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Building Managers' Skills to Create Listening Environments

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Building Managers' Skills to Create Listening Environments

Abstract

Managers' ability to listen to employees and colleagues is an essential skill for developing a strong, successful service culture in their hospitality operation. By improving their own listening skills, managers can create a "listening environment" within their organization. One problem in this scenario is that most managers believe that their listening skills are better than they really are—as judged by their employees. Effective listening involves a set of related skills, and managers can improve those listening skills once they determine where their weaknesses lie. This tool explains the HURIER framework for analyzing listening effectiveness. HURIER is an acronym for hearing, understanding, remembering, interpreting, evaluating, and responding. Each of those six interrelated skills contributes to effective listening. The tool includes a self-assessment questionnaire that allows a manager to see which of those skills needs work. It also provides a second, companion questionnaire that enables a peer or employee evaluation of the manager's listening skills. Comparing those assessments is the first step in developing the effective listening skills that will help create a successful and effective service culture.

Keywords

Cornell, tools, listening, management, leadership

Disciplines

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Comments

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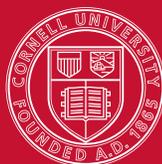


Building Managers' Skills to Create Listening Environments

Cornell Hospitality Tools

by Judi Brownell

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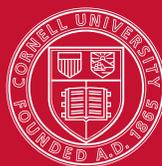
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Building Managers’ Skills to Create Listening Environments

by Judi Brownell

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Judi Brownell, Ph.D., is professor of organizational behavior and management communication and dean of students at the School of Hotel Administration (jlb18@cornell.edu). Her research projects include studies on managerial listening behavior and the competencies required for global hospitality leaders. She has created tools to assess employee-organization fit and the communication of service values. Her current research focuses on listening as it relates to communicating and maintaining service quality standards in the international cruise industry. The author of several textbooks, she has published over 80 articles and serves on several editorial boards. She is also past president of the International Listening Association and has received awards for her research in this field. As a trainer and consultant for a wide range of hospitality organizations, she has designed assessment centers for hospitality leadership development. Prior to her appointment as dean of students, she was the school’s associate dean for academic affairs and was its director for graduate studies. She has also been academic area director for both the organization behavior and management communication disciplines.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Managers' ability to listen to employees and colleagues is an essential skill for developing a strong, successful service culture in their hospitality operation. By improving their own listening skills, managers can create a "listening environment" within their organization. One problem in this scenario is that most managers believe that their listening skills are better than they really are—as judged by their employees. Effective listening involves a set of related skills, and managers can improve those listening skills once they determine where their weaknesses lie. This tool explains the HURIER framework for analyzing listening effectiveness. HURIER is an acronym for hearing, understanding, remembering, interpreting, evaluating, and responding. Each of those six interrelated skills contributes to effective listening. The tool includes a self-assessment questionnaire that allows a manager to see which of those skills needs work. It also provides a second, companion questionnaire that enables a peer or employee evaluation of the manager's listening skills. Comparing those assessments is the first step in developing the effective listening skills that will help create a successful and effective service culture.

Building Managers' Skills to Create Listening Environments

by Judi Brownell

Setting the stage for high quality customer service involves more than selecting the right employees and training them well—although those are critical steps. Managers must also develop and maintain a strong service culture by focusing on what happens inside the organization.¹ This requires that you pay as much attention to creating a positive work environment for your employees as you do to creating a memorable experience for your guests. To meet this challenge of effective management by developing a strong internal service culture, you need to develop skills in effective listening—thereby creating what I call a “listening environment.”²

¹ B. Boon, “Working with the Front-of-House/Back-of-House Boundary: Room Attendants in the Hotel Guest Room Space,” *Journal of Management and Organization*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (2007), pp. 160-175; K. McIntyre, *Understanding a Climate for Customer Service* (Fort Collins, CO: Colorado State University, 2005), AAT 3185524.

² J. Brownell, “Creating Strong Listening Environments: A Key Hospitality Management Task,” *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (1994), pp. 3-10; W.J. Glynn, S. de Burca, T. Brannick, B. Fynes, and S. Ennis, “Listening Practices and Performance in Service Organizations,” *International Journal of Service Industry Management*, Vol. 14, No. 4 (2003), pp. 310-331.

This tool provides an overview of the importance of managerial listening within service organizations and focuses on how managers, through effective listening practices, can improve their listening skills to foster and sustain the strong service culture and to create the “listening environment” that I just mentioned. I outline the difficulties many managers face as they develop listening competence, and I offer a framework for assessing and improving managerial listening in hospitality settings. This tool gives you a set of surveys that will assist you in creating a strong listening environment, whether you manage a hotel, restaurant, club, ship, or other hospitality enterprise. The survey results allow managers to identify the key listening components that will improve managerial listening behavior and, as a consequence, raise the quality of service.

