



**Working In English
by Doing Business In English™**

EFFECTIVE BUSINESS ENGLISH
LISTENING AND WATCHING BY
DOING BUSINESS IN ENGLISH

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“There is a difference between listening and waiting for your turn to speak.” – Simon Sinek

“Listening is active. At its most basic level, it’s about focus, paying attention.” – Simon Sinek

The Difference Between Hearing and Listening?

What is hearing? – The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines hearing as the “process, function, or power of perceiving sound; specifically: the special sense by which noises and tones are received as stimuli.”

Hearing is a passive, physical act that requires one sense and has to do with the perception of sound. It does not rely on concentration. Hearing is like collecting data; we hear sounds and words all day long, even if we are not paying attention to them.

What is listening?

Listening involves actively paying attention to the words and sounds heard with the aim of absorbing their meaning and then potentially creating a answer. Listening is a active process that requires multiple senses, it is seen as voluntary and an active choice, because we have the choice of listening or not. When someone hears but does not listen, we say they it is an example of “in one ear and out the other.”

It is important to remember that because someone is quiet and lets others do 75% of the talking, does not mean they are a good listener. On the other hand, just because someone is good at speaking and hearing what others say, does not mean they are a good listener.

The neuroscientist, Seth S. Horowitz, argues that the difference between hearing and listening is ‘attention’. Listening is an active behavior that requires focus.

“Most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply.” – Steven Covey

Benefits of Effective Listening

Effective listening can play a key role in helping to resolve conflicts, develop trust, engage and motivate others, plus collectively strengthen teams. Specifically effective listening helps with the following.

Collect information to make better decisions

Collection of all of the facts rather than jumping to assumptions, supports better decision making. If in business When people stop worrying about what they are going to say and instead focus on what is actually being said, they can then more thought into what they want to communicate.

Listen on different levels

Most speakers listen for facts or data and then the meaning of what is being said, when listening in a second language for many this is all they focus on. Effective listeners also listen to how the speaker is speaking, try to identify what is being said between the lines and also are conscious of what is not being said.

Being actively present

In an age of smart phones, social media and other distractions effective listening brings a listener into the present moment, engage and connect more effectively with speakers. Effective listeners are more appreciated by the people they communicate with and are more likely to get new points of view, perspectives and insights. At the very least it helps develop understanding and normally the listener's popularity.

“To listen well, is as powerful a means of influence as to talk well, and is as essential to all true conversation.” – Chinese Proverb

**“Most of the successful people I’ve known are the ones who do more listening than talking.”
– Bernard M. Baruch**

“Wise men speak because they have something to say; Fools because they have to say something.” - Plato

Effective listening tips

Be respectful

Demonstrating respect for others' opinions increases the likelihood of reciprocal acknowledgment. They are also more inclined to persist in sharing their ideas, so promoting growth and enhancing the probability of success. Effective listeners engage in active listening and then pose respectful inquiries that help the discovery of solutions or courses of action.

Question assumptions

Effective listeners are very aware of their own preconceptions and bias which they control and manage. To listen effectively it is extremely important to withhold any negative thoughts when listening and the reactions that speaker will notice.

Don't interrupt

Effective listeners allow others to speak uninterrupted. Effective leaders listen and don't interrupt, embracing two-way communication and are aware that with every interruption comes disengagement. Quite often speakers just want someone to speak to, who does not interject sharing their own thoughts and views. One problem is that humans actually think at roughly 800 words per minute, but most people speak at 125-150 words per minute.

Actively listen

Active listen involves concentrating on what the other person is saying and in addition asking questions for further information, explanation or clarification.

- "John, are you suggesting" ?"
- "I think you are saying, is that correct?"
- "Sorry Liz, do you mean that"?"

Many researchers on effective listening propose that in business an effective listener should speak for 20% of the time and listen 80% of the time. Bernard.T.Ferrari took this a step further arguing that of the 20% speaking time 16% should be offering opinions and at least 4% asking questions. In many cultures nodding helps showing active listening, in addition speaking words such as 'ok', "yes" and "mhmm".

Observe Other People

If you're really serious about mastering the art of listening, why not observe other people? One of the best ways to become a better listener is to observe the way people interact with each other, and all the irritating and rude things they do. Create an "annoying habit" checklist, and see if you do any. If you're brave enough, you can even ask someone you trust about what they like and dislike about the way you interact with others in conversation.

