpreted instructions, or inappropriate reactions. Complicating matters is the fact that the social pressure to listen is not as strong in groups as it would be in a two-person conversation. If one group member doesn't listen or respond, others usually will. Thus, group members may be poor listeners because they count on others to listen for them.<sup>3</sup>

Communication consultant Harry Chambers put it this way: “The challenge of effective listening is universal. It is the least practiced skill in America today; poor listening skills influence our professional lives and also play a major role in our personal relationships.”<sup>4</sup> But unlike the case with many other influences, *you* control whether, when, and how you listen.

### The Nature of Listening

**Listening** is the ability to understand, analyze, respect, and appropriately respond to the meaning of another person's spoken and nonverbal messages. At first, listening may appear to be as easy and natural as breathing. In fact, nothing could be farther from the truth. Although most of us can *hear*, we often fail to *listen* to what others say. Hearing requires only physical ability; listening requires complex thinking ability. People who are hearing-impaired may be better listeners than those who can hear the faintest sound.

Listening is our number one communication activity. A study of college students found that listening occupies more than half of their communicating time.<sup>5</sup> In the corporate world, studies estimate that managers spend the equivalent of two out of every five working days in meetings and may devote over 60 percent of their workday to listening to others.<sup>6</sup> Chief executives may spend as much as 75 percent of their communicating time listening.<sup>7</sup> This means that businesses

What nonverbal behaviors do these group members exhibit that suggest that they are listening effectively?  
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Photo Edit)



are spending millions of dollars to pay people to listen, “and simply assuming (or hoping) that it’s money well spent.”<sup>8</sup> Although percentages vary from study to study, Figure 6.1 shows how most of us divide up our daily communicating time.

Yet, despite the enormous amount of time we spend listening, most of us are not very good listeners. In fact, we tend to think we’re better listeners than we really are. Several studies report that immediately after listening to a short talk, most of us cannot accurately report 50 percent of what was said. Without training, we listen at only 25 percent efficiency.<sup>9</sup> And, of that 25 percent, most of what we remember is a distorted or inaccurate recollection.<sup>10</sup>

In surveys of business leaders, listening is often cited as the communication skill that is most lacking in new employees. When asked about the percentage of high school graduates with good listening skills, the answer was only 19 percent.<sup>11</sup> A study of Fortune 500 company training managers concludes that “poor listening performance is ranked as a serious problem during meetings, performance appraisals, and superior-subordinate communication.”<sup>12</sup>

**FIGURE 6.1** Time Spent Communicating

Communication Activity	Percent of Communicating Time
Listening	40–70%
Speaking	20–35%
Reading	10–20%
Writing	5–15%

## The Dialectics of Listening

Speaking and listening are two sides of a single coin, twin competencies that rely on and reflect each other. Thus, the dialectics of speaking and listening affect how members become and succeed as leaders. As you will learn in Chapter 8, “Group Leadership,” the member who speaks first and most often is more likely to emerge as the group’s leader.<sup>13</sup> The number of contributions is even more important than the quality of those contributions. On the other hand, once a person becomes a leader, listening is much more important in determining his or her success. Effective leaders engage in listening more than talking and in asking more than telling.<sup>14</sup>

The vast majority of your time in groups will be spent listening. Even during a simple half-hour meeting of five people, it is unlikely that any member will talk more than a total of ten minutes—unless that person wants to be accused of monopolizing the discussion. Unfortunately, many of us place more emphasis on the roles and responsibilities of group members who talk rather than on those

### TOOLBOX 6.1



#### You Must *Want* to Listen

Stephen R. Covey, author of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, provides a definition of *habit* that also describes effective communication. In Covey’s opinion, habits require knowledge, skills, and desire. Knowledge plays a role similar to that of methods and theories by describing *what* to do and *why* to do it. Skills represent *how* to do it. And, most important of all, you must have the desire to communicate effectively and ethically. In order to make something a habit, you have to have all three. Effective listening relies as much on your attitude (*wanting* to do it) as it does on your knowledge and skills. Covey uses the challenge of listening to illustrate the three components of an effective habit:

1. *Knowledge*. I may be ineffective in my interaction with my work associates, my spouse, or my children because I constantly tell them what I think, but I never really listen to them. Unless I search out correct principles of human interaction, I may not even *know* I need to listen.

2. *Skills*. Even if I do know that to interact effectively with others, I really need to listen to them, I may not have the skill. I may not know how to really listen deeply to another human being.
3. *Desire*. But knowing I need to listen and knowing how to listen is not enough. Unless I *want* to listen, unless I have the desire, it won’t be a habit in my life.<sup>1</sup>

The best listeners are motivated to listen; they let go of what’s on their mind long enough to hear what’s on the other person’s mind. An appropriate listening attitude does not mean that you know exactly what another person thinks or feels. Instead, it is a genuine willingness and openness to listen and discover.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Stephen R. Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989), p. 48.

<sup>2</sup> Michael P. Nichols, *The Lost Art of Listening* (New York: Guilford, 1995), pp. 42, 43.

who listen. “This unbalanced emphasis, especially as it actually affects persons in real discussions, could be an important cause of the problems that speaking is supposed to cure.”<sup>15</sup> In other words, if you are concerned only about what you are going to say in a group discussion, you can’t give your full attention to what is being said by others.

## TYPES OF LISTENING

Effective group members use different types of listening to advance group goals. For example, if your group is discussing a controversial issue or proposal, you may engage analytical listening skills. However, if you’re celebrating a group member’s birthday, you may put aside analytical listening to enjoy the festivities. Researchers have identified several types of listening, each of which calls upon unique listening skills.

