

2.9: Group Members and Listening

Learning Objectives

1. Identify seven challenges of listening in a group as opposed to listening to one person
2. Identify two advantages of group listening as opposed to listening to one person
3. Identify pros and cons of listening in digital groups

In the beginning, God made an individual—and then He made a pair. The pair formed a group, and together they begot others and thus the group grew. Unfortunately, working in a group led to friction, and the group disintegrated in conflict. And Cain settled in the land of Nod. There has been trouble with groups ever since. - Davis Sharp (Sharp, D. 2004, February 24. Workgroups that actually work. Business Times, p. 10).

I remind myself every morning: Nothing I say this day will teach me anything. So if I'm going to learn, I must do it by listening.
- Larry King

All listening takes energy, concentration, and fortitude. To a degree that will depend on the topic and the listener's individual personality, it also requires self-sacrifice, since at least part of the time that we're listening we may need to stifle the urge to question, correct, interrupt, or even silence a speaker.

Listening in a group is especially portentous. If you do it well, you can learn a great deal, present yourself in a favorable light, and contribute to a positive atmosphere and high level of productivity on the part of the group.

Poor listening in a group, on the other hand, can lead to serious negative consequences. Take the case of a group numbering six members. For every time it has to retrace its ground for five minutes and repeat things because of poor listening, that's 30 minutes of time wasted. Furthermore, misunderstandings among group members can be spread and magnified outside the group to the point that its image and effectiveness are weakened. When we get to chapter 12 we'll examine this danger and some of the other things that can go wrong when groups of people take part in formal meetings.

Challenges of Listening in a Group

Although all of us get practice at it for years as students and eventually as employees, listening in a group isn't easy. It presents more of a challenge to each member, in fact, than does listening to one other person at a time. Why? We'll consider seven reasons, all of which stem from the inherent differences between groups and pairs of people.

First, in a typical one-on-one conversation you're probably going to listen about 50% of the time, right? Compare that to your participation in a group, in which you're likely to spend between 65% and 90% of your time listening. (Steil, L.K. (1997). Listening training: The key to success in today's organizations. In M. Purdy & D. Borisoff (Eds.), *Listening in everyday life* (pp. 213–237). Landham, MD: University Press of America). If you listen with the same depth of energy and concentration in the group that you do with a single conversation partner, you're going to get tired out a lot more quickly.

Second, unless you know each of the other members of a group very well, you may not adequately gauge their knowledge and perspectives on a given topic before it's discussed. This may make you less likely to be receptive and responsive to their views on a topic, especially a contentious one. You may also have to work harder to understand their viewpoints.

Third, it may be difficult to keep up with changing levels of engagement on the part of other members of your group. People's attention and involvement may fluctuate because they're anxious about the circumstances of a discussion, about a particular message that's being sent, or even about extraneous factors in their lives that come to mind. At some moments in a group's activities, everyone may be attentive and actively involved; at others, they come and go both mentally and physically. Because all the members are rarely simultaneously "firing on all cylinders," you'll need to work particularly hard to distinguish between vital messages and routine, mundane, or irrelevant ones.

Fourth, in a group, you have less of an opportunity to influence others' thoughts and actions than you do in one-on-one communication. Deciding when to cease listening and interject your viewpoints so that they'll be most likely to be received positively by the largest possible proportion of group members is hard, especially if conversation is fast and free-wheeling.

Fifth, listening for long periods prevents you from releasing some of your own energy. Because you speak less in a group than in a one-on-one conversation, this build-up of energy may frustrate you and interfere with your ability to process what other people are saying.

Sixth, in a group, you have lots of time to daydream. People talk at about 100–150 words per minute, but your mind can process information at up to 600 words a minute. (Wolvin, A., & Coakley, C.G. *Listening* (3rd ed.). Dubuque, IA: 1988). You may not be compelled or feel a need to listen actively all the time that a group is interacting, nor do you have to worry about other people's assessment of your behavior if you're not the one speaking at a particular time. Thus, you'll be able to fill in the gap between other people's talking speed and your own thinking speed with thoughts of your choice...or with thoughts that just float into and out of your consciousness. You may even be tempted to surreptitiously glance at reading material unrelated to the group's activities, or to send or receive text messages.