The Impact of Listening on Service

One of the most direct outcomes of improved managerial listening is stronger relationships within the hospitality organization. This concept, known as “service within,” has been defined and studied in a number of ways.³ One common perspective is to recognize that every employee, no matter what his or her job responsibilities, serves at least one other internal customer—another employee. The premise is that servicing internal customers is as important as serving guests,

³ J. Walters, “Fostering a Culture of Deep Inquiry and Listening,” *Journal for Quality and Participation*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (2005), pp. 4-9; S. Kelly, “Developing Customer Orientation among Service Employees,” *Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science*, Vol. 20, No. 4 (1992), pp. 27-36; D. Varoglu and Z. Eser, “How Service Employees Can Be Treated as Internal Customers in the Hospitality Industry,” *Business Review*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (2006), pp. 30-35.

since satisfied and secure employees are more likely to go the extra mile to provide excellent service to guests.⁴ In fact, a number of researchers have proposed that the internal customer must come first—that is, the internal service chain needs to be identified and nurtured if hospitality organizations are to deliver their services successfully.⁵

Listening to colleagues becomes essential if managers are to create a positive and supportive work culture. The impact of listening on team performance cannot be underestimated, especially when individual members hold different perspectives and goals. When employees feel “heard,” when managers and colleagues are responsive to their needs or concerns, they are likely to feel more empowered and loyal. This attitude fosters a greater receptiveness to new ideas and facilitates collaborative efforts.

Looking at a hotel environment, we can identify numerous examples of service within and internal-customer service chains. A housekeeper, for instance, serves the front desk employees by preparing rooms to sell and release. The housekeepers, however, depend on maintenance to fix mechanical problems and on their colleagues in the laundry

⁴ J.L. Heskett, W.E. Sasser, and L.A. Schlesinger, *The Service Profit Chain* (New York: The Free Press, 1997); T.B. Maber, *Creating a Great Workplace: Exploring Shared Values and Employee Engagement through Appreciative Inquiry* (Victoria, BC: Royal Roads University, 2006); K. Albrecht, *Service Within: Solving the Middle Management Leadership Crisis* (Homewood, IL: Irwin, 1990).

⁵ A. Paraskevas, “Exploring Hotel Internal Service Chains: A Theoretical Approach,” *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, Vol. 13, Nos. 4-5 (2001), pp. 251-258; J. Theders, “Creating a Culture that Emphasizes Customer Service,” *American Agent & Broker*, Vol. 79, No. 7 (2007), pp. 38-44.

to provide the linens and other supplies that are needed. If there are breakdowns at any point in this system—if maintenance disregards housekeepers' needs, or if the front desk attendants release rooms without first listening to housekeepers' concerns—the result is diminished service to the guest.

The concept of service within extends far beyond accomplishing interdependent tasks, which is an everyday occurrence in a hospitality enterprise. Rather, this idea suggests a team-centered, family-centered metaphor. When employees feel part of a collaborative effort, when they are assured that their coworkers care about their work experience, turnover is reduced and employee commitment increases.⁶ Individual employees who recognize how their efforts are related to the overall service experience are more likely to feel personal ownership in and responsibility for the guest's satisfaction as well. The dishwasher who sees only a stack of dirty dishes may find it difficult to put in her best effort, but that dishwasher's commitment increases substantially when she realizes that the cooks and servers are depending upon her to fill a role in creating an exceptional dining experience for the guest.

The quality of the manager-employee relationship is greatly influenced by the manager's listening ability, and this relationship, in turn, has a substantial impact on establishing a strong service culture.⁷ All indications are that an internal service environment that ends in high performance begins with the manager's listening behavior.

The Manager's Role in Creating Listening Environments

What you do as a manager has profound consequences on your employees, their service attitudes, and their subsequent

⁶ D. Gale, "The Ten-minute Manager's Guide to...Creating Community at Work," *Restaurants & Institutions*, Vol. 117, No. 9 (2007), p. 22; L. Sun, S. Aryee, and K. Law, "High-performance Human Resource Practices, Citizen Behavior, and Organizational Performance: A Relational Perspective," *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 50, No. 3 (2007), p. 558.

⁷ G. Cowan, "Case Study: Improving Employee Satisfaction as a Means to Improve Customer Satisfaction," *Workspan*, Vol. 50, No. 3 (2007), p. 34; J. Joyner, "Listening Increases Support from Coworkers," *Computing Canada*, Vol. 27, No. 22 (2001), p. 31.

interpersonal relationships.⁸ Here, I focus on the following three managerial activities that contribute to a strong listening environment: encouraging a smooth flow of information throughout the organization,⁹ modeling behaviors that reflect concern for the individual employee, and serving as a symbolic leader. Through mindful choices and interventions, managers readily can create cultures where listening becomes a key value, whether at the team, department, unit, or corporate level.¹⁰

(1) Encourage Information Sharing

Because each person responds differently to a particular message, managers need to take opportunities to get to know each employee and tailor internal communication according to what they have learned about their employees. More critically, employees often seek information through "the grapevine"—channels that are not connected with those used by management to communicate essential information.¹¹ Studies have found, for instance, that while managers often communicate through printed materials and training programs, employees are more likely to tap into informal networks as they observe their peers and engage in informal

⁸ See, for example: S. Mc Caulay and G. Clark, "Creating a Customer-focused Culture: Some Practical Frameworks and Tools," *Managing Service Quality*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (1998), pp. 183-186; and C. Lobdell, K. Sonoda, and W. Arnold, "The Influence of Perceived Supervisor Listening Behavior on Employee Commitment," *Journal of the International Listening Association*, Vol. 7 (1993), pp. 92-110.

