Fostering Service Excellence through Listening: What Hospitality Managers Need to Know

Judi Brownell Ph.D.
Cornell University, jlb18@cornell.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarship.sha.cornell.edu/chrpubs

Recommended Citation
Fostering Service Excellence through Listening: What Hospitality Managers Need to Know

Abstract
Amid the “noise” created by increased use of computers and other technology, the ability to listen takes on increasing importance for hospitality employees. Listening is essential in the course of delivering personal, customized service. A survey of eighty-three hospitality managers found the highest agreement with the statement that effective listening is vital to business success. For hospitality organizations, that success is tightly linked to the quality of service produced by employees. At the same time, survey respondents gave their lowest agreement to the statement that most members of their organization listen well. Listening is the foundation of two organizational processes essential to service delivery, one involving the accurate exchange of information and the other facilitating the development of strong relationships. Employees who are good listeners have a willingness to listen and an awareness of their own listening ability (although that may be overestimated). While developing listening competencies is not easy, it is possible for managers to improve their service employees’ listening abilities through modeling effective listening and offering training that is then augmented in the workplace—all the while improving service delivery. In addition to the rapid pace of the hospitality industry and interference from technology, one other barrier to effective listening is the diversity of employees and guests. Not only cultural differences, but also gender and age differences influence listening styles and effectiveness.

Keywords
hospitality, customer service, listening, communication

Disciplines
Business | Hospitality Administration and Management

Comments
Required Publisher Statement
© Cornell University. This report may not be reproduced or distributed without the express permission of the publisher

This article is available at The Scholarly Commons: http://scholarship.sha.cornell.edu/chrpubs/8
Fostering Service Excellence through Listening: What Hospitality Managers Need to Know

Cornell Hospitality Report
Vol. 9, No. 6, April 2009

by Judi Brownell, Ph.D.
Advisory Board

Scott Berman, U.S. Advisory Leader, Hospitality and Leisure Consulting Group of PricewaterhouseCoopers
Raymond Bickson, Managing Director and Chief Executive Officer, Taj Group of Hotels, Resorts, and Palaces
Stephen C. Brandman, Co-Owner, Thompson Hotels, Inc.
Raj Chandnani, Vice President, Director of Strategy, WATG
Benjamin J. “Patrick” Denihan, CEO, Denihan Hospitality Group
Michael S. Egan, Chairman and Founder, job.travel
Joel M. Eisemann, Executive Vice President, Owner and Franchise Services, Marriott International, Inc.
Kurt Ekert, Chief Operating Officer, GTA by Travelport
Brian Ferguson, Vice President, Supply Strategy and Analysis, Expedia North America
Kevin Fitzpatrick, President, AIG Global Real Estate Investment Corp.
Gregg Gilman, Partner, Co-Chair, Employment Practices, Davis & Gilbert LLP
Susan Helstab, EVP Corporate Marketing, Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts
Jeffrey A. Horwitz, Partner, Corporate Department, Co-Head, Lodging and Gaming, Proskauer Rose LLP
Kenneth Kahn, President/Owner, LRP Publications
Paul Kanavos, Founding Partner, Chairman, and CEO, FX Real Estate and Entertainment
Kirk Kinsell, President of Europe, Middle East, and Africa, InterContinental Hotels Group
Nancy Knipp, President and Managing Director, American Airlines Admirals Club
Gerald Lawless, Executive Chairman, Jumeirah Group
Mark V. Lomanno, President, Smith Travel Research
Suzanne R. Mellen, Managing Director, HVS
David Meltzer, Vice President, Sales, SynXis Corporation
Eric Niccolls, Vice President/GSM, Wine Division, Southern Wine and Spirits of New York
Shane O’Flaherty, President and CEO, Mobil Travel Guide
Tom Parham, President and General Manager, Philips Hospitality Americas
Steven Pinchuk, VP, Profit Optimization Systems, SAS
Chris Proulx, CEO, eCornell & Executive Education
Carolyn D. Richmond, Partner and Co-Chair, Hospitality Practice, Fox Rothschild LLP
Richard Rizzo, Director, Consumer Research, General Growth Properties, Inc.
Steve Russell, Chief People Officer, Senior VP, Human Resources, McDonald’s USA
Saverio Scheri III, Managing Director, WhiteSand Consulting
Janice L. Schnabel, Managing Director and Gaming Practice Leader, Marsh’s Hospitality and Gaming Practice
Trip Schneck, President and Co-Founder, TIG Global LLC
Adam Weissenberg, Vice Chairman, and U.S. Tourism, Hospitality & Leisure Leader, Deloitte & Touche USA LLP