### Discriminative Listening

In Chapter 3, “Group Member Diversity,” we define discrimination as the way in which people act out and express prejudice. The meaning of discriminative listening is very different. In fact, the first definition of *discriminate* in *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* is “to make a clear distinction; distinguish,” as in “Can you discriminate among the different sounds of orchestra instruments?”<sup>16</sup> Thus, **discriminative listening** is the ability “to distinguish auditory and/or visual stimuli.”<sup>17</sup>

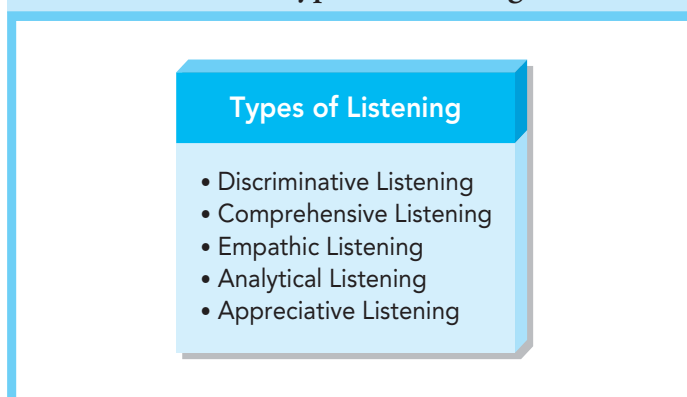
Discriminative listening answers the question: Do I hear accurately? At its simplest level, it involves the ability to make clear, aural distinctions among the sounds and words in a language. Discriminative listeners also notice nonverbal behavior, such as a smile, a groan, or the shrug of a shoulder.

Discriminative listening comes first among the five types of listening because it forms the basis for the other four. If you cannot hear the difference between an on-key and an off-key note, you may not be able to listen appreciatively to a singer. If you cannot hear or recognize the distress in a person’s voice, you may not be able to listen empathically.

### Comprehensive Listening

Comprehensive listening in a group discussion requires an answer to the following question: What do group members mean? **Comprehensive listening** focuses on accurately understanding the meaning of group

FIGURE 6.2 Types of Listening



members' spoken and nonverbal messages. After all, if you don't understand what a person means, you can't be expected to respond in a reasonable way. For example, an after-class discussion might begin as follows: "Let's have a party on the last day of class," says Geneva. A comprehensive listener may wonder whether Geneva means that (1) we should have a party instead of an exam, (2) we should ask the instructor whether we can have a party, or (3) we should have a party after class. Misinterpreting the meaning of Geneva's comment could result in an inappropriate response.

Answering the following questions can help you understand several criteria for effective comprehensive listening:

- How well do you understand the words spoken by other group members?
- How well can you accurately identify the main ideas and the arguments and evidence used to support a group member's claim?
- How well does the message confirm what you already know or believe?

## Empathic Listening

Empathic listening in a group discussion requires an answer to the following question: How do group members feel? **Empathic listening** goes beyond comprehending what a person means; it focuses on understanding and identifying with a member's situation, feelings, or motives. Can you see the situation through the other member's eyes? Put another way, how would you feel in a similar situation?

By not listening for feelings, you may overlook the most important part of a message. Even if you understand every word a person says, you can still miss the anger, enthusiasm, or frustration in a group member's voice. An empathic listener doesn't have to agree with other group members or feel the same way as they do, but the person does have to try to understand the type and intensity of feelings that those members are experiencing. For example, the after-class discussion might continue as follows: "A class party would be a waste of time," exclaims Kim. An empathic listener may wonder whether Kim means that (1) she has more important things to do during exam week, (2) she doesn't think the class or the instructor deserves a party, or (3) she doesn't want to be obligated to attend such a party.

Empathic listening is difficult, but it also is "the pinnacle of listening" because it demands "fine skill and exquisite tuning into another's mood and feeling."<sup>18</sup> You can improve your empathic listening ability by using one or more of the following strategies:

- Be conscious of your feedback. Are you showing interest and concern? Do your vocal tone, gestures, and posture communicate friendliness and trust?
- Avoid being judgmental.
- Focus on the speaker, not on yourself. Avoid talking about your own experiences and feelings.<sup>19</sup>

## Analytical Listening

Analytical listening asks this question: What's my opinion? **Analytical listening** focuses on evaluating and forming appropriate opinions about the content of a message. It requires critical thinking and careful analysis. Once you comprehend and empathize with group members, you may ask yourself whether you think they are right or wrong, logical or illogical. Good analytical listeners understand why they accept or reject another member's ideas and suggestions.

Russell makes the following proposal: "Suppose we chip in and give Professor Hawkins a gift at the party?" An analytical listener might think that (1) the instructor could misinterpret the gift, (2) some class members won't want to make a contribution, or (3) there isn't enough time to collect money and buy an appropriate gift.

Recognizing that another group member is trying to persuade—rather than merely inform—is the first step in improving your analytical listening. The following strategies can help you improve this critical listening skill:<sup>20</sup>

- Learn to recognize persuasive strategies. Is the group member appealing to your emotions and/or to your critical thinking ability?
- Evaluate persuasive arguments and evidence. Are conclusions based on relevant and reliable evidence?
- Recognize any changes in your beliefs or attitudes. Have you changed your original position? Why or why not?

### TOOLBOX 6.2



#### Critical Thinking and Listening

Analytical listening requires critical thinking. Some people, however, mistakenly believe that critical thinking means the same thing as criticizing. Definitions of the word *criticize* include "to find fault with" and "to judge the merits and faults of."<sup>1</sup> The word *critical* is a broader, less fault-finding term. *Critical* comes from the Greek word for critic (*kritikos*), which means to question, to make sense of, or to be able to analyze.<sup>2</sup>

Critical thinking is a way of analyzing what you read, see, hear, and experience in order to make intelligent decisions about what to believe or do. It is not the same as tearing down someone's

argument or criticizing a person. Critical thinkers must identify what they are being asked to believe or accept and evaluate the evidence and reasoning given in support of the belief. Good critical thinkers develop and defend a position on an issue, ask probing questions, are open-minded, and draw reasonable conclusions.<sup>3</sup> And they are skilled analytical listeners.

<sup>1</sup> *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), p. 432.

<sup>2</sup> John Chaffee, *Thinking Critically*, 7th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), p. 51.