⁹ O. Kyriakidou and J. Gore, "Learning by Example: Benchmarking Organizational Culture in Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure SMEs," *Benchmarking: An International Journal*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (2005), pp. 192-206; and M. Testa and L. Sipe, "A Systems Approach to Service Quality: Tools for Hospitality Leaders," *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, Vol. 47, No. 1 (February 2006), pp. 36-49.

¹⁰ R. Teare, H. Ingram, G. Prestoungange, and E. Sandelands, "High Performance Learning at Work," *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, Vol. 14, No. 7 (2002), pp. 375-381.

¹¹ A. Ellinger, K. Watkins, and R. Bostrom, "Managers as Facilitators of Learning in Learning Organizations," *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (1999), pp. 105-126; and J. Frahm and K. Brown, "Developing Communicative Competencies for a Learning Organization," *Journal of Management Development*, Vol. 25, Nos. 3-4 (2006), pp. 201-211.

Managers can create cultures where listening becomes a key value.

conversations to better understand “what is going on.”¹² Given this organizational reality, effective listening increases the chances that information will be effectively shared and misunderstandings will be reduced. The diversity of the workforce makes the need for listening effectiveness even more critical. Listening, not speaking, becomes the key to establishing greater understanding and stronger relationships among those from diverse cultures and backgrounds.¹³ Not only might it be difficult to understand non-native speakers, but their nonverbal cues and behaviors related to time and space also may be unfamiliar. Under these circumstances, managers need to focus substantial attention on creating shared meanings among employees as well as on avoiding misunderstandings resulting from these differences.¹⁴ Although effective listening requires time and effort, the rewards are substantial.

There is no question that hospitality organizations with strong listening environments have a competitive advantage.¹⁵ When managers and employees listen, knowledge is

shared and every employee becomes a valued resource.¹⁶ As information moves more freely throughout the organization, it increases employees’ self confidence and sense of belonging. This activity also facilitates a continuous improvement process¹⁷ and increases the organization’s overall adaptability and agility.¹⁸

(2) Model Effective Listening

Never underestimate your ability to influence employees through your daily actions and activities.¹⁹ Simons writes about the importance of what he calls “behavioral integrity,” which is employees’ perceptions of the alignment between what managers say and what they actually do.²⁰ If your goal is to create strong listening environments, you cannot afford to have your staff question whether you personally are committed to listening.

Modeling effective listening practices inspires employees and sets the stage for others to follow. By demonstrating sincere concern for employees’ ideas, managers make it possible for all of the organization’s members to feel empowered and valued. In many instances, serving as a role model requires that you rethink priorities and reconceptualize everyday practices and procedures.

(3) Use Symbols (Be a Symbolic Leader)

You’ve likely heard the saying, “You cannot not communicate.” Everything a manager says and does sends messages—

¹² J. Brownell and D. Jameson, “Closing the GAPPP: Increasing Your Internal Influence with Confident Communication,” *Cornell Hospitality Tools*, No. 5 (2005), Cornell Center for Hospitality Research, chr.cornell.edu.

¹³ D. Jones, “Multinationals Must Be Flexible to Be Successful, BP Chief: Listen, as Well as Speak,” *USA Today*, 1999, p. B12:1; J. Brownell, “Effective Communication in Multicultural Organizations: A Receiver-defined Activity,” in *Exploring the Rhetoric of International Professional Communication: An Agenda for Teachers and Researchers*, ed. C.R. Lovitt and Dixie Goswami (Amityville, NY: Baywood Publishers, 1999), pp. 171-187; J. Haas and W. Arnold, “An Examination of the Role of Listening in Judgments of Communication Competence in Co-workers,” *Journal of Business Communication*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (1995), pp. 123-139.

¹⁴ C. Kiewitz, J.B. Weaver III, H.B. Brosius, and G. Weimann, “Cultural Differences in Listening Style Preferences: A Comparison of Young Adults in Germany, Israel, and the United States,” *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, Vol. 9 (1997), pp. 233-247.

¹⁵ D. Lustri, I. Miura, and S. Takahashi, “Knowledge Management Model: Practical Application for Competency Development,” *The Learning Organization*, Vol. 14, No. 2 (2007), pp. 186-203; P. Murray, “Cycles of Organizational Learning: A Conceptual Approach,” *Management Decision*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (2002), pp. 239-247.

¹⁶ Frahm and Brown, *op.cit.*; and M. Stine, T. Thompson, and L. Cusella, “The Impact of Organizational Structure and Supervisory Listening Indicators on Subordinate Support, Trust, Intrinsic Motivation, and Performance,” *International Journal of Listening*, Vol. 9 (1995), pp. 84-100.

¹⁷ S. Cornett, *Learning Experiences of Leaders in Developing Characteristics of Leadership Identified for Learning Organizations* (Santa Barbara, CA: The Fielding Institute, 1998).

¹⁸ Testa and Sipe, *op.cit.*

¹⁹ S.D. Johnson and C. Bechler, “Examining the Relationship between Listening Effectiveness and Leadership Emergence: Perceptions, Behaviors, and Recall,” *Small Group Research*, Vol. 29 (1998), pp. 452-471.