Cornell Hospitality Report,
Volume 9, No. 6 (April 2009)
Single copy price US$50
© 2009 Cornell University

Cornell Hospitality Report is produced for the benefit of the hospitality industry by The Center for Hospitality Research at Cornell University

David Sherwyn, Academic Director
Jennifer Macera, Associate Director
Glenn Witham, Director of Publications

Center for Hospitality Research
Cornell University
School of Hotel Administration
537 Statler Hall
Ithaca, NY 14853

Phone: 607-255-9780
Fax: 607-254-2292
www.chr.cornell.edu
Thank you to our generous Corporate Members

Senior Partners
American Airlines Admirals Club
General Growth Properties, Inc.
job.travel
McDonald’s USA
Philips Hospitality
Southern Wine and Spirits of New York
Taj Hotels Resorts Palaces
TIG Global LLC

Partners
AIG Global Real Estate Investment
Davis & Gilbert LLP
Deloitte & Touche USA LLP
Denihan Hospitality Group
eCornell & Executive Education
Expedia, Inc.
Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts
Fox Rothschild LLP
FX Real Estate and Entertainment, Inc.
HVS
InterContinental Hotels Group
Jumeirah Group
LRP Publications
Marriott International, Inc.
Marsh’s Hospitality Practice
Mobil Travel Guide
PricewaterhouseCoopers
Proskauer Rose LLP
SAS
Smith Travel Research
SynXis, a Sabre Holdings Company
Thayer Lodging Group
Thompson Hotels Group
Travelport
WATG
WhiteSand Consulting

Friends
American Tescor LLC • Argyle Executive Forum • Caribbean Hotel Restaurant Buyer’s Guide • Cody Kramer Imports • Cruise Industry News • DK Shifflet & Associates • ehotelier.com • EyeforTravel.com • Gerencia de Hoteles & Restaurantes • Global Hospitality Resources • Hospitality Financial and Technological Professionals • HospitalityInsider.com • Hospitality.net.org • Hospitality Technology • Hotel Asia Pacific • Hotel China • HotelExecutive.com • Hotel Interactive • Hotel Resource • International CHRIE • International Hotel Conference • International Society of Hospitality Consultants • Perceptions • Lodging Hospitality • Lodging Magazine • Milestone Internet Marketing • MindFolio • Parasol • PhoCusWright • PwC Hospitality Research • Questex Media Group • RealShare Hotel Investment & Finance Summit • ResortRecreation Magazine • The Resort Trades • RestaurantEdge.com • Shibata Publishing Co. • Synovate • The Lodging Conference • TravelCLICK • UniFocus • WageWatch, Inc. • WHW.COM

Cornell University School of Hotel Administration
Fostering Service Excellence through Listening:
What Hospitality Managers Need to Know
by Judi Brownell

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Judi Brownell, Ph.D., is a professor and dean of students at the Cornell 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 eighty journal 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. Among her training and consulting projects are the design of assessment centers for hospitality leadership development. As an administrator, she has served as the school’s associate dean for academic affairs and as its director for graduate studies. She has also been academic area director for both the organization behavior and management communication disciplines.
Amid the “noise” created by increased use of computers and other technology, the ability to listen takes on increasing importance for hospitality employees. Listening is essential in the course of delivering personal, customized service. A survey of eighty-three hospitality managers found the highest agreement with the statement that effective listening is vital to business success. For hospitality organizations, that success is tightly linked to the quality of service produced by employees. At the same time, survey respondents gave their lowest agreement to the statement that most members of their organization listen well. Listening is the foundation of two organizational processes essential to service delivery, one involving the accurate exchange of information and the other facilitating the development of strong relationships. Employees who are good listeners have a willingness to listen and an awareness of their own listening ability (although that may be overestimated). While developing listening competencies is not easy, it is possible for managers to improve their service employees’ listening abilities through modeling effective listening and offering training that is then augmented in the workplace—all the while improving service delivery. In addition to the rapid pace of the hospitality industry and interference from technology, one other barrier to effective listening is the diversity of employees and guests. Not only cultural differences, but also gender and age differences influence listening styles and effectiveness.
Researchers and practitioners alike have long been interested in identifying the competency requirements of effective service delivery. Such information is particularly important for the insights it provides to hospitality managers seeking to select and develop hospitality talent and to create cultures that support best practices in service delivery. Considerable empirical research demonstrates that improved service is linked directly to improved business performance and therefore is the concern of every hospitality professional.¹

Numerous competency clusters have been proposed as critical to service excellence. While no two competency typologies are identical, most would agree that hospitality employees require a distinctive set of skills and personal characteristics to meet the industry's service challenges.

