
Navigational Communications:

The Racer's Edge

Most of a manager's day is spent communicating.

What are the tools we can take along to help successfully navigate our course?

"We are all in races, every day, especially in the work environment.

Racing is a way of life, and we are all in it together."

By Judith E. Glaser

For a manager, listening is perhaps the most important component of communication. It's the basic tool for collecting information needed for timely and effective decision making. Whether your talents are in sales, systems engineering, administration, a support center or headquarters staff, gathering and effectively assessing relevant information is very important to your success as a manager.

On Your Mark, Get Set

Unlike this page before it was printed, the listening adult mind is never blank or completely impartial. Our listening is influenced by events, relationships and experiences – all adding to what we hear, and changing the meaning. As objective as we would like to think we are in our listening, we actually are not.

We also are subject to the effects of our physical and emotional states. Being tired,

angry, elated or stressful predisposes us to selectively attend to what we hear. These two forces – history plus emotional state – make up our "listening set" at any point in the day.

The Navigator

Try to recall a recent situation where you were a listener. It may have been a speech delivered by an executive, a discussion with a subordinate or an explanation from a peer. Did you listen to facts or to specific words? Did you paraphrase these words in your mind? Did this lead to new impressions, feelings, and ideas? Were you affected by how the speaker stood her low voice or his tan suit?

Did his anger bother you? Were you evaluating the speaker's effectiveness as a communicator? Were you judging? Or were you so preoccupied with your own problems that you didn't

listen at all? It's impossible to attend to everything we hear, so we listen selectively.

But *what guides our listening?* It isn't the same for everyone; for example, individuals who hear the same speech often walk away with different impressions of what they heard. Obviously, they didn't "hear" the same thing.

The Untrained Navigator

We hear and one – seventh as fast as we think – about *one* unit of hearing to *five* units of thinking. Obviously, the mind has the opportunity and the time to construct questions inferences, assumptions and associations as we listen. But: Are we using this time wisely?

Traditionally, ineffective listening has been viewed as a hearing problem. However, as we gain important new information about the effects of this uniquely human process – called listening – on the effectiveness of an

organization, we can recognize that ineffective listening is a management problem. Consider some of these common types of listening behavior in business.

“Noise in the Attic” Listening

Like many people, some we've been taught to think that being a good listener is merely sitting silently while others talk. Outwardly, we *appear* to be listening. Inwardly, however, we are surrendering to a type of listening called Noise in the Attic.

Disengaged from the speaker's ideas and – sometimes – presence, when listening with this posture, we are completely involved in our own mental processes, adding partiality and distance between the speaker and ourselves.

Noise in the Attic listening tends to develop from childhood experiences. As youngsters, how many of us heard: “Don't talk while I'm speaking!” “Don't interrupt me!” “Don't ask so many questions!” “Why? Because I said so!”

Conditioned by these long-ago warnings, many of us in business unconsciously turn off our minds – and potentially good habits of inquiry. Instead of trying to

clarify the speaker's intent, we sometimes end up preoccupied with our own internalizations: “Who does she think she is?” “I can do his job better than he can.” Or, sometimes we find ourselves planning a trip, remembering a pleasant experience, or even mentally completing a thought left dangling from another conversation...returning from time to time to listen to what is being said. Sound familiar?

“Face Value” Listening

Sometimes, we *think* we are hearing facts, when actually the words we're hearing are interpretations of events they describe. In Face Value listening, the listener isn't mentally “checking back” into the real world to see whether the words really explain what they purport to explain.

Words are heard more for their literal meanings rather than as tools for understanding. This explains why executives, managers and staff can differ dramatically in their perceptions.

Children are excellent examples of people who use Face Value listening. But they have a choice, since their experiences are so limited. As adults, we

have more experiences, and we should use these experiences to add depth and understanding to the listening process. Unfortunately, many adults hear, rather than listen. Good listening requires *guided thought*.