Listening Cross-Culturally

Stop listening with your eyes

Many non-native speakers listen with both their eyes and ears, this is often due to the amount of screen time in their lives and the frequency of virtual meetings. The danger of this is that they become dependent on using their eyes, but when working in person the speaker is often not directly in front of them. In addition, maintaining constant eye contact can be very uncomfortable for the speaker and makes the speaker look like they have a problem understanding thus damaging their credibility.

“The most basic of all human needs is the need to understand and be understood. The best way to understand people is to listen to them.” - Ralph Nichols

Empathy

Put yourself in the speaker’s shoes, consider their cultural background, potential values and life experiences that might shape their perspective.

Focus on nonverbal communication

Nonverbal cues such as body language, facial expressions and eye contact play a significant role in communication across cultures. These cues differ across cultures which means that in business listeners need to adapt their interpretation of nonverbal communication. For example, in some cultures, nodding doesn’t mean agreement, it can just mean that the person is listening.

“I like to listen. I have learned a great deal from listening carefully. Most people never listen.” - Ernest Hemingway

Reflection

Reflecting back what you’ve heard not only shows that you’re actively engaged but also helps clarify any misunderstandings. Use phrases like “What I hear you saying is...” or “It sounds like you’re feeling...” to validate the speaker’s thoughts while encouraging further discussion.

Stop assuming similarities

Many people start by assuming there will be similarities, then react when they do not exist instead of recognizing differences normally exist and should be assumed. It’s important to be aware of cultural assumptions and how they can influence interpretation of the speaker. For example, listeners from a culture that values direct communication, often have to be very mindful of their tendency to interrupt, show signs of impatience or finish the speaker’s sentences.

Research and prepare

Before engaging with individuals from a different culture, professionals should take some time to research the communication norms and customs of who they will work with. Research anticipates potential differences and also helps prevent issues.

Ask open-ended questions:

Closed questions often limit conversation whereas open-ended questions encourage the speaker to share more. These questions develop more in-depth understanding and avoids assumptions due to the listener's cultural biases. For example, "Do you understand the policy?", could be improved with "How do you feel about the policy?"

"A good listener is not only popular everywhere, but after a while he knows something."
- Wilson Mizner

Summarize and clarify:

By summarizing what the listener has heard and asking clarifying questions the listener can show how engaged they are and this would prevent any misunderstandings. For example, "Ok, if I have understood correctly, what you're saying is that..." or "John, please could you clarify what you specifically meant by?"

"If God had wanted us to talk more, he would have given us two mouths." - Ken Blanchard

Notice speed, rhythm and tone

In business changes in speed, rhythm or tone of voice are vital when analyzing nonverbal communication, most changes are signals of attitudes, emotions and intentions, all within the cultural norms of those involved. These variations are shaped by cultural conventions and language patterns as each language is spoken differently with their own inbuilt standard variations. In some business cultures fluctuations in volume signify emphasis or significance whereas in others it could be perceived as confrontational. Consequently, while analyzing tone of voice, it is essential to account for both the uttered words and the cultural variations in speaking patterns.

Give non-native speakers a break

Normally people do not want to offend but when only looking through our own cultural and communication norms many people can quickly become offended. The failure to use the word 'please' when making requests is an example of this, in many cultures the word please is not used when making requests. Therefore, a failure to say 'please' is understandable whereas a failure to say 'thank you' is rarely tolerable.

Watching

“To acquire knowledge, one must study; but to acquire wisdom, one must observe.” – Marilyn vos Savant

“If you make listening and observation your occupation you will gain much more than you can by talk.” – Robert Baden Powell

Effective leaders depend on their watching of others and situations, watching is learning whilst doing everything else rather than something they plan and sit down to do. Throughout their careers experience builds their knowledge and capabilities.

Sir Alex Ferguson is regarded as one of the greatest football managers of all time. In his book, ‘Leading’, he explains that the art of watching is one of the most important leadership practices.

“You can see a lot more when you are not in the thick of things...when you are a step removed from the fray, you see things that come as surprises – and it is important to allow yourself to be surprised. When I stepped back and watched from the sidelines, my field of view was widened and I could absorb the whole session, as well as pick up on players’ moods, energy and habits.” – Alex Ferguson

Despite common assumptions, effective leaders talk less, instead intentionally listen and watch more. This enables better perception of details and nuances plus overall see the bigger picture and challenge preconceptions. Leaders are able to interpret body language, how people interact with each other, the disposition of everyone and what impacts on them when they watch effectively. Therefore, by stepping back and in effect doing less, simply watching and listening, leaders can be more effective.