In this report, I explain why listening is a core competency for service providers and explore research that has implications for a better understanding of listening and its role in service delivery. While managers model key listening behaviors, set performance standards, and reinforce desirable outcomes, all employees must be competent listeners to work effectively within hospitality environments. My focus here is on the importance of listening for service staff—not only in the course of service but also as a source of information about customers' preferences and their opinions about how the firm fulfills expectations. In addition, internal processes in support of service delivery can function smoothly only when employees' expectations and goals are aligned. Therefore, I am also interested in the degree to which service employees listen to other organization members.

Early efforts to understand listening behavior focused on commonsense heuristics. Practitioners, educators, and scholars alike developed listening principles absent any reliable evidence and with little consistency. Listening remained poorly defined, therefore, and nearly impossible to assess. While many aspects of the listening process remain elusive, the following review of research findings provides insights to hospitality managers seeking to better understand the nature of listening in efforts to improve their employees' service delivery.

This report reaffirms the important role that listening plays in service settings by first reporting findings from a convenience survey of hospitality managers conducted through the Cornell Center for Hospitality Research. Listening competence is then discussed as it facilitates

---


two key organizational processes essential to service quality: the sharing of accurate information to effectively accomplish tasks and the display of empathy prerequisite to the development of meaningful relationships. The nature of listening behavior is then explained in terms of the six-component HURIER listening model, which I developed. I explore personal characteristics that affect service employees’ potential ability to listen well. Those characteristics are attitude, listening style, and self-efficacy. Managerial considerations in developing and assessing listening competence are then highlighted with emphasis on assessment instruments, skill transfer, and listening authenticity. Finally, I examine the following three future challenges to listening in service settings: providing service customization, managing workforce diversity, and addressing the effects of changing, pervasive technology. Managers are viewed as catalysts who facilitate listening effectiveness in their organizations. Throughout this report, I emphasize research that provides insights into how listening competence can improve the service experience.

6 See: Brownell (2008), op.cit.

The Importance of Listening: Managerial Perceptions

Hospitality managers are becoming increasingly aware of the role listening plays in high performing organizations. To further explore this belief, a survey comprising both objective and open-ended questions regarding the role and importance of listening was sent via email to a convenience sample of hospitality managers who previously had expressed a willingness to participate in studies sponsored by the School of Hotel Administration’s Center for Hospitality Research. I received eighty-three usable surveys within the eleven-day time limit. I must point out that these responses were intended to assess the level of support for findings from previous studies and to generate hospitality implications, and not to make independent generalizations or conclusions. Findings are presented throughout this report as they provide insights and enrich the particular topic of discussion.

The first section of the survey presented respondents with 5-point Likert scales and asked them to indicate the strength of their agreement with a series of statements about listening in their organizations. Means of responses to these questions are given in Exhibit 1. The survey’s open-ended...
Listening is vital. With regard to the quantitative portion of the survey, I found that the highest agreement was with the statement, “Effective listening is vital to our business success” (mean of 4.8 of 5.0). Similarly, managers strongly agreed that listening had helped them personally to advance in their careers (mean of 4.56 of 5.0). The third highest agreement rating was with the statement, “I consider myself an effective listener” (mean of 4.06 of 5.0). It is interesting to note that respondents did not believe their staff would give them as high a rating as they gave themselves. This is shown in the response to the statement, “My staff would say I’m an effective listener,” with a mean of only 3.85 out of 5.0. Perhaps the most provocative finding, given the focus on listening for service delivery, was that the lowest agreement rating—a mean of 2.96 out of 5.0—was with the statement, “Most members of my organization listen well.” These results send a clear message—managers believe that listening is important, but that service employees are not listening as well as they could.

Service Benefits of Listening

Research to date suggests that employees’ listening ability supports two distinctive organizational processes: (1) the exchange of accurate information to accomplish tasks, and (2) the facilitation of strong relationships. Both are critical to the delivery of effective service. Exhibit 2 summarizes several of the outcomes of each of these two parallel activities, which are discussed in greater detail below. These processes have implications for both the coordination of workplace activities and the customers’ service experience.