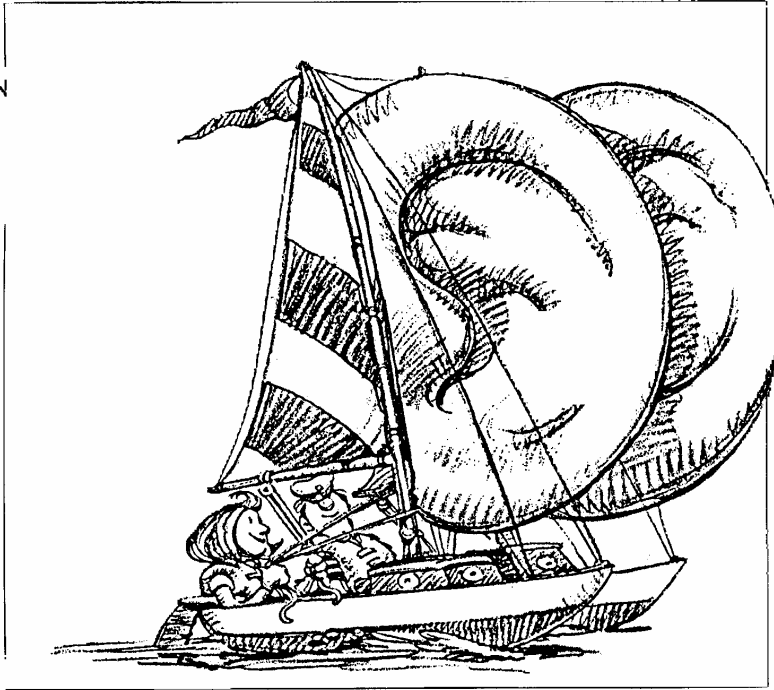
“Position” Listening

The business environment has its own unique listening problems. Employees, constantly alert for clues to their performance, are often victims of Position listening. This highly partial form of listening can be extremely harmful to good communications.

For example: A manager might listen to her president's annual report to determine whether her division will be growing. What she hears in that talk could easily affect her performance during the year as well as her relationships with coworkers. She will listen to immediate superiors to determine her role. Obviously, Position listening can lead to faulty assumptions and can destroy the morale of a well managed and high performing team.

Precision Listening

Using precision listening, the art of knowing how to listen and how listening affects performance can



A framework telling them how to influence a person from Point A to Point B also guides these professionals.

In sales, the marketing rep wants to influence a customer from a point of no interest to a commitment to buy. The lawyer tries to influence the jury to his or her point of view. The psychiatrist works to influence the patient toward new insights about personal behavior, motivations or view of the world.

make us better executives. Listening is not an end in itself, but part of a chain of processes that end in a decision, strategy, or change in behavior or point of view.

When driving some place new, we think nothing of stopping at a gas station for a map so we can navigate in unfamiliar territory. In doing this, we learn “how to” so navigating the roads can be done efficiently and with less chance of an accident. If we get lost, we need only refer back to the map to find our way. Listening can be approached the same way.

Creating the Maps

Why we’re listening determines the type of information we listen for.

Salespeople listen for customer concerns. Lawyers listen for the opposing speaker’s faulty logic. Freudian psychiatrists, listen for unconscious motivations. These bits of information are important for the listeners to do their jobs successfully.

Training has taught them not to listen at face value, and to use the time lag between their hearing and subsequent speaking to properly evaluate what is being said. At the same time, they don’t dismiss their emotional response to the speaker, their “feel” for the situation or their hunch of what might happen next.

The Executive as Precision Listener

In business, executives need to focus on the interpersonal influencing process. Who is being influenced from Point A to Point B and why? Where is this conversation going? To what ideas, beliefs and behaviors is this person most committed in his life? Which of these ideas, beliefs, attitudes and behaviors need to be influenced for the person to be more effective on the job?

What do I know about this individual that will help me better understand her and what is being said? Are her problems, or concerns, such that we can effect real

changes, or are they out of reach in the business context?

The executive examines the way she/he answers the employee to see how these answers affect the listening process. Will the employee listen better if the answers are short and sweet (“yes” or “no”) or will listening improve if these statements contain more background information? What kind of information will be helpful?

In practicing Precision Listening, the executive listens carefully to the employee’s answers – to phrasing, context and words used to get clues to the real meanings behind the words.

To reduce the ambiguity of meaning and intent, the executive will ask questions, will rephrase and restate what was heard in the new words.

Precision listening is a potentially powerful tool in the complex and uniquely human process of listening. It helps us peer into the minds of others, enabling us to set more helpful, meaningful and satisfying objectives for action.

The Racer’s Edge

When we adopt the framework of Navigational Communications, and when we use Precision Listening as

a tool, we improve our ability to communicate in a world of change, and to make more timely and accurate decisions.

Few decisions involve a simple yes or no; odds almost always play a role. What manager hasn’t silently thought, “If I grasp the wrong intent of the situation, what risk am I taking in making a decision?”

Each situation has its own odds to consider. Using Precision Listening, the executive will move from making assumptions to gaining clarification of meaning and intent, and by asking the right questions can put the odds in everyone’s favor.

Navigational Questions

1. What is the situation?
2. How are you approaching it?
3. What outcomes do you want to create?
4. What are you focusing on?
5. What resources do you need to draw upon?
6. What assumptions do you hold?
7. What does success look like?
8. How will you measure success?

9. What is holding you back from success?
10. What are your current strategies for moving forward?
11. How will the desired outcome impact you and others?
12. How will you prepare everyone for the potential changes?
13. How will you reduce fear and increase visibility to the endgame?
14. What new ideas and approaches are you considering?
15. How will you introduce them to others?
16. How will you engage colleagues in creating the new outcomes?
17. In the best of all possible worlds, what would you like to see happen?
18. How important are these changes to you and your organization?
19. What would happen if these changes did not take place?
20. What are the implications if they do take place?
21. Who will benefit from the changes?
22. How can you insure the right people are engaged?

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