²⁰ T. Simons, “Behavioral Integrity: The Perceived Alignment between Managers’ Words and Deeds as a Research Focus,” *Organization Science*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (2002), pp. 18-35.

Managerial listening is important, but achieving high levels of listening competence is not an easy task.

whether intentional or unintentional. It is therefore important to be consistent about the priority placed on listening and to demonstrate its importance not only through modeling listening behavior but also through less direct, symbolic means.

Managers can serve as symbolic leaders in a variety of ways. You reflect your priorities through your use of language and the stories you tell. Your communication will contain “value-laden images,” which have both informational and emotional value. Stories about how coworkers reached out when someone was having personal challenges, or volunteered to take an extra shift on particularly hectic convention weekends—how they listened and responded with empathy and understanding—need to be repeated and shared. Whether in the employee cafeteria or in a weekly department meeting, the behaviors and events you discuss can have an impact on employees’ understanding of what is important and the “way things are done” in your department or company. New employees, in particular, depend on these cues as they come to understand the organization’s norms and culture.²¹

The policies, routines, and rituals you put into place also contribute to establishing a listening environment. Leaders use symbols to indicate and strengthen the behaviors that they profess are important to them. Suggestion boxes and open office doors let employees know you care what they think—that you are listening to them. When you have lunch in the employee cafeteria or recognize employees’ small accomplishments each day, you contribute to the listening culture. Room arrangements that provide opportunities for informal conversation denote the importance of listening. By making listening competence a criterion in selection processes or by allocating rewards to those who listen effectively, service within is reinforced and the listening environment is strengthened.

In addition to the nonverbal symbols of a listening environment that I just mentioned, symbols also may be verbal, including postings on hallway bulletin boards and ready ac-

²¹ A. Grof, “Communication in the Creation of Corporate Values,” *Corporate Communications*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (2001), pp. 193-199.

cess to information, not to mention the actual conversations that take place because of open doors and appropriate room arrangements. Again, these make the importance of listening easier to demonstrate and experience. The accumulated effect of these activities is to demonstrate that listening is one of your highest priorities.

Challenges in Assessing and Improving Managerial Listening

While it is evident that managerial listening is important, achieving high levels of listening competence is not an easy task. To begin with, the listening process itself remains poorly understood.²² Although we speak of active listening, in reality listening is covert and cannot be observed directly. Thus, listening is difficult to define and challenging to learn. We must also point out that dissatisfaction with the manager’s listening behavior also has halo effects—employees who are unhappy with how well their managers listen tend to also be less satisfied with their work environment.²³ Let’s look at three barriers to improved listening.

(1) Lack of clarity regarding the constructs of listening.

Lack of consensus on a definition for listening is a significant concern, which was highlighted by research I conducted to assess managerial listening in hospitality organizations.²⁴ This study revealed that while many employees were dissatisfied with their manager’s listening skills, the employees defined “poor listening” in different ways depending upon the particular organizational context. While

²² J. Brownell, *Listening: Attitudes, Principles, and Skills*, 3rd edition (New York: Allyn & Bacon, (2006); B.R. Witkin and W. Trochim, “Toward a Synthesis of Listening Constructs: A Concept Map Analysis,” *International Journal of Listening*, Vol. 11 (1997), pp. 69-87; and E.C. Glenn, “A Content Analysis of Fifty Definitions of Listening,” *Journal of the International Listening Association*, Vol. 3 (1989), pp. 21-31.

²³ Joyner, *op.cit.*

²⁴ J. Brownell, “Hospitality Managers’ Communication Practices,” *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (1992), pp. 111-128.

some employees assigned low ratings because their manager did not follow through with what he or she promised, others complained that no opportunities were provided to give their manager feedback. Still others noted that their manager did all the talking and had preconceived opinions that were nearly impossible to change. In addition, this study confirmed that managers' own perceptions of their listening behavior were seldom accurate. Worse, few managers recognized that their employees were dissatisfied with their listening effectiveness.

(2) Distinguishing between listening and perceptions of listening.

Service employees who interact with guests are expected to display nonverbal behaviors that indicate interest and concern. Staff members at all levels quickly learn to make eye contact, nod, smile, and provide the indicators which North American customers associate with effective listening. The reality, however, is that greeting or checking in guests all day can take its toll in emotional labor, so that as employees become fatigued and guests' requirements become routine, listening declines, along with attention generally.

This phenomenon occurs just as frequently during internal communication, when stressed managers and their employees may nod to acknowledge coworkers' comments but are in fact distracted or even uninterested. As a consequence of seeing a nod or other response, employees may at first believe that their manager "listened," but when no action is taken or when information has to be repeated, they soon discover that in fact they have not been heard. In such cases, perceptions of listening and actual listening effectiveness are poorly aligned. Managers who demonstrate the nonverbal indicators associated with listening may not be attentive to what an employee is saying.

(3) The role of motivation in listening improvement.