Listening to Accomplish Tasks

Employees who listen well learn new tasks more readily and make fewer mistakes than their peers do. Strong listening skills result in accurate information sharing where the focus is on the continuous transfer of knowledge. This process increases the resources available to solve organizational problems and make effective decisions. Access to information increases employees’ confidence and self-efficacy as every individual becomes a knowledgeable and valued team member. Accurate and continuous information sharing also facilitates the coordination of activities and services across departmental boundaries.

Effective listening also reduces costly misunderstandings that waste time and heighten anxiety. Employees become confused and guests become frustrated when requests and explanations are misunderstood. Listening is particularly important when service challenges require independent problem solving. We know that the more novel and unpredictable the tasks, the more likely it is that effective listening

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exhibit 2</th>
<th>Ways in which listening enhances service</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Listening facilitates task-related outcomes:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Improves accuracy of communications with guests and coworkers,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Encourages timely feedback,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Increases frequency of employee information sharing,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Encourages direct and clear communication,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Reduces misunderstandings when tasks are novel or changing,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Improves problem solving, and</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Increases employees’ self-efficacy.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listening facilitates relationship-related outcomes:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Increases interpersonal trust,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Promotes service customization,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Increases guest satisfaction with service delivery,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Reduces stress,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Increases customer loyalty,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Increases employee commitment and morale, and</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Increases perceptions of integrity.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


will promote successful performance of those tasks. Employees empowered by high levels of listening competence enhance the service experience for guests through their ability to solve problems and resolve conflicts.

Listening to Build Relationships
At the core of all relationships, trust influences the nature and quality of interactions on the job. Several researchers have suggested that trust develops through a reciprocal process of effective listening. Employees’ mental health and sense of well-being are also related to their perceptions of whether their voices are heard by coworkers and supervisors. These perceptions, in turn, influence productivity; employees who feel stressed and isolated are less likely to provide quality service to guests.

Interpersonal trust continues to emerge as a key to both guest satisfaction and customer loyalty. Listening facilitates more personalized service interactions, which are therefore more satisfying; when employees respond with authentic and empathic communication, guests feel that they are cared for and that their needs are being addressed. Service employees who seek to understand the customer’s perspective and to fulfill their promises build lasting relationships and increase customer loyalty.

The Nature of Listening Behavior

Long overlooked and often viewed as a skill that “comes naturally,” listening remains a critical component of nearly every service-related activity. Hospitality managers cannot fully capitalize on listening as a core competency for their service employees until they examine what exactly it means to listen. Further, managers should consider what are the key listening challenges faced by the service staff and what best practices are available to address them.

While the benefits of listening are clear, this key competency has proven difficult to define precisely. Most researchers agree that listening is a multi-stage process involving a number of cognitive and behavioral aspects.18 While numerous listening models have been proposed, the HURIER framework, a six-component framework based on research findings in a hospitality context appears to be one of the most useful for managers seeking to improve employees’ competence. I have explained the model in greater detail elsewhere,19 but I review this framework here (see Exhibits 3 and 4). In past research, I’ve discovered that listening meant different things to employees in different departments and in different industry segments. The skills associated with listening clustered into six distinct but interrelated components that were integrated into a behavioral model, under the HURIER acronym: Hearing, Understanding, Remembering, Interpreting, Evaluating, and Responding to messages.

In the survey discussed in this report, respondents provided specific examples of how people in their organizations experience listening. It is not surprising that 84 percent of these examples fit readily into one of the six components of the HURIER model, with examples shown in Exhibit 4.

The HURIER model not only provides a comprehensive picture of the considerations involved in the listening process, but also helps identify essential listening behaviors for service settings. As is evident from Exhibit 3, the HURIER framework also accounts for personal characteristics that influence the individual service employee—such as attitudes, previous experiences, and biases—and considers contextual features that affect the service experience. For example, an attendant at a luxury hotel’s front desk, a bartender at a pool-side tiki hut, and a valet working at a busy intersection would each find that their listening effectiveness is influenced by their diverse environments.

The relative importance of each of the six listening components, as you might suspect, also varies as situations and specific listening requirements change. A member of the sales staff, for instance, may need to develop a high level of competence in understanding and remembering the details a client provides, while a hostess in the bar might depend more heavily on her ability to interpret a guest’s behavior, since the hostess must assess and respond appropriately to a guest’s emotional aspect.

Understanding the components of the HURIER model is useful for managers as they go about the important task of selecting individuals with the potential to listen well, and as they pursue activities to assess the listening competence of their existing staff.