<sup>3</sup> Robert H. Ennis, "Critical Thinking Assessment," *Theory into Practice*, 32 (1993), p. 180.

## Appreciative Listening

Appreciative listening answers this question: Do I like or value what another member has said? **Appreciative listening** focuses on the *way* group members think and speak—the way they choose and use words; their ability to inject appropriate humor, argue persuasively, or demonstrate understanding. For example, if a group is struggling with the wording of a recommendation, appreciative listening can help identify the statement that best captures and eloquently expresses the central idea and spirit of the proposal. When we are pleased to hear a member find the right words to calm a frustrated member or energize an apathetic group, we are listening appreciatively. Appreciative listening skills help us enjoy and acknowledge good talk in groups.

“Well,” suggests Paul, “why not buy a thank-you card, ask class members to sign it, and present it to Mr. Hawkins at the party?” An appreciative listener might think, (1) Paul always comes up with the best ideas, (2) a well-selected card may be able to express our appreciation better than we could, or (3) I will thank Paul for making a suggestion that doesn’t obligate anyone to contribute to or attend the party.

Florence Wolff and Nadine Marsnik note that “listeners often devote a great part of their day to appreciative listening, but often without a conscious plan.”<sup>21</sup> We listen appreciatively to a favorite radio station or CD. We appreciate a spell-binding or funny story. But when we are asked to listen to something new or challenging, we’re often hard-pressed to listen appreciatively. Here are some suggestions for improving this type of listening:

- Set aside time for appreciative listening. For example, don’t listen to a friend’s story or problem while scanning a magazine.
- Welcome opportunities to hear something new or challenging.
- Prepare to listen appreciatively. For example, read about or discuss a play or composer before going to the theater or concert hall.

## GROUP ROLES AND LISTENING

No one is a perfect listener. Certainly, it is unreasonable to expect that every group member will be an ideal discriminative, comprehensive, empathic, analytical, and appreciative listener. Fortunately, the group situation provides a way of balancing the strengths and weaknesses of listeners within a group. One way to assess and improve the listening behavior of a group as a whole is to understand the relationship between listening abilities and member roles.

### Task Roles and Listening

Members who assume important task roles are often good comprehensive and analytical listeners. Clarifier-summarizers use comprehensive listening to accurately



reexplain the ideas of others and summarize group conclusions. Evaluator-critics are usually effective analytical listeners who assess ideas and suggestions as well as the validity of arguments. An effective recorder-secretary, however, must be a comprehensive rather than an analytical listener when taking minutes. If several group members effectively assume most of the traditional task roles, the group, as a whole, is likely to be good at comprehensive and analytical listening.

## Maintenance Roles and Listening

Maintenance roles affect how well a group gets along. They focus on building relationships and maintaining a friendly atmosphere. Members who assume important maintenance roles are often good empathic and appreciative listeners. Encourager-supporters and observer-interpreters use comprehensive, empathic, and appreciative listening to explain both how others feel and what others are trying to

### ETHICAL GROUPS



## Self-Centered Roles and Listening

As you know from Chapter 2, “Group Development,” self-centered roles occur when members put their own needs ahead of the group’s goal and other members’ needs. Although members who assume self-centered roles may be excellent comprehensive and analytical listeners, their goals may be unethical. For example, aggressors and dominators may be analytical listeners who eagerly expose the weaknesses in other members’ comments in order to get their own way. Blockers may be good listeners who purposely ignore what they hear or poor listeners who are incapable of comprehending or appreciating the comments of others. Recognition seekers, confessors, and special interest pleaders may be so preoccupied with their own needs that they are unable to listen to anyone else in the group.

In addition to the listening styles that reflect self-centered roles, unethical listening can take other forms that serve self-centered goals, as illustrated in the following situations:

- Listening behavior that shows no respect for the opinions of others
- Listening for the purpose of criticizing the ideas of others
- Listening for personal information that can be used to humiliate or criticize others
- Faking listening in order to curry favor with high-status members

Ethical listening is as important as ethical speaking, particularly because we spend most of our communicating time listening. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, lamented that “many hasty, immature, superficial, and misleading judgments are expressed every day . . . without any verification.”<sup>1</sup> Ethical listeners have a responsibility to understand, analyze, and respond appropriately to messages that have personal, professional, political, and moral consequences for themselves and others.

<sup>1</sup> Alexander Solzhenitsyn, “A World Split Apart,” *Vital Speeches*, September 1978, p. 680.

say. Harmonizers and tension releasers are often empathic listeners who understand when and how to resolve conflicts, mediate differences, and relax the group. If several group members effectively assume most maintenance roles, the group, as a whole, is likely to be good at empathic and appreciative listening.

## Leadership Functions and Listening

Researchers have discovered strong links between listening skills and successful leadership.<sup>22</sup> Good leaders are good listeners. They know when to use comprehensive, empathic, analytical, and appreciative listening. Effective leaders are also proactive listeners. They don't wait to clear up misunderstandings; they try to make sure that every group member comprehends what is being said. They don't wait for misunderstandings to escalate into arguments; they intervene at the slightest hint of hostility. Proactive leaders try to find out what members think and feel by asking them rather than by guessing what is on their minds.

Leaders who are good listeners do not fake attention, pretend to comprehend, or ignore other group members. Instead, they work as hard as they can to better understand what members are saying and how their comments affect the group and its goals. In studying the characteristics of effective groups and their leaders, Larson and LaFasto share the comments of a successful aerospace leader: "The worst failing is a team leader who's a nonlistener. A guy who doesn't listen to his people—and that doesn't mean listening to them and doing whatever the hell he wants to do—can make a lot of mistakes."<sup>23</sup>



## IMPROVING LISTENING

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Two major listening principles balance the need for comprehensive and analytical listening with the need for empathic and appreciative listening. The two principles are (1) use your extra thought speed, and (2) apply the golden listening rule. Once these principles are understood and employed as overriding listening standards, group members can begin to work on specific listening methods and skills.