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“To assess the quality of thoughts of people, don't listen to their words, but watch their actions.” - Amit Kalantri

Effective Watching Tips

“Watching great people do what you love is good way to start learning how to do it yourself.” – Amy Poehler

Be open to learning by watching

We need to be receptive to learning by watching, this requires an open mindset to observing something new or different to preconceptions. This requires a belief that there is always something to learn, whatever the situation and people involved.

- When did you last learn something by watching?
- How good are you at watching?
- When can you next use watching to learn or be more effective?
- Which parts of watching can you improve?

Be aware of filters

When watching awareness of filters is critical as filters can be wrong, leading to inaccurate watching and learning. Filters in the brain exist that are formed by past experiences, beliefs, habits, and surroundings. To avoid this risk the filter needs changing to let more without filtering to enable learning and growth.

- What filters do you have that affect what you see?
- Where did these filters come from?
- How can you be conscious of them existing and manage them?
- When are you most at risk of your filters risking your ability to watch effectively?

Watch openly and with purpose

Watching openly prepares us for learning possibilities, and this process needs to be done with purpose. Watchers often need to know what their watching goals and questions are, then be intentional in finding them. There are times when leaders need to pause, slow down and watch openly, there are other times when watching has to be extremely purposeful.

- When do you benefit from watching calmly without purpose?
- When do you benefit from listening really purposefully?
- When will you next listen purposefully and how will you do this most effectively?

Pay attention to everything

Pay attention to everything, notice what people both do and do not say and how they interact with you and others. Effective watching and understanding body language and non-verbal cues helps make better judgements and decisions, noting both what was done and what was not done is effective.

- How able are you to read the body language of others?
- How able are you to understand the different body language rules of different cultures?
- What non-verbal cues do you notice?
- Do you notice what is not happening as well as what is happening?

Use all your senses

Effective watching is powerful, it is even more powerful when combined with effective listening and feeling, creating a deeper understanding and greater insights from any situation. This is particularly important in situations with nuance, complexity, change and uncertainty.

- When do you have to combine effective watching and listening?
- When does effective listening added with perception help you?
- In which situations in the next month will you be able to combine watching, listening and perception?

Plan to slow down

Effective watching depends on slowing down, this often requires planning down, effective leaders often plan in daily and weekly watching and listening.

- When will you next plan some powerful watching?

Be still then move

Effective watching depends on slowing down, this often requires planning down, effective leaders often plan in daily and weekly watching and listening. The stillness increases the impact of watching, once time is taken then changing the position a leader watches from enable further different perceptions and learning.

“Go some distance away because then the work appears smaller and more of it can be taken in at a glance and a lack of harmony and proportion is more readily seen.” - Leonardo da Vinci

- When will you next have to stand still and really concentrate on watching effectively?
- How often do you consciously change the position you look at things from?
- When would it benefit you most to change the position you look at things from?

Look for greatness

“Ninety per cent of how you learn is watching great people. When you are surrounded by good actors it lifts your performance.” – Natalie Portman

Consciously looking for people displaying good and great behaviour, skills and knowledge is a great way of increasing the chances of developing by watching.

- Who do learn from when you watch them?
- How could you find more people to learn from by watching?

Watch for good and bad in all

“Watching great people do what you love is good way to start learning how to do it yourself.” – Amy Poehler

Life is rarely black and white, people and situations are normally complex, there can be bad behaviour, learning and skills in effective people and situations, conversely there can be good behaviour, learning and skills in less effective people and situations.

- Who do you learn what not to do by watching?
- What do you see in effective people around you that you do not want to copy?

Enable both fast and slow thinking

"Thinking, Fast and Slow" by Daniel Kahneman explains there are dual thought systems that determine decision making.

System 1 is fast, automatic, and emotional, operating intuitively, responsible for quick judgments and decisions based on knowledge and biases.

System 2 is slower, deliberate and logical. This system engages in complex problem-solving and critical thinking, normally requiring more cognitive effort.

Effective leaders need to learn when to engage in which system, leaders who throughout their lives watch and listen effectively build up better knowledge and manage biases so strengthen System 1 thinking. In addition, leaders who can slow down and step back when appropriate will be able to adopt System 2 better.

"We can be blind to the obvious, and we are also blind to our blindness." - Daniel Kahneman

- Does your way of watching and listening suit System 1 or System 2 thinking?
- When will you next need to adopt each type of watching and listening?