Listening skills are particularly difficult to enhance and assess due to the strong role motivation plays in listening

effectiveness. It appears that unless managers are motivated to listen, little can be done to improve their performance.²⁵ While a number of listening assessment instruments have been developed over the years, it is troublesome that there appears to be a low correlation between managers' scores on these instruments and the ratings that employees give them on the job. This gap between ability and application is apparent in the majority of situations as managers become consumed with issues and dilemmas that reduce their ability to focus on employee concerns.

The other side of this coin is that most managers seem to learn to listen well if they are sufficiently motivated and if they have the necessary native ability.²⁶ Steil and Bommelje expressed this as the LAW of listening, that is, Listening = Ability + Willingness.²⁷ Therefore, if you are motivated (willing) to improve your listening, the six-point model presented below will be useful in helping you to assess and develop your abilities.

The Six-Component HURIER Listening Model

Researchers now agree that listening is a multi-faceted activity that can be profitably viewed as a process involving separate, but interrelated skills. I developed the HURIER model, named as an acronym of its elements, following an extensive needs assessment that revealed hospitality employees' varied definitions of "poor managerial listening."²⁸ As mentioned above, some complained that their manager never took time to hear their concerns, while others were frustrated that no action was taken as a result of their conversations. Still oth-

²⁵ S. Bentley, "Listening and Memory," in *Perspectives on Listening*, ed. A. D. Wolvin and C. G. Coakley (Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing, 1993), pp. 60-77; J. Brownell, "Teaching Listening: Some Thoughts on the Behavioral Approach," *Business Communication Quarterly*, Vol. 57, No. 4 (1994), pp. 19-26.

²⁶ C.M. Kelly, "Mental Ability and Personality Factors in Listening," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, Vol. 49 (1983), pp. 152-156.

²⁷ L.K. Steil and R.K. Bommelje, *Listening Leaders: The Ten Golden Rules to Listen, Lead, and Succeed* (St. Paul, MN: Beaver's Pond Press, 2004).

²⁸ Brownell (1992), *op.cit.*

EXHIBIT 1

The HURIER Listening Model

1. **H** – Develop Hearing

- Do not multi-task when listening—focus entirely on the speaker
- Eliminate distractions
- Position yourself where it is easy to hear
- Postpone listening if you cannot concentrate
- Be prepared to listen

2. **U** – Increase Understanding

- Ask for clarification when vocabulary or jargon is unfamiliar
- Restate to ensure that you have understood completely
- Ask questions to clarify intentions
- Distinguish details from the speaker's main points
- Refrain from interrupting the person speaking

3. **R** – Improve Remembering

- Quickly identify good reasons to remember what you hear
- Stay calm and focused—stress interferes with memory
- Learn short and long term memory techniques
- Continuously practice to improve your memory

4. **I** – Interpret Accurately

- Observe and consider the speaker's nonverbal cues
- Listen for emotional messages as well as words
- Take the context of the communication into account
- Encourage the speaker
- Recognize and account for individual differences

5. **E** – Evaluate Wisely

- Listen to the entire message before responding
- Apply guidelines of sound reasoning in making judgments
- Distinguish emotional from logical appeals
- Recognize the influence of your personal bias and values
- Differentiate between the ideas presented and the person speaking

6. **R** – Respond Appropriately

- Be aware of your unintentional nonverbal communication
- Recognize how your response influences the speaker's decisions
- Distinguish among different types of response—including judgments, empathy, opinions, and questions
- Expand your behavioral flexibility—make choices based on the needs of the situation rather than your habits and comfort level

ers perceived their manager as uninterested or unapproachable even though they spoke with her frequently.

The HURIER model (shown in Exhibit 1) conceptualizes listening as a complex, multi-faceted activity and seeks to more clearly define the sets of behaviors involved in the listening process. By taking a behavioral approach,²⁹ managers are able to assess their behaviors in each of the model's six components and focus their efforts on those skills that will have the greatest impact on performance. Each of these six interrelated skill clusters is described below.

1. Hearing (Concentration)

The average person hears and processes information at a rate at least twice the pace of normal speech. This means that managers have a good deal of “unused” mental time as they listen to employees—time that is often spent considering events and activities unrelated to the conversation at hand.³⁰ Numerous other factors also serve to distract from the listening process, whether it be an event in the next room, a lack of sleep, or unfamiliarity with the language being spoken.

Whether distracted by internal or external factors, managers who are unable to hear or to concentrate risk getting the story wrong—resulting in misunderstandings and stress. Often, managers blame their poor memories for breakdowns in communication when the problem wasn't forgetfulness. They simply never paid attention. When employees' messages are neglected, they quickly conclude that their manager is uninterested in their challenges and ideas.

2. Understanding (or Comprehension)

Listening comprehension concerns the extent to which messages—ideas, arguments, descriptions—are understood. With increased specialization and the use of technical vocabularies, comprehension has become an increasingly vital component of the listening process in hospitality settings.³¹ Catering employees have to be able to communicate with sales and marketing personnel, for instance, and information technology specialists need to be understood by the reservations staff.

The hospitality industry's cultural diversity makes listening comprehension a managerial concern. Expatriate managers need to learn the communication conventions of their new destination, while those in the United States likewise must find common ground with talented employees whose native language is not English. In either case the result may

²⁹ Brownell, *Communication Quarterly*, *op.cit.*

³⁰ B.R. Witkin, “Human Information Processing,” in *Perspectives on Listening* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing, 1993), pp. 23-59.