### Use Your Extra Thought Speed

Most people talk at about 125 to 150 words per minute. According to Ralph Nichols, there is good evidence that if thought were measured in words per minute, most of us could think at three to four times the rate at which we speak.<sup>24</sup> Thus, we have about four hundred extra words of spare thinking time during every minute a person is talking to us.

**Thought speed** is the speed (in words per minute) at which most people can think compared to the speed at which others can speak. Ralph Nichols asks the obvious question: "What do we do with our excess thinking time while someone is speaking?"<sup>25</sup> Poor listeners use their extra thought speed to daydream, engage

in side conversations, take unnecessary notes, or plan how to confront the speaker. Good listeners use their extra thought speed productively. They . . .

- identify and summarize main ideas.
- pay extra attention to nonverbal behavior.
- analyze arguments.
- assess the relevance of a speaker's comments.

Effective group members don't waste their extra thought speed—they use it to enhance comprehensive and analytical listening.

### Apply the Golden Listening Rule

The **golden listening rule** is easy to remember: Listen to others as you would have them listen to you. Unfortunately, this rule can be difficult to follow. It asks you to suspend your own needs in order to listen to someone else's. Michael P. Nichols counsels, "Let go of what's on your mind long enough to hear what's on the other person's."<sup>26</sup>

The golden listening rule is not so much a "rule" as it is a positive listening attitude. If you aren't motivated to listen, you won't listen. If you aren't willing to stop talking, you won't listen. The following six positive listening attitudes have six negative counterparts:<sup>27</sup>

#### Positive Listening Attitudes

Interested  
Responsible  
Other-oriented  
Patient  
Equal  
Open-minded

#### Negative Listening Attitudes

Uninterested  
Irresponsible  
Self-centered  
Impatient  
Superior  
Close-minded

The key to playing by the golden listening rule is to understand that both "players" must have a positive listening attitude.

### Listening Strategies

Although using your extra thought speed and applying the golden listening rule are critical listening goals, how to achieve them may not be obvious. The five strategies listed in Figure 6.3 can improve your listening ability and help you apply the two basic principles of effective listening.

**Listen for Big Ideas.** Good listeners use their extra thought speed to identify a speaker's overall purpose. Poor listeners tend to listen for and remember isolated facts rather than identifying big ideas. Sometimes listening for big ideas can be very difficult when the fault lies with the speaker. For example, listeners may lose track

FIGURE 6.3 Listening Strategies



and drift off when listening to a speaker whose message lacks relevant content and a clear structure or whose voice lacks expressiveness. In a small-group setting, good listeners who sense such problems may interrupt a speaker and politely ask, “Could you help me out here and summarize your point in a couple of sentences?” Although it is tempting to blame poor speakers when you can’t comprehend a person’s message, good listeners try to cut through irrelevant facts and opinions in order to identify the most important ideas.

**Overcome Distractions.** Distractions can take many forms in a group discussion.<sup>28</sup> Loud and annoying noises, uncomfortable room temperature and seating, frequent interruptions, or distracting décor and outside activities are environmental distractions. Distractions can also be caused by members, such as someone talking too softly, too rapidly, or too slowly; someone speaking in a monotone or with an unfamiliar accent; or someone having unusual mannerisms or appearance. It is difficult to listen when someone is fidgeting, doodling, tapping a pencil, or openly reading or writing something unrelated to the discussion.

When a distraction is environmental, you can get up and shut the door, open the window, or turn on more lights. When another member’s behavior is distracting, you can try to minimize or stop the disruption. If members speak too softly, have side conversations, or use visual aids that are too small, a conscientious listener will ask a member to speak up, request that side conversations be postponed, or move closer to a visual aid.

**“Listen” to Nonverbal Behavior.** Speakers don’t always put everything that’s important to them into words. Very often you can understand a speaker’s meaning by observing his or her nonverbal behavior. A change in vocal tone or volume may be another way of saying, “Listen up—this is very important.” A person’s sustained eye contact may be a way of saying, “I’m talking to you!” Facial expressions can reveal whether a thought is painful, joyous, exciting, serious, or boring. Even gestures can be used to express a level of excitement that words cannot convey.

It is, however, easy to misinterpret nonverbal behavior. Effective listeners verbally confirm their interpretation of someone’s nonverbal communication. A question as simple as “Do your nods indicate a *yes* vote?” can ensure that everyone is on the same nonverbal wavelength. If, as nonverbal research indicates, more than half of a speaker’s meaning is conveyed nonverbally,<sup>29</sup> we are missing a lot of important information if we fail to “listen” to nonverbal behavior. Even Freud suggested that “he that has eyes to see and ears to hear may convince himself that no mortal can keep a secret. If his lips are silent, he chatters with his fingertips;

betrayal oozes out of him at every pore.”<sup>30</sup> No wonder it is difficult for most people to conceal what they mean and feel in a face-to-face group discussion.

Correctly interpreting nonverbal responses can tell you as much as or more than spoken words. At the same time, the nonverbal reactions of listeners (head nods, smiles, frowns, eye contact, and gestures) can help you adjust what you say when you are speaking. Even the nonverbal setting of a group discussion can communicate a wealth of meaning about the status, power, and respect given to speakers and listeners.

**Listen Before You Leap.** One of the most often quoted pieces of listening advice coming from Ralph Nichols’s writings is, “We must always withhold evaluation until our comprehension is complete.”<sup>31</sup> This phrase counsels listeners to make sure that they understand a speaker before they respond.

When we become angry, friends may sometimes tell us to “count to ten” before reacting. This is also good advice when we listen. Counting to ten, however, implies more than withholding evaluation until comprehension is complete. You may comprehend a speaker perfectly, but be infuriated or offended by what you hear. If an insensitive leader asks that “one of you girls take minutes,” it may take a count to twenty to collect your thoughts before you can respond to this sexist

## TOOLBOX 6.3



### Listening in High-Context Cultures

In Chapter 3, “Group Member Diversity,” we explore the high-context–low-context dialectic and note that someone from a high-context culture goes well beyond a person’s words to interpret meaning. High-context communicators also pay close attention to nonverbal cues when they listen. Interestingly, the Chinese symbol for listening includes characters for eyes, ears, and heart.