---


---

**EXHIBIT 4**

Components of the HURIER model with examples from hospitality managers’ comments

1. **Hearing**—Reception of the message, paying attention to the right information. “Managers need to know who to listen to, and when to listen to them.” “Associates must be ready to listen when a customer approaches them—it’s important to stop other activity to listen.”

2. **Understanding**—Comprehension, accurately understanding what is said. “Conversations end with ‘so what I hear you saying is’ and ‘what we have agreed on is’ to confirm commitment and understanding.” “Listening is paramount to being able to understand the diversity of the people I work with.”

3. **Remembering**—Recalling what was heard at a later point in time. “I take notes. It’s important to remember and act on what is heard.” “Always make an action plan to follow up on items that need to be addressed.”

4. **Interpreting**—Understanding beyond the literal words, using nonverbal and situational cues to determine meanings, and demonstrating empathy. “We need to make them feel comfortable enough to make suggestions and to complain and not just tell us what we want to hear.” “Eye contact is especially important. Often, disgruntled employees and guests just want to be heard.”

5. **Evaluating**—Remaining open-minded and assessing information objectively. “Gather as much information as possible; help the conversation to be objective.” “Try not to react as if what was stated is a personal attack.”

6. **Responding**—A reliable indicator of accurate listening is the individual’s response. Response options are nearly unlimited; the listener’s ability to respond appropriately demonstrates the quality of his or her listening.
Managers who hear and understand individual employees’ concerns can help them to perform more effectively.

Characteristics of Employees Who Listen
Research on listening behavior points to a number of key considerations in determining an individual’s potential for listening effectiveness. This section reviews three key dimensions that research has shown to be important to achieving the high levels of listening competence required for delivering outstanding service.

Attitude. Attitude is one of the most significant factors influencing listening behavior; a positive attitude is associated with motivation, or what has been called a willingness to listen. Willingness to listen has a profound effect on hospitality professionals’ service delivery. In fact, studies show that individuals who score well on listening tests do not translate their expertise to the workplace unless they are motivated to do so. Consequently, the results of listening assessments conducted outside the workplace context have little predictive value. As with any aspect of a job, listening training, absent meaningful incentives, is not likely to result in desired outcomes.

Listening style. An employee’s willingness to listen is also influenced by his or her listening style, or preferences. The Listening Preference Profile identifies those preferences and translates them into one of the following four distinct listening styles: (1) a people-oriented style, which focuses on the emotional and relational aspects of communication; (2) a content-oriented style, which centers on processing complex information; (3) an action-oriented preference for clear information delivered efficiently; and (4) a time-oriented style characterized by short, limited messages. While most listeners demonstrate a combination of preference types, assessment results are useful in identifying individual differences and strengths. Hospitality managers may then determine whether there is a good fit of person to job. In many cases, listening style helps to explain on-the-job performance.

While the Listening Preference Profile captures many important variables, other personal characteristics also influence listening behavior. Managers are better able to predict an individual’s listening potential by assessing such dimensions as cognitive style, self-monitoring behavior, and preference for message channel, such as aural or visual. Personality traits, like extroversion and introversion, are also associated with specific listening preferences. While extroverts are energized by the rapid exchange of ideas, introverts...
are more reflective listeners, focusing and probing to clarify the facts and feelings expressed. Placing staff in positions that allow them to capitalize on their listening strengths not only results in greater job satisfaction but also translates into higher performance and a more positive guest experience.

**Self-efficacy.** Employees' self-efficacy regarding their listening competence affects interactions with both coworkers and customers. As mentioned earlier, it is not unusual for individuals to overestimate their listening abilities. An inflated sense of listening competence may result in a reluctance to work hard on improving performance.

The other side of the self-efficacy coin is that listeners may be apprehensive or concerned about misinterpreting what guests or supervisors say to them. Listening anxiety stemming from stressful interpersonal encounters can lead to distorted messages and misunderstandings. Line staff members, in particular, frequently lack confidence when it comes to their ability to listen well. Stateroom stewards whose command of English is limited, for example, may find it stressful when passengers make special requests as they pass in the hallway. Listening is then affected by their anxiety as much as by language challenges. It is important for managers to recognize listening anxiety when it occurs and take steps to address this barrier to service excellence.

**Developing and Assessing Employees’ Listening Behavior**

While employees possess varying degrees of listening aptitude, hospitality managers can promote listening effectiveness in service settings. The characteristics related to employees' listening potential makes it clear that improving service effectiveness is not an easy task.

One research study that provided a thought-provoking perspective described organizations according to their employees’ general level of listening competence. This description included four categories: the completely deaf, the partially deaf, the partially hard of hearing, and the completely hard of hearing.