³¹ R.N. Bostrom, *Listening Behavior: Measurement and Application* (New York: Guilford Press, 1990).

be that staff members have difficulty following directions or understanding explanations.³²

Several standardized listening tests have been developed that measure aspects of listening comprehension, and numerous studies document their validity and reliability.³³ Researchers and practitioners alike have been interested in the variables that affect listening comprehension and in the ways in which individuals can improve their understanding of the messages they hear.³⁴

3. Remembering

The ability to remember and recall is so closely linked to listening effectiveness that almost all models of the listening process include memory as a key component.³⁵ Employees depend on their managers to remember what they say. Poor memory not only creates dissatisfaction among employees, but it almost inevitably results in lower productivity and inefficiency as well.³⁶

As you might suspect, managers differ in their ability to recall information, whether short-term or long-term. Your ability to remember and recall what employees tell you is a key factor in their assessment of your overall listening effectiveness. Consider the types of listening challenges you encounter on a daily basis—distractions, language barriers, multitasking. Any of these will interfere with your ability to remember a conversation, even if you sincerely intended to make note of the information. Those managers interested in increasing employee morale and trust would do well to focus on developing effective memory techniques.³⁷

³² T.D. Thomlison, "Intercultural Listening," in *Listening in Everyday Life: A Personal and Professional Approach*, ed. D. Borisoff and M. Purdy (New York: University Press of America, 1991), pp. 87-137

³³ W.A. Villaume and J.B. Weaver III, "A Factorial Approach to Establishing Reliable Listening Measures from the WBLT and KCLT: Full Information Factor Analysis of Dichotomous Data," *International Journal of Listening*, Vol. 10 (1996), pp. 1-20; M. Fitch-Hauser and M.A. Hughes, "The Conceptualization and Measurement of Listening," *Journal of the International Listening Association*, Vol. 6 (1992), pp. 6-22.

³⁴ R.N. Bostrom and E.S. Waldhart, *Kentucky Comprehensive Listening Skills Test* (Lexington, KY: Kentucky Listening Research Center, 1983); J.I. Brown, G.R. Carlsen, and L. Carstens, *Brown-Carlsen-Carstens Listening Comprehension Test* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1995); and K.W. Watson and L.L. Barker, *Watson-Barker Listening Test* (New Orleans: Spectra Publishers, 1991).

³⁵ K.K. Halone, T.M. Cunconan, C.G. Coakley, and A.D. Wolvin, "Toward the Establishment of General Dimensions Underlying the Listening Process," *International Journal of Listening*, Vol. 12 (1998), pp. 12-18; and Witkin and Trochim, *op.cit.*

³⁶ S. Bentley, "Benchmarking Listening Behaviors: Is Effective Listening What the Speaker Says It Is?," *International Journal of Listening*, Vol. 11 (1997), pp. 51-68.

³⁷ Bentley (1993), *op.cit.*

4. Interpretation (or Empathy)

While it is important for managers to understand the literal meaning of what they hear, recognizing employees' as individuals requires listening beyond the literal substance of the message. Listeners must also take into account the speaker's perceptions, attitudes, values, and experiences. Much of the information that enhances the verbal message, and which provides important clues in interpreting an employee's intended meaning, comes in nonverbal form. Managers who are skilled at interpreting messages—who demonstrate what has become known as emotional intelligence³⁸—pay attention to nonverbal cues from facial expressions, eye contact, gestures, and other body movements.

The diversity of the hospitality workforce demands that emphasis be placed on interpreting messages. Valuing diversity, a recurring theme, requires managers to see things from the other person's point of view. Listeners must understand and respect the person speaking before responding to his or her ideas. Those studying empathy emphasize the importance of this other-centered perspective to the development and maintenance of effective relationships at work.³⁹

5. Evaluation

Effective managers are perceived as open-minded; they have learned to withhold judgment until after they have heard and understood what others are saying. As employees become empowered to participate in decision-making processes, the quality of their decisions will improve and promote organizational effectiveness. Managers who are successful in creating strong listening environments recognize and work to reduce prejudice and personal bias. They refrain from interrupting, recognize stereotypes, and set an example of effective listening for their employees.

Managers who listen well also distinguish emotional appeals from valid evidence and logical argument.⁴⁰ Because

³⁸ See: eqi.org/index.htm, maintained by Stephen Hein. The term emotional intelligence was coined by: Wayne Payne, "A Study of Emotion: Developing Emotional Intelligence," The Union Institute, 1985. Further work was done by: J.D. Mayer, M.T. DiPaolo, and P. Salovey, "Perceiving Affective Content in Ambiguous Visual Stimuli: A Component of Emotional Intelligence," *Journal of Personality Assessment*, Vol. 54 (1990), pp. 772-781; and P. Salovey and J.D. Mayer, "Emotional Intelligence," *Imagination, Cognition, and Personality*, Vol. 9 (1990), pp. 185-211. The term was popularized by Daniel Goleman. See, for example: D. Goleman, "What Makes a Leader?," *Harvard Business Review*, Vol. 82, No. 1 (2004), pp. 82-97; and R. Baron and J.D. Parker, *Handbook of Emotional Intelligence* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999).