For the Chinese “it is impossible to listen . . . without using the eyes because you need to look for nonverbal communication. You certainly must listen with ears” because Chinese is a tonal language in which intonation determines meaning. “Finally, you listen with your heart because” you must sense the “emotional undertones expressed by the speaker.” In Korean, there is a word, *nunchi*, that means that you communicate through your eyes. “Koreans believe that



the environment supplies most of the information that we seek, so there is little need to speak.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth A. Tuleja, *Intercultural Communication for Business* (Mason, OH: Thomson Higher Education, 2005), p. 43.

comment in a professional manner. If a group member tells an offensive joke, you may have a double reaction—anger at the speaker and disappointment with those who laughed. Listening before you leap gives you time to adjust your reaction in a way that will help rather than disrupt a group discussion.

**Help Your Group Listen.** In the most effective groups, members help one another listen. The most effective listeners may become the group’s translators, explaining what other group members mean and interpreting their responses. One way to help a group listen is to do periodic group listening checks that ask for a confirmation of comprehension. By asking, “What is everyone’s understanding of . . . ?” or “Am I right in saying that all of us agree to . . . ?” you are making sure that everyone understands and is responding to the same message.

You also can help a group listen when group members disagree or argue. When members’ emotions are stirred up, their thoughts may be devoted to responding to the opposition rather than to applying the golden listening rule. You can help a group resolve such conflicts by summarizing different positions in accurate and neutral terms.

Try to keep good listening habits at the forefront of the group’s attention. Remind members how important it is for everyone to improve her or his listening behavior. Such reminders can have powerful consequences. In fact, some experts claim that 50 percent of our potential improvement in listening can come simply from realizing that we have poor listening habits and are capable of listening much better.<sup>32</sup>

## The Art of Paraphrasing

**Paraphrasing** (also called *reflective listening* or *mirror responses*) is the ability to restate what people say in a way that indicates that you understand them. When you paraphrase, you go beyond the words you hear to understand the feelings

### TOOLBOX 6.4



#### Listening Is Hard Work

Effective listening is hard work and requires a great deal more than keeping quiet and recognizing individual words. Researchers note that “active listeners register an increase in blood pressure, a higher pulse rate, and even more perspiration. [Active listening] means concentrating on the other person rather than on yourself. As a result, a lot of people just don’t do it.”<sup>1</sup>

Listening requires the kind of preparation and concentration required of attorneys trying a case, psychologists counseling a client, and physicians seeking a diagnosis based on patients’ reported symptoms. Intensive listening can be an exhausting experience. If you are not willing to work at listening, you will not be a good listener.

<sup>1</sup> Tony Alessandra and Phil Hunsaker, *Communicating at Work* (New York: Fireside, 1993), p. 55.

and underlying meanings that accompany the words. Too often, we jump to conclusions and incorrectly assume that we know what a speaker means and feels.

Paraphrasing is a form of feedback—a listening check—that asks, “Am I right—is this what you mean?” Paraphrasing is not repeating what a person says; it requires finding *new* words to describe what you have heard rather than repeating what you have heard. In addition to rephrasing another person’s message, a paraphrase usually includes a request for confirmation.

Paraphrasing can be used for many purposes:

- To ensure comprehension before evaluation
- To reassure others that you want to understand them
- To clear up confusion and ask for clarification
- To summarize lengthy comments
- To help others uncover thoughts and feelings
- To provide a safe and supportive communication climate
- To help others reach their own conclusions<sup>33</sup>

If you want to clarify someone’s meaning, you might say, “When you said you were not going to the conference, did you mean that you want one of us to go instead?” If you want to make sure that you understand a person’s feelings, you might say, “I know you said you approve, but I sense that you’re not happy with the outcome—am I way off?” If you are summarizing someone’s lengthy comments, you might say, “What you seem to be saying is that it’s not the best time to change this policy, right?”

Paraphrasing is difficult. Not only are you putting aside your own interests and opinions, but you are also finding *new* words that best match someone else’s meaning. The phrasing of an effective paraphrase can vary in four critical ways: content, depth, meaning, and language.<sup>34</sup>

**Paraphrasing Content.** Content refers to the words used. If all you do is repeat the exact same words you hear, you are not paraphrasing—you are parroting. “Repeating a person’s words actually gets in the way of communicating an understanding of the essential meaning of a statement.”<sup>35</sup> And, as depicted in the following example, it sounds foolish.

Susan: “I never seem to get anywhere on time, and I don’t know why.”

You: “Ah, so you don’t know why you never seem to get anywhere on time?”

Susan: “Yeah, that’s what I just said.”

**Paraphrasing Depth.** Depth refers to the degree to which you match the importance of and emotions in the speaker’s message in your response. Try to avoid responding lightly to a serious problem, and vice versa. Responses that match a

speaker's depth of feeling or that lead the person to a slightly greater depth of feeling are most effective.<sup>36</sup>

Susan: "People, including my boss, bug me about being late, and sometimes I can tell that they're pretty angry."

You: "In other words, you worry that other people are upset by your lateness."

Notice that you did not repeat the words *bug me* and *pretty angry*. Instead, you looked for comparable words—*worried* and *upset by*—that try to match the same depth of feeling.

**Paraphrasing Meaning.** Even experienced listeners may miss another person's meaning when paraphrasing. Sometimes we may add an unintended meaning to a person's message if we become impatient and complete a sentence or thought for the speaker. What if Susan tried to say, "I really don't know what to do to change," and you interrupted as follows:

Susan: "I really don't know . . ."

You: ". . . how to manage your time?"

