



## Five Critical Skills for Team Leadership – Part 2

### Effective Listening is a Critical Skill for Leading Project Teams

Kay H. Roman

This article is Part 2 in a four-part series that covers five critical skills needed for effectively leading teams: understanding behavioral styles, listening effectively, giving praise, accepting criticism, and using problem solving and persuasion instead of criticism. Read on to find out more about how effective listening can help lead a project team.

#### Dealing with Extra “Mental Time”

The average person speaks at about 150-200 words per minute. The average person can actually listen at 400 words per minute. This means we have a lot of *mental time* leftover when we are listening to the average speaker. How we use that mental time has a profound effect on how we listen, how much we remember, and how effective we are in leading people.

**Mental Time**  
**400-200=200**

#### Identifying Effective Listeners

At the beginning of each project our company helps manage, we engage team members and team leaders in a series of human relations training courses. When we get to listening skills, I open the session with “I’m always a better listener after teaching this class...for at least two weeks.” This always get a chuckle from the group. Listening is a skill that has to be learned, practiced, and reinforced on a regular basis.

I then ask team members to think about people they know who are poor listeners and to describe how they know these people are not listening. People say things like...

*“They keep asking me the same question again.”*

*“They seem distracted. They seem to be thinking about something else entirely.”*

*“They interrupt me to tell me what they think.”*

*“They don’t even look at me when I’m talking.”*

When I ask team leaders and members if they themselves ever demonstrate these poor listening behaviors, their sheepish looks answer my question. It's true. We are all poor listeners sometimes – especially when we are not focusing on or practicing effective listening skills.

Your skill as a listener can make or break your success in leadership, teams, customer relationships, and negotiation. Listening to others is a great way to demonstrate and earn respect.

## Barriers to Listening

We all have barriers that filter how we see, hear, and think about information. These barriers can be caused by the sender, receiver, or the actual mode of communication.

Sender-related barriers include those things a speaker may do that impede listening such as tone or volume, distracting behaviors, or even language differences. Receiver-related barriers include the listener being distracted, focusing on something else, interrupting, and even arguing and lecturing. Various modes of communication have their own inherent barriers such as using the phone and not being able to see reactions to messages through facial expressions or other body language. The tone of the message in an email could be misunderstood. The actual location if surrounded by distracting noises or activity can also hamper effective listening.

The greatest compliment ever paid me was when one asked me what I thought and attended my answer.

—Henry David Thoreau

## Overcoming Barriers to Listening

Based on our experience in working with teams for more than 20 years, we recommend four primary techniques for overcoming listening barriers.

1. **Be Active.** One of the best ways to combat preoccupation, daydreaming, and lack of interest in the topic is to become an "active" listener by getting involved in the discussion. Ask questions, seek clarification, reflect feelings, and otherwise become interested.
2. **Use "Alert" Body Language.** Do not assume a relaxed body posture. Communicate that you are paying attention by an erect posture, by maintaining eye contact, and, if seated, by leaning forward slightly toward the speaker.
3. **Remove Distractions.** Let your voicemail answer the phone. Close the door to your office so people will not interrupt. If you do not have an office, find a quiet place with some privacy. Turn off the TV, radio, or other potential distractions so that you can devote full attention to the speaker.
4. **Listen with the Intent to Report -- Periodically Summarize.** One way to stay involved in the conversation is to periodically summarize what the speaker has said. This technique has at least three advantages.
  - First, it forces you to pay attention to the speaker. You cannot summarize what someone has said if you do not listen.
  - Second, if you summarize correctly it communicates to the speaker that you are listening.
  - Finally, if you summarize incorrectly it allows the speaker to correct you, which improves your listening.

## Elements of Communication

In his book, "Silent Message-Implicit Communications of Emotions and Attitudes," Professor Albert Mehrabian, a behavioral scientist at the University of California at Los Angeles concluded that all communication consists of three elements – **visual**, **vocal**, and **verbal**. He goes on to point out that each element has a different value in determining the believability of a presentation. The values may surprise you. Verbal – the actual words you use – comprise only 7% of the value when determining the believability of a presentation. The remaining 93% is comprised of vocal at 38% (tone of voice, rate of speed, pitch) and visual at 55% (body language, facial expressions, gestures, and mannerisms). This demonstrates that while words are important, the effective use of tone and engaged body language speaks volumes.



## Showing Understanding

One way to begin active listening is by showing you understand the emotions shared by a person. Put a specific name on the feeling you see expressed – i.e. angry, frustrated, sad, confused. You are not agreeing or disagreeing with the person. You are simply recognizing what the person is feeling. A good example might be: "You really seem frustrated by their inability to make a decision."

Every single interaction you have with a person is either a deposit or a withdrawal for every future interaction.

—Jordan V. Johnson, Ed. D.

By showing understanding for a person's emotions, you avoid judging or giving advice (something we all love to do). You are not focused on coming up with a solution to their situation. You are focused on how they feel about the subject they are talking about. You may also need to wait out pauses (a very difficult and uncomfortable thing to do). This allows speakers a chance to get things "off their chests."

## Using Effective Listening Tools

Once you have opened lines of communication by showing understanding, you can become an active listener by using various communications tools. Following is a list of the most basic communications tools:

Tool	Examples
Open-ended Questions	<p>Open-ended questions are phrased so that more information is given in the response than “yes” or “no.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ <i>What do you think?</i></li> <li>✓ <i>How can we solve this?</i></li> <li>✓ <i>What concerns do you have?</i></li> <li>✓ <i>Tell me more...</i></li> <li>✓ <i>What is working well?</i></li> </ul>
Closed-ended Questions	<p>Closed-ended questions are phrased so that specific and limited information is given in the response.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ <i>Are you comfortable with this change?</i></li> <li>✓ <i>Do you want Sam or Jane to finish the work?</i></li> <li>✓ <i>March 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup>?</i></li> <li>✓ <i>Will it help to change the procedure?</i></li> </ul>
Paraphrase Summarize	<p>Paraphrasing is repeating statements in your own words, while maintaining the original meaning of what the person said.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ <i>Let me make sure I understand what you said. You said...</i></li> <li>✓ <i>So you think that the situation is getting worse with meeting the project deadlines.</i></li> </ul>
Confirmation Statements	<p>Short statements that are used to acknowledge active listening.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ <i>I see.</i></li> <li>✓ <i>Tell me more.</i></li> <li>✓ <i>That’s interesting.</i></li> </ul> <p>Non-verbals: Nodding, facial expressions. Hand gestures.</p>
Silence	<p>Not speaking for as long as 8 to 15 seconds. Allows the speaker to gather his or her thoughts.</p>

Using the advice and tools in this article will help you become a more effective listener, which will in turn improve your leadership abilities when it comes to managing a project team. Look for Part 3 in our series that will focus on giving praise to your team members.

If you found this article helpful and would like to read more, please go to our website at: [www.collegiateproject.com](http://www.collegiateproject.com) and browse our ERP Library.