- **Completely Deaf:** Employees who are completely deaf as a result of a hearing loss may find it difficult to engage in conversations and may rely heavily on written communication. However, with proper training and support, they can develop effective listening skills.
- **Partially Deaf:** Employees who are partially deaf may require additional accommodations such as lip-reading or sign language interpreters to enhance their listening ability.
- **Partially Hard of Hearing:** Employees who are partially hard of hearing may need a more comfortable listening environment to compensate for their hearing loss.
- **Completely Hard of Hearing:** Employees who are completely hard of hearing may require the use of assistive listening devices to help them hear conversations more clearly.

**Exhibit 5**

**Respondents’ best practices for fostering effective listening**

- We reward employees for effective listening by acknowledging their specific service accomplishments.
- Our “best listening practice” is our weekly lunch meeting that is attended by our general manager and one employee from each of our departments. Topics discussed include guest surveys, departmental issues that need attention, employee suggestions, and other ways that our hotel can improve its customer relations and employee morale.
- With employees, it’s “management by walking around” and talking to them and making them feel comfortable enough to make suggestions or complain. With members and guests, it’s being visible so they feel comfortable talking to you and expressing ideas and concerns.
- We promote listening by holding “rap” sessions with each associate at least every quarter. We also have “REX discussions” (reality vs. expectations), which are documented after new associates are here ten days. This gives us feedback on the orientation process, and the “rap sessions” ensure we keep in touch with each of our associates.
- A major focus of our “Embracing Leadership Excellence” program is on “Listening Leadership.”
- I hold roundtable discussions quarterly with department managers as well as with employees, seeking feedback and discussions. I hold monthly interview sessions with guests to receive their feedback.
- Open door policy, dedicated time for employee feedback, asking employees how they would “fix the problem” and actually using their suggestions, comment card usage and review, review of the benefits of active listening when situations arise.
- Annual training for all management team members on listening skills in formal sessions, and repeated coaching reinforcement to ensure understanding. Key that all conversations and meetings end with “so what we have agreed upon is...” to confirm commitment and understanding.
- People listen better if they are ready to listen. Ask your staff to be ready to listen when a customer approaches them. If they are busy with other tasks, be sure that the staff member acknowledges the customers and lets them know that he or she will be ready to listen soon.
- I strongly reinforce the rule in meetings that everyone has the right to speak up and that all should first listen and not interrupt. We hold regular meetings with all associates where the general manager has to listen to any issue brought forward. These meetings are held in small groups in every department.
- Give credit to the ideas of associates.
- We have a “manager on duty” in the lobby of our hotel. The MOD listens to our guests and takes that information back to our departments.

---


organization, the hard of hearing organization, the selective listening organization, and the total listening organization. Managers can keep these vivid distinctions in mind as they assess their employees' current level of competence and plan a course of action toward improving their listening effectiveness. Such efforts will undoubtedly improve the organization's overall service culture.

Developing Listening Competence

Managers who hear and understand individual employees' concerns can help them to perform more effectively through such efforts as providing listening training or including listening effectiveness in performance appraisals. These activities increase employees' competence and motivation, which results in higher levels of guest service. Appropriate recognition also leads to continuing high performance as managers select meaningful rewards and reinforce desirable outcomes. While managers may put any number of policies and procedures into place, there are few situations where "walking the talk" has a greater effect than when managers themselves model effective listening practices.

Over half of the hospitality managers who participated in this survey had not had any listening training themselves, but many had ideas about how to improve their employees' listening on the job. Representative suggestions on the question, "What are your best listening practices?", are presented in Exhibit 5 (previous page).

Notice that respondents' suggestions attest to their concern with fostering a free and open exchange of ideas and information among all organizational members. This type of environment, which I have called a "listening culture," contributes to effective service delivery as well. Clearly, those managers who responded to this survey recognized the importance of effective listening in facilitating a number of positive organizational outcomes (Exhibit 6), and were already addressing the need for listening competence in a variety of ways. It also appears that excellence is achieved by employees who not only listen, but who are also heard and are given the opportunity to participate in and contribute to the organization's larger goals.

Assessing Listening Competence

Survey responses are consistent with the general belief that managers are often unsure of how to assess their employees' listening competence. The eighty-three responding hospitality managers gave the item, "I know exactly how to go about improving listening," a mean of only 3.23 on the 5-point scale. As managers focus greater attention on improving listening effectiveness, they need to identify and put into place reliable assessment techniques. Let's