In this case you would be denying Susan the opportunity to describe her own problem. We also may add meaning by responding to ideas that the speaker uses only as an example. Suppose Susan said, "I have an important project coming up at work, and I worry that I'll be late getting there and getting it done on time." Responding with, "You seem to be very upset about getting an important project done" would be an inaccurate paraphrase because it responds to only one specific example that Susan gives, instead of responding to her much larger lateness problem.

**Paraphrasing Language.** Finally, keep language simple to ensure accurate communication. If you doubt how important word choice can be, imagine Susan's perplexity and frustration if you responded to her as follows:

Susan: "I never seem to get anywhere on time, and I don't know why."

You: "Ahh, your importunate perplexities about punctuality are inextricably linked."

Susan: "Huh?"

Effective paraphrasing requires mindful listening. Paraphrasing says, "I want to hear what you have to say, and I want to understand what you mean." If you paraphrase accurately, the other person will feel grateful for being understood. And if you don't quite get the paraphrase right, your feedback provides another opportunity for the speaker to explain.<sup>37</sup>



 LISTENING TO DIFFERENCES

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Just as there are differences among members' backgrounds, perceptions, and values, there are differences in the way people listen. Fortunately, a group provides a setting in which different listening abilities and styles can be an asset rather than a liability. If you have difficulty analyzing an argument, there may be someone else in the group who can be relied upon to serve as an analytical listener. If you know that several members pay attention only to the words they hear rather than observing the nonverbal behavior that accompanies those words, you may appoint yourself the group's empathic listener.

Listening behavior may also differ between male and female members. Deborah Tannen suggests that men are more likely to listen to the content of what is said, whereas women focus on the relationships among speakers.<sup>38</sup> In other words, men tend to focus on comprehensive and analytical listening, whereas women are more likely to be empathic and appreciative listeners. If "males tend to hear the facts while females are more aware of the mood of the communication," a group is fortunate to have both kinds of listeners contributing to the group process.<sup>39</sup>

Differences in personalities may also affect the way members listen. The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator<sup>®</sup> predicts that introverts will be better comprehensive listeners than extroverts, who are eager to speak out—even when they haven't understood all that is being said. Sensing members may listen for facts and figures, while intuitives listen for key ideas and overarching themes. Thinking members are often effective analytical listeners, whereas feeling members are more likely to be effective empathetic listeners. Judging listeners may drive the group to reach a decision, while perceivers take the time to appreciate what they hear without leaping to immediate conclusions.<sup>40</sup>

In addition to gender and personality-type distinctions, cultural differences can influence the ways in which group members listen and respond to one another. One study concludes that international students see U.S. students as being less willing and less patient as listeners than students from African, Asian, South American, or European cultures.<sup>41</sup> One way to explain such differences in perceived listening behavior is offered by Myron Lustig and Jolene Koester, who explain that English is a speaker-responsible language in which the speaker structures the message and relies primarily upon words to provide meaning. In Japanese, however, which is a listener-responsible language, speakers indirectly indicate what they want the listener to know. The listener must rely on nonverbal communication and an understanding of the relationship between the speaker and the listener to interpret meaning.<sup>42</sup> Thus, an English-speaking listener may feel that a Japanese speaker is leaving out important information; the Japanese listener, however, may think that the English speaker is overexplaining or talking down to him or her. Such misunderstandings and perceived discourtesies are the result of speaking and listening differences rather than of substantive disagreement.

 TAKING NOTES IN GROUPS

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If most of us listen at only 25 percent efficiency, why not take notes during a discussion? Why not write down important ideas and facts? Taking notes makes a great deal of sense, but only if it is done with skill.

The inclination to take notes is understandable. After all, that's what we do in a classroom when an instructor lectures. However, if you are like most listeners, only one-fourth of what is said will end up in your notes. Even if it were possible for you to copy down every word uttered in a group discussion, your notes would be missing the nonverbal clues that often tell you more about what a person means and feels. And if you spend all of your time taking notes, when will you put aside your pen and participate? Ralph Nichols summarized the dilemma of balancing note taking and listening when he concluded that "there is some evidence to indicate that the volume of notes taken and their value to the taker are inversely related."<sup>43</sup> Thus, the challenge for a group member is this: How do I obtain brief, meaningful records of a group discussion? Several methods can help, depending upon your needs and your role in the group.

If a member is assigned to take minutes, you can rely on the official record of the meeting. But here, too, there are potential problems. What if the secretary is a poor listener? What if you need the notes immediately and can't wait for the official minutes to be distributed and approved? Suppose you need personalized meeting notes that record your assignments and important information? In such cases, minutes may not be enough.

Flexibility is the key to taking useful and personalized meeting notes. Good listeners adjust their note-taking system to a group's agenda or impose a note-taking pattern on a disorganized discussion. In some cases, marginal notes on an agenda may be sufficient to highlight important information and actions. If you attend a lot of meetings, you may find it helpful to use a brief form that records important details and provides space for critical information and action. The form shown in Figure 6.4 is an example of the way in which vital information and actions can be recorded.

 SELF-LISTENING IN GROUPS

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As important as it is to listen to other members of your group, it is just as important to listen to yourself. Poor self-listening is often the cause of communication breakdowns. Rebecca Shafir, author of *The Zen of Listening*, maintains that "if we could hear our words . . . through the ears of our listeners, we would be appalled at the overgeneralizations, the inaccuracies, and the insensitive, negative comments we make about ourselves and others."<sup>44</sup> If you can monitor, understand, and modify the effects of what you say, you can become a more effective group member. Two strategies can enhance your ability to listen to yourself. The first is

FIGURE 6.4 Sample Form for Meeting Notes

Meeting Notes	
Group:	Goal/Topic:
Date and Time:	Place:
Members Attending:	
Members Absent:	
Vital Information	
1.	
2.	
3.	
Decisions Reached	
1.	
2.	
3.	
Personal To-Do List	Date Due
1.	
2.	
3.	
Date/Time/Place of Next Meeting:	

to translate feedback into useful information about the way you speak and listen so that you can answer questions such as these:

- Do members listen to me, or do I seem to be talking to a blank wall?
- Do members seem to understand what I am saying, or are there frequent questions or confusion following my remarks?
- Do I feel my voice rising and my heart racing when I address a controversial issue or an argumentative member?