³⁹ T. Bruneau, "Empathy and Listening," in *Perspectives on Listening*, ed. A.D. Wolvin and C.G. Coakley (Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing, 1993), pp. 185-200; R. Dawda and S.D. Hart, "Assessing Emotional Intelligence: Reliability and Validity of the Baron Emotional Quotient Inventory," *Journal of Personal and Individual Differences*, Vol. 28 (2000), pp. 797-812.

⁴⁰ E. Eisenberg, "Ambiguity as Strategy in Organizational Communication," *Communication Monographs*, Vol. 51, No. 3 (1984), pp. 227-242.

they recognize differing viewpoints, they seek a range of information before making their decisions.

6. Response

Communication is no longer viewed as a process of speaking and listening in turn. Instead, managers and their employees simultaneously send and receive messages, whether by texting or email, and process incoming information as they provide feedback and formulate their response. Even in the electronic environment, though, employees make judgments about their manager's listening effectiveness based on both verbal and nonverbal responses. Given the wide range of channels for those options, it becomes essential to focus on the quality and appropriateness of each response as a key element in establishing strong listening environments.

As a starting point for listening improvement, managers might begin by examining how they respond when one of their employees asks for advice, describes a personal problem, or misunderstands directions. Do you typically give advice, make a judgment, ask a question (all appropriate), or laugh (perhaps not so appropriate)? For each of your typical responses, envision how that reaction influences employees' morale, confidence, and motivation. You have the opportunity with every encounter to either increase the strength of the listening environment or to damage it.

Using the HURIER Assessment Instrument

Since we know that managers are usually poor judges of their own listening effectiveness, the listening tool presented here is particularly useful. It provides a user-friendly assessment of managerial listening behavior specific to hospitality contexts. If listening is viewed as a key ingredient for success, this instrument has tremendous value in suggesting a framework for identifying and improving specific components of the listening process.

The self-assessment instrument (Survey A) can be used by managers to heighten their own awareness of the six key dimensions of listening competence. Since each component represents a distinct skill set, managers might then focus on developing those behaviors that will have the greatest possible impact on their performance. Results from this self-assessment might also be used as a catalyst in performance dialogues to clarify priorities and to establish personal goals.

To gain additional information, the companion assessment (Survey B) can be distributed to department members or work teams to assess employees' perceptions of their manager's listening effectiveness. When used as a professional development tool, a comparison between self-scores (Survey A) and the means of staff responses (Survey B) on each of the six dimensions provides insights that will enable managers to set personal improvement goals that will foster stronger listening environments.

When managers have a better idea of their listening strengths and development needs, they can take direct action to improve performance. When the means of employees' ratings on each of the six listening dimensions are shared, managers are motivated to address listening challenges that may not have been previously apparent to them. Exhibit 1 suggests specific activities to address skills in each of the listening components.

Conclusion

A key aspect of management is to influence employees to reach a particular goal. Given the importance of communication in that process, one of the most essential management goals is establishing a culture where listening is valued. As a manager, your listening ability has a tremendous impact on your organization. Developing a strong listening environment is an essential first step in moving toward service excellence, from the inside out. ■

LISTENING SELF-ASSESSMENT

Your HURIER Listening Profile

Each of the questions on this listening self-assessment corresponds with one of six components of the HURIER listening model: (1) Hearing, (2) Understanding, (3) Remembering, (4) Interpreting, (5) Evaluating, and (6) Responding.

Think about your listening behavior as it relates specifically to your employees. How do you think you will score?

(1) I think I will score highest on component _____

(2) I will probably score lowest on component _____

Hospitality Manager's Listening Self-Assessment Survey

Survey A

Respond to each of the following questions concerning *your perceptions* of how you listen to your employees on the job. Use the key below:

5 - always 4 - usually 3 - sometimes 2 - infrequently 1 - never

- ___1. I weigh all the facts before making a decision.
- ___2. I am sensitive to an employee's feelings when he or she talks with me.
- ___3. I concentrate fully on what an employee is saying to me.
- ___4. I encourage those I work with to express their opinions.
- ___5. I always try to see how different pieces of information or ideas relate to one another.
- ___6. I listen to the entire message without interrupting, whether I agree with what is said or not.
- ___7. I let an employee know immediately that I have understood what was said to me.
- ___8. I remember what an employee says to me, even when in stressful situations.
- ___9. I recognize an employee's main points and am not sidetracked by less important details.
- ___10. I am sensitive to vocal cues when an employee or customer communicates with me.
- ___11. I give an employee my complete attention when he or she is speaking to me.
- ___12. I take a variety of factors that influence our interactions into account when an employee speaks to me.
- ___13. I can recall what an employee has said to me when I see him or her several days later.
- ___14. I respond in an appropriate and timely manner to employees' information and requests.
- ___15. I make sure I am ready to listen when an employee approaches me.
- ___16. I notice an employee's facial expressions, body posture, and other nonverbal behaviors and take them into account.
- ___17. I wait until an employee presents all the information before drawing any conclusions.
- ___18. I allow for the fact that individuals and circumstances change over time.
- ___19. I successfully overcome distractions when I listen, such as background noises.
- ___20. I make sure that I accurately understand what an employee says to me.
- ___21. I actively seek information for better understanding of a situation.
- ___22. I ask for clarification if an employee uses unfamiliar terms.
- ___23. I remember the details of things that were said weeks or even months ago.
- ___24. I am patient and focused when listening to speakers of another language.