Watching Cross-Culturally

Carefully interpret facial expressions

Paul Ekman is a psychologist, professor, and author who is known for his ground breaking work on human emotions and how they link to facial expressions. Ekman believed that six fundamental emotions are universally expressed and recognized: pleasure, sadness, anger, fear, surprise, and disgust. Facial expressions can communicate many emotions but must only be interpreted once cultural differences have been considered.

For example, in Russian culture, facial expressions may be muted or appear more neutral, according to traditional norms such as self-restraint. In Russia smiling can attract suspicion as smiling too much can be seen as insincere, therefore smiling is less common with new people. In East Asia, smiling is sometimes used to cover up discomfort or embarrassment, instead of expressing actual happiness. In North America, Australia and a lot of Western Europe, smiling is seen as a common friendly gesture to show happiness and often used to help put others at ease. In Italy, the intensity of emotional expression is not only normalized but often glorified, resulting in more exaggerated and lively facial expressions.

Consequently, comprehending cultural subtleties is essential for accurately reading face emotions. A smile may signify contentment, although it can also conceal discomfort or anxiety in specific contexts. Consequently, observing facial expressions alongside other verbal and nonverbal signals can yield significant insights into an individual's emotional condition and intentions.

Eye contact

All societies see making or avoiding eye contact as very important but interpret the meanings differently. In cross cultural business most people are focused on verbal language but there are many factors such as how eye contact is used that are important to understand.

Understanding eye contact in the Western World

In many Western societies, holding eye contact is seen as a demonstration of confidence, honesty and politeness. The Western world, including Western Europe, the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, has its own social conventions about the interpretation of eye contact and there can be slight variance between them in the meaning of eye contact.

Eye contact as important, when they communicate, it is assumed that listeners maintain greater eye contact than speakers to demonstrate they are actively listening. Speakers typically alternate between establishing eye contact with their audience and diverting their gaze before reestablishing full eye contact at the end of their remarks.

In Western cultures, maintaining prolonged eye contact with a speaker is regarded as staring, which is seen as rude or even confrontational. On the other hand, prolonged avoidance of eye contact indicates to the speaker that the listener's focus is elsewhere and is seen as impolite by Westerners. One difficulty here when observing is that shy people may avoid holding eye contact with others for extended periods which can unfortunately appear rude.

If a manager asks a question to a small group of staff, but whilst doing this directs their eye contact solely towards a specific member of the group, they exclude all others from responding. Then, when the manager directs their gaze to the whole group, the other group members know they can speak. Westerners typically avert their gaze from others in public settings, such as elevators, preserving their personal space by refraining from initiating conversation. Carefully observing these dynamics can help the viewer interpret what is going on and the characteristics of those involved.

Understanding eye contact in non-Western Cultures

When doing business in many Caribbean, East Asian, and Latino countries, holding long eye contact both when speaking or listening, is often seen as rude and should be avoided. In Japan it is very normal to look away from a speaker, avoiding their eye contact or sometimes closing their eyes, people from Western countries can see this behaviour as disrespectful.

In many African countries, young people and those seen as being of lower social status are discouraged from making eye contact with older people and those of perceived higher social status. This is similar in India between people of different castes but when people perceive themselves as equals long eye contact is common.

In many Arab nations across the Middle East and North Africa, religious considerations inhibit men and women from establishing eye contact unless they are appropriately acquainted. In contrast, when individuals of the same sex communicate, the eye contact can be both direct and lengthier than Westerners would feel comfortable with.

Personal Space Norms by Region

In Latin America and the Middle East, people normally stand closer to people of the same sex, whereas people in North America or Northern Europe tend to keep a larger personal space.

Touching

Cultures vary significantly in their acceptance or comfort with physical touching. In Latin American cultures physical touching is normal and acceptable as long as appropriate, whereas most Asian cultures are more comfortable with less contact, particularly in work situations.

Be careful with head movements

In most cultures, head nodding shows agreement (moving the head forward and backwards), but in countries such as India, a head wobble (moving the head from side to side) can mean agreement, acknowledgment or just 'we will see.' Confusingly, in Bulgaria, shaking the head sideways means 'yes', whereas nodding means 'no'.

Monitor and Adjust to Nonverbal Cues

In countries such as Australia, Canada, Netherlands and United States thoughts and opinions are shared directly and sincerely. Whilst in Indonesia, Japan, Korea and Saudi Arabia this type of communication can be seen as too direct and rude. In cross-cultural business exchanges, nonverbal cues to guarantee should be watched for, interpreted and managed. In most situations and relationships there will be issues, they need to be recognized as soon as possible, when people show they appreciate they have made mistakes and are ready to learn most obstacles can be overcome and relationships developed.