When you listen to yourself, “Whatever you have to say needs only to pass the simple test of teamwork: Are you saying something that is germane to the team as a whole—to its objectives, to its overriding vision, to the tasks it has set out for itself? . . . If not, fix your message so that it is direct, relevant, and respectful of others.”<sup>45</sup>

A second way to listen to yourself is to become aware of your internal thought processes. This strategy recognizes that, in a group discussion, what you *want* to say may not be what you *should* say. In order to illustrate the usefulness of this strategy, consider the following hypothetical situation:

A professional facilitator has been hired to work with a student government council charged with rewriting the council’s constitution and bylaws. Right from the start, the student government president and the facilitator do not hit it off. The situation has become so bad that the rest of the council is paralyzed. Nothing gets done, as everyone spends valuable meeting time watching the president and facilitator fight over every issue on the group’s agenda.

If you were a member of this group, what would you say or do to help resolve such a problem? A lot depends on how well you listen to others and to yourself, how efficiently you use your extra thought speed, and how fairly you

apply the golden listening rule. The following seven questions may help you assess your internal thought processes:

1. *What do I want to say?* “I wish you two would stop acting like babies. We’re sick and tired of your bickering.”
2. *What are the consequences of saying what I want to say?* Both of them will become angry or hurt, and what is left of group morale and cohesiveness could fall apart.
3. *Have I listened comprehensively?* What is each side trying to say? Is the president saying that the facilitator has no right to impose her will on the group? Is the facilitator saying that the president doesn’t respect her as an expert?
4. *Have I listened analytically?* Is either side right or wrong? Both the president and the facilitator have legitimate complaints, but their arguments are becoming personal rather than substantive.
5. *Have I listened empathically?* How would I feel if someone treated me this way? I’d probably be just as angry.
6. *Have I listened appreciatively?* Do the president and the facilitator have positive contributions to make? The president should be commended for how well he has led our group. The facilitator should be thanked for sharing useful resources and helping us understand the scope of our assignment.
7. *So, what should I say?* I should speak on behalf of the group and tell the president and the facilitator how much we value both of them, but that the group, as a whole, is distressed by the conflict between them. I should ask whether there is something we can do to resolve the problem.

Taking the time to ask a series of self-listening questions can help you develop an appropriate and useful response. Analyzing your own thought processes lets you employ different types of listening to come up with a useful response that can help resolve a group problem.



## BALANCED LISTENING

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Groups lose their balance when many members want to talk rather than listen. If members fail to listen discriminatively, comprehensively, analytically, empathically, and appreciatively, a group will soon lose its ability to work together. In a well-balanced group, members spend more time listening than speaking; they try to balance their own needs with those of listeners. In fact, there may be no more difficult task in a group discussion than suspending your own needs and

## GROUPTECH



## Listening in Virtual Groups

Effective listening in virtual groups requires adapting to a different medium of expression. In a sophisticated teleconference, this adaptation is relatively easy—you can see and hear group members sitting at a conference table in another city or on another continent almost as clearly as you can see and hear the colleagues sitting across the table from you. Your only adaptation is making sure that your microphone is on or off at appropriate times. In an email discussion, however, you can neither see nor hear participants, but you still must “listen” to their messages.

Ironically, it may be easier to “listen” to group members in a virtual meeting than in a face-to-face setting. What makes it easier is the amount of time you have to listen and respond as well as the luxury of controlling the content and style of your responses. In a face-to-face discussion, you hear what members say and are expected to respond immediately. Members can see one another grimace, smile, or roll their eyes in disgust. In an email discussion—whether synchronous or asynchronous—you have more time to listen to others and control your reactions.

For example, you can read and reread what someone has written to make sure that you comprehend the message. In a virtual discussion, time also gives you the luxury of using all four listening styles. Because you have more than the few seconds given a listener in a face-to-face discussion, you can interpret and analyze a message, determine the content and tone of the response you want to make, and choose appropriate words. The downside of the time-to-listen advantage is that it is easier to fake attention in electronic meetings. You can pretend to participate online by typing an occasional comment. During a teleconference, you can stop listening completely and work on other tasks at your desk, but you can check in and respond with an “I agree” or “Good job, Fred” to feign participation. Although you can fake listening in a face-to-face discussion, your physical presence makes it difficult to “be elsewhere.”

<sup>1</sup> Andrew F. Wood and Matthew J. Smith, *Online Communication: Linking Technology, Identity, and Culture*, 2nd ed. (Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2005), p. 82.

your desire to talk in order to listen to what someone else has to say. In 1961, Ralph Nichols contrasted the hard work of listening with faked attention:

Listening is hard work. It is characterized by faster heart action, quicker circulation of the blood, a small rise in bodily temperature. The over-relaxed listener is merely appearing to tune-in and then feeling conscience-free to pursue any of a thousand mental tangents. . . . For selfish reasons alone, one of the best investments we can make is to give each speaker our conscious attention.<sup>46</sup>

As we note at the beginning of this chapter, effective listening is the counterpart of effective speaking. Effective group members both create messages *and* listen and respond to other members’ messages appropriately during the course of group interaction. Engaging in both of these communication activities simultaneously is challenging *and* essential for groups working to achieve a common goal.

## GROUPWORK

## Practice Paraphrasing

**Directions.** Read the four statements made by group members and write the response you would make that best paraphrases their meaning. As a guide, we recommend that you include at least three components in your paraphrase:

- State your interest in understanding the other person, such as, “I sense that . . .” or “If I understand you correctly, you . . .” or “It sounds as if you . . .”
- Identify the other person’s emotion or feeling, but make sure you find alternatives to the words the person uses. For example, if a person says, “I’m angry,” you will need to decide whether this means that the person is annoyed, irritated, disgusted, or furious. Try to find a word that matches the person’s meaning and emotion.
- Describe the situation, event, or facts using alternative words.<sup>47</sup>

## Sample Situation and Paraphrase

Group Member: “I get really annoyed when André yells at one of us during a meeting.”