Seventh, it may be harder to listen in a group because of the existence of social loafing. This is the tendency for each member to devote less energy to a task than she or he would alone because it's possible to let others take responsibility for getting things done.

Advantages to Listening in a Group

Now that we've reviewed some of its challenges and pitfalls, we should note that listening in a group offers potential benefits as well. Let's consider two major kinds.

The first big advantage to listening in a group is that it embodies the possibility of taking one of the characteristics that we earlier said could be used negatively—i.e., that you have time and opportunity to think about and react to what you hear—and using it in a positive way. Rather than using that surplus time to daydream or plan a rebuttal to other group members' messages, you can try in your mind to empathetically interpret the messages and decide whether and how to respond in ways that promote the well-being of the speakers and the whole group. Here's an illustration with a cross-cultural dimension (and with the person's name changed):

Yukio Sakai was a young Japanese man enrolled in a college public speaking class. Whatever went on in class, Yukio watched and listened raptly...and silently. Often the instructor posed open-ended questions to the group as a whole, such as, "What do you think John did well in his persuasive speech?" When such questions were posed, almost anyone in class except Yukio would pipe up with an opinion. To a casual observer, Yukio would seem to be "just sitting there."

If the instructor directly asked Yukio one of the questions, however, what usually happened was that he replied without the slightest hesitation. Furthermore, his answers conveyed insight, sound reasoning, and common sense. It would have been a mistake to take his apparent lack of activity at any given moment as a sign of incapacity.

As we discovered earlier in our chapter on intercultural and international group communication, someone from a high power distance culture such as Japan's may not outwardly react to messages from an authority figure such as a college instructor. What appears to be the person's inert passivity, however, could actually be thoughtful analysis and reflection. (Of course, you don't have to be Japanese to practice those good habits).

The second advantage of listening in groups is a product of the fact that there will always be more diverse perspectives and more interaction in a group than in a dyad. People can be fascinating, can't they? And many times the product of discussion among different people, with their different backgrounds and values, is something entirely unexpected. What this means, if you're a curious person at all, is that you should find lots to keep you entertained and educated as you listen to people in a group setting.

Listening in Digital Groups

As we mentioned earlier, digital groups can communicate either synchronously or asynchronously; that is, in real-time or with delays between messages. If you use synchronous tools, such as Skype or some other form of audio or video conferencing, the same challenges and advantages apply to digital groups that we've already presented. The only difference may be that you and the other group participants aren't physically in the same place.

On the other hand, group members who exchange oral messages asynchronously may confront more intense pros and cons. (Davis, M., Paleg, K., & Fanning, P. (2004). *How to communicate workbook; Powerful strategies for effective communication at work and home*. New York: MJF Books). The good news is that you'll have even more time than in a face-to-face group discussion to review and think about messages before reacting to them, which may yield wiser and calmer responses. The bad news is that the freshness and spontaneity of listening to each other's comments in real-time will be lost, which could tend to homogenize people's attitudes and make it less likely for "aha moments" to take place.

Furthermore, if other group members can't actually see you when you're communicating, you may feign attentiveness or behave in unorthodox ways. One of the authors remembers being part of a group that was conducting a phone interview with a candidate for a job at a university many years ago. When the person in charge of the interview started the exchange by saying, "We know it may be

uncomfortable for you to have to do an interview without being able to see us,” one of the candidates said, “That’s all right. I’m sitting here on my couch naked, anyway.”

Key Takeaway

Listening in a group presents significant challenges but can also pay important dividends.

Exercise 2.9.1

1. If you’re enrolled in college courses, do a little measuring in one of your next class sessions. Use a stopwatch to measure exactly how long you and one or two other students actually spend speaking during the class period. Ask a classmate to do the same for the instructor. Afterward, compare the measurements. What did you learn from the results?
2. Pick two groups of which you’re a member. How would you compare the level of participation of their members in group discussions? How do their members’ listening practices compare? In which group do you find it harder to function as a listener? Why?
3. The next time a group you’re part of meets, watch and listen for the person who says the least. Does the person appear to be listening? If you feel comfortable doing so, ask the person afterward how much of the time he or she was attending closely to the discussion. Does the person’s answer fit with how you’d assessed his or her behavior?
4. “To become a leader, you need to talk; to stay a leader, you need to listen.” Do you agree, or not? What examples can you give to support your viewpoint?

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