When you are done with the ratings, transfer the scores to the grids on the next page.

Hospitality Manager's Listening Self-Assessment Survey (continued)

Your Survey Results

When you have completed the HURIER listening self-assessment, calculate your scores in the following manner:

- (1) Write the number you assigned to each response on the appropriate line below.
- (2) Add up the points you gave yourself for each of the six sets of questions. U
- (3) Place your total for each set in the "Total" space.

Component I: Hearing 3 _____ 11 _____ 15 _____ 19 _____ Total: _____	Component II: Understanding 9 _____ 20 _____ 22 _____ 24 _____ Total: _____	Component III: Remembering 5 _____ 8 _____ 13 _____ 23 _____ Total: _____
Component IV: Interpreting 2 _____ 10 _____ 12 _____ 16 _____ Total: _____	Component V: Evaluating 1 _____ 6 _____ 17 _____ 18 _____ Total: _____	Component VI: Responding 4 _____ 7 _____ 14 _____ 21 _____ Total: _____

Now, fill in your total points in the first column and then rank order the six components.

Component of HURIER Listening Model	Total Points	Rank Items	Excellent 16 – 20 pts	Adequate 11 – 15 pts	Neglected Under 11 pts
Component I: Hearing					
Component II: Understanding					
Component III: Remembering					
Component IV: Interpreting					
Component V: Evaluating					
Component VI: Responding					

Suggested points for analysis

What does this information tell you about your self-perceptions of your listening behavior?

How did your actual scores compare with your earlier guess?

In what skill areas are you high?

What do results suggest about how you might further develop specific listening components to strengthen the listening environment?

If you would like to know how your employees would rate your listening behaviors, use the companion Survey B to find out!

Employees' Assessment of Manager's Listening Behavior

Survey B

Your manager realizes the value of effective listening and needs you to provide feedback that he or she can use to improve performance still further.

Imagine an encounter with your manager in your current workplace, and respond to each of the following questions concerning *your* perceptions of his or her listening behavior. Use the key below:

5 - always 4 - usually 3 - sometimes 2 - infrequently 1 - never

- ___ 1. My manager weighs all the facts before making a decision.
- ___ 2. My manager is sensitive to my feelings when he or she talks with me.
- ___ 3. My manager concentrates fully on what I have to say.
- ___ 4. My manager encourages me to express my opinions.
- ___ 5. My manager tries to see how different pieces of information or ideas relate to one another.
- ___ 6. My manager listens to the entire message without interrupting, whether in agreement or not.
- ___ 7. My manager lets me know immediately that he or she has understood what was said.
- ___ 8. My manager remembers what I say, even when in stressful situations.
- ___ 9. My manager recognizes my main points and is not sidetracked by less important details.
- ___ 10. My manager is sensitive to vocal cues when communicating with a customer or me.
- ___ 11. My manager gives me his/her complete attention when he or she is speaking to me.
- ___ 12. My manager takes a variety of factors that influence our interactions into account when speaking to me.
- ___ 13. My manager recalls what I said when I see him or her several days later.
- ___ 14. My manager responds in an appropriate and timely manner to my information and requests.
- ___ 15. My manager makes sure to be ready to listen when an employee approaches.
- ___ 16. My manager notices my facial expressions, body posture, and other nonverbal behaviors and takes them into account.
- ___ 17. My manager waits until I present all the information before drawing any conclusions.
- ___ 18. My manager allows for the fact that individuals and circumstances change over time.
- ___ 19. My manager successfully overcomes distractions when listening, such as background noises.
- ___ 20. My manager makes sure that he/she accurately understands what I say to him or her.
- ___ 21. My manager actively seeks information for better understanding of a situation.
- ___ 22. My manager asks for clarification if I use unfamiliar terms.
- ___ 23. My manager remembers the details of things that were said weeks or even months ago.
- ___ 24. My manager is patient and focused when listening to speakers of another language.

Thank you!

(Note: Manager should include directions for submitting responses.)

Summary of Manager vs Employee Perceptions of Manager's Listening Behavior

To compare the results of your HURIER self-assessment to your employees' perceptions, follow the steps outlined below.

1. Determine the means (average) of employee ratings for all 24 questions.
2. Determine the means of employee ratings for each of the four items corresponding to the six HURIER model components.

This will result in six mean scores corresponding to employees' perceptions of each component. These means can then be compared to managers' self-scores for each of the six listening components. Substantial differences require further investigation. The table below can be used to compare manager and employee ratings.

Component of HURIER Listening Model

Manager's Mean Ratings

Employees' Mean Ratings

Manager – Employee Difference Score

Component I: Hearing

Component II: Understanding

Component III: Remembering

Component IV: Interpreting

Component V: Evaluating

Component VI: Responding

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