Paraphrase 1: “It sounds as though you get pretty upset with André when he shouts at you or another group member. Am I right?”

1. Group Member: I have the worst luck with computers. Every single one I’ve ever used has problems. Just when the warranty runs out, something goes wrong and I have to spend a lot to get it fixed. The computer I have now has crashed twice, and I lost all of my documents. Maybe it’s me—I mean maybe I’m doing something wrong. Why me? I must be cursed or something.

Paraphrase: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

2. Group Member: I hope Anita doesn’t react too strongly to Chris and Mark’s concerns about the scope of our project at today’s meeting. She can be very emotional when she feels strongly about something she really believes in.

Paraphrase: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

3. Group Member: I dislike saying *no* to anyone in our group who asks for help, but then I have to rush or stay up late to get my own work done. I want to help, but I also want to do my own job—and do it well.

Paraphrase: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

4. How on earth are we going to get an A on this assignment if we can't even find time to meet?

Paraphrase: \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

## GROUPASSESSMENT

### Shafir's Self-Listening Test

Self-knowledge is the first step toward self-improvement. This assessment instrument looks at how you listen in a variety of situations and settings. Carefully consider each question and indicate whether or not you consistently demonstrate each behavior.

#### Do you

1. Think about what *you* are going to say while the speaker is talking?  
 Yes, consistently       No, almost never       Sometimes
2. Tune out people who say things you don't agree with or don't want to hear?  
 Yes, consistently       No, almost never       Sometimes
3. Learn something from each person you meet, even if it is ever so slight?  
 Yes, consistently       No, almost never       Sometimes
4. Keep eye contact with the person who is speaking?  
 Yes, consistently       No, almost never       Sometimes
5. Become self-conscious in one-on-one or small group conversations?  
 Yes, consistently       No, almost never       Sometimes
6. Often interrupt the speaker?  
 Yes, consistently       No, almost never       Sometimes
7. Fall asleep or daydream during meetings or presentations?  
 Yes, consistently       No, almost never       Sometimes
8. Restate instructions or messages to be sure you understood correctly?  
 Yes, consistently       No, almost never       Sometimes
9. Allow the speaker to vent negative feelings toward you without becoming defensive or physically tense?  
 Yes, consistently       No, almost never       Sometimes
10. Listen for the meaning behind a speaker's words through gestures and facial expressions?  
 Yes, consistently       No, almost never       Sometimes

11. Feel frustrated or impatient when communicating with persons from other cultures?  
 Yes, consistently       No, almost never       Sometimes
12. Inquire about the meaning of unfamiliar words or jargon?  
 Yes, consistently       No, almost never       Sometimes
13. Give the appearance of listening when you are not?  
 Yes, consistently       No, almost never       Sometimes
14. Listen to the speaker without judging or criticizing?  
 Yes, consistently       No, almost never       Sometimes
15. Start giving advice before you are asked?  
 Yes, consistently       No, almost never       Sometimes
16. Ramble on before getting to the point?  
 Yes, consistently       No, almost never       Sometimes
17. Take notes when necessary to help you remember?  
 Yes, consistently       No, almost never       Sometimes
18. Consider the state of the person you are talking to (nervous, rushed, hearing-impaired, and so on)?  
 Yes, consistently       No, almost never       Sometimes
19. Let a speaker's physical appearance or mannerisms distract you from listening?  
 Yes, consistently       No, almost never       Sometimes
20. Remember a person's name after you have been introduced?  
 Yes, consistently       No, almost never       Sometimes
21. Assume that you know what the speaker is going to say and stop listening?  
 Yes, consistently       No, almost never       Sometimes
22. Feel uncomfortable allowing silence between you and your conversation partner?  
 Yes, consistently       No, almost never       Sometimes
23. Ask for feedback to make sure you are getting across to the other person?  
 Yes, consistently       No, almost never       Sometimes
24. Preface your statements with unflattering remarks about yourself?  
 Yes, consistently       No, almost never       Sometimes
25. Think more about building warm working relationships with team members and customers than about bringing in revenue?  
 Yes, consistently       No, almost never       Sometimes



**Scoring:** Compare your answers to those on the following chart. For every answer that matches the key, give yourself one point. If you answered *Sometimes* to any of the questions, score half a point. Total the number of points.

1. N	6. N	11. N	16. N	21. N
2. N	7. N	12. Y	17. Y	22. N
3. Y	8. Y	13. N	18. Y	23. Y
4. Y	9. Y	14. Y	19. N	24. N
5. N	10. Y	15. N	20. Y	25. Y

Total points:

### Interpretation of Results

21+ points: You are an excellent listener in most settings and circumstances.

Note which areas could use further improvement.

16–20 points: You usually absorb most of the main ideas, but you often miss a good portion of the rest of the message as a result of difficulties with sustained attention. You may feel detached from the speaker and start thinking about other things or about what you are going to say next.

10–15 points: You may be focusing more on your own agenda than on the speaker's needs. You easily become distracted, and you perceive listening as a task. Personal biases may get in the way of fully understanding a speaker.

9 points or less: Most of the time you experience listening as a boring activity. You might complain that your memory is poor and feel great frustration when trying to retain information and succeed in a classroom situation.

*Note:* If you answered *Sometimes* to many of the questions, then obviously you are a sometimes listener. Chances are that your ability to concentrate may be at fault and/or that you are a highly critical individual and quick to judge whether a listening opportunity is worthwhile. However, there have been times when you have experienced the satisfaction of being fully absorbed in what someone has to say.

Source: "Self-Listening Test" from Rebecca Z. Shafir, *The Zen of Listening: Mindful Communication in the Age of Distraction*, pp. 28–33. Copyright ©2000. Reprinted by permission of Quest Books/The Theosophical Publishing House, Wheaton, IL.

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