



## **BEST PRACTICE**

### **Achieving Effective Listening**

Throughout school, students are taught the importance of speaking, reading, writing, and arithmetic, but rarely is much emphasis placed on listening. The shift in society from industrial production to information management emphasizes the need for good listening skills. This is particularly true in the practice of software testing – oral communication is rated as the number-one skill for the quality analyst.

Some facts about listening include:

- Many Fortune 500 companies complain about their workers' listening skills.
- Listening is the first language skill that we develop as children; however, it is rarely taught as a skill. Thus, in learning to listen, we may pick up bad habits.
- Listening is the most frequently used form of communication.
- Listening is the major vehicle for learning in the classroom.
- Salespeople often lose sales because they believe talking is more important than listening (thus, in ads a computer company emphasizes that they listen).

It is also important to understand why people do not listen. People do not listen for one or more of the following reasons:

- They are impatient and have other stimuli to respond to, such as random thoughts going through their mind.
- They are too busy rehearsing what they will say next, in response to someone.
- They are self-conscious about their communication ability.
- External stimuli, for example, an airplane flying overhead, diverts their attention.
- They lack the motivation and responsibility required of a good listener.
- The speaker's topic is not of interest to them.

The listener must be aware of these detriments to good listening so they can recognize them and devote extra attention to listening.



## The 3-Step Listening Process

The listening process involves three separate steps: 1) hearing the speaker, 2) attending to the speaker, and 3) understanding the speaker. The practice of listening requires these three listening steps to occur concurrently. Mastering each of these steps will help improve your listening abilities.

### Step 1: Hearing the Speaker

Hearing the speaker requires an understanding of the five channels of communication incorporated into speech. Much of listening occurs beyond merely hearing the words. Let's look at the five channels through which a speaker delivers information to his/her audience:

<b>Information Channel</b>	The speaker's subject.
<b>Verbal Channel</b>	The words used by the speaker.
<b>Vocal Channel</b>	The tone of voice associated with the various words.
<b>Body Channel</b>	The body movements and gestures associated with the information being conveyed.
<b>Graphic Channel</b>	The pictures, charts, etc., that the speaker uses to emphasize or illustrate the material being discussed.

Speakers normally use the information, verbal, vocal, and body channels in speaking. In some instances, they also use the graphic channel. Listening requires that there is a meeting of the mind on the information channel. Speakers sometimes skip around to different subjects, making it easy to lose the subject being covered on the information channel. In Step 2, attending to the speaker, we will discuss the importance of feedback to confirm the subject being covered on the information channel.

The vocal and body channels impact the importance of the verbal channel. The verbal channel includes the choice of words used to present information, but the vocal and body channels modify or emphasize the



importance of those words. For example, the words in the verbal channel may be, "John says he can do it." However, the tone of the vocal channel might indicate that John cannot do it, or the use of a thumbs-down body channel signal will also indicate that John cannot do it.

Hearing the speaker involves an awareness of all five channels, and listening to and watching the speaker to be sure we are receiving what the speaker is saying through all five channels. To master the hearing step, you must pay attention to all five channels. If you miss one or more of the channels, you will not hear what the person is saying. For example, if you are only paying partial attention to the speaker when the words, "John can do it" are stated, you may hear that John can do it, while the speaker said that John could not do it.

## **Step 2: Attending to the Speaker**

Attending to the speaker is sometimes referred to as being an active listener. Devote your full attention to the speaker to confirm that what you heard is what the speaker intended you to hear. You must first understand yourself and your situation. You must evaluate your motivation for wanting to listen to this speaker. If the subject is important to you, but the speaker is boring, it will require significantly more effort on your part to be a good listener.

The most important part of attending to the speaker is establishing an active listening ability. Active listening involves a lot of response and dynamics. Some people view the listening process as a passive skill where you sit back and let the other person talk. This is fine for hearing the speaker, but not for confirming what the speaker has said. Feedback is very important to the listening process, particularly in this step. Feedback can be a nonverbal response, such as nodding your head, or a verbal response such as a question or a statement of confirmation.

It is very important to send the right type of feedback to the speaker. The wrong type of feedback not only doesn't confirm what the speaker said, but also can reduce or terminate the listening process. It is very irritating to a speaker who is providing information to have the listener stray from the subject. For example, the speaker might be describing a quality problem, and the listener changes the subject and asks where the speaker is going to have lunch that day.

Some suggestions to help in attending to the speaker are:

- Free your mind of all other thoughts and concentrate exclusively on the speaker's communication.



- Maintain eye contact with the speaker for approximately 80 percent of the time.
- Provide continuous feedback to the speaker.
- Periodically restate what you heard the speaker say, and ask the speaker to confirm the intent of the information spoken.
- Move periodically to the understanding step to ensure that the information passed has been adequately understood.

### **Step 3 - Understanding the Speaker**

There are five types of listening. While people can listen several different ways concurrently, normally listening is limited to one of the five types. The type chosen will have an impact on the ability to understand what the speaker is saying. When one has deciphered the information channel (i.e., what the subject is) and related the importance of that subject to the audience, listening must be adjusted to ensure that we get the message we need.

The five types of listening and their impact on understanding are:

- **Type 1: Discriminative Listening**

Directed at selecting specific pieces of information and not the entire communication. For example, one may be listening to determine if an individual did a specific step in the performance of a task. To get this, listen more to the nonverbal expressions rather than the verbal channel.

- **Type 2: Comprehensive Listening**

Designed to get a complete message with minimal distortion. This type of listening requires a lot of feedback and summarization to fully understand what the speaker is communicating. This type of listening is normally done in fact gathering.

- **Type 3: Therapeutic Listening**

The listener is sympathetic to the speaker's point of view. During this type of listening, the listener will show a lot of empathy for the speaker's situation. It is very helpful to use this type of listening when you want to gain the speaker's confidence and understand the reasons why a particular act was performed or event occurred, as opposed to



comprehensive listening where you want to find out what has happened.

- **Type 4: Critical Listening**

The listener is performing an analysis of what the speaker said. This is most important when it is felt that the speaker is not in complete control of the situation, or does not know the complete facts of a situation. Thus, the audience uses this type of understanding to piece together what the speaker is saying with what has been learned from other speakers or other investigation.

- **Type 5: Appreciative or Enjoyment Listening**

One automatically switches to this type of listening when it is perceived as a funny situation or an explanatory example will be given of a situation. This listening type helps understand real-world situations. One must establish which type of understanding is wanted and then listen from that perspective.

## References

Guide – CSQA Common Body Of Knowledge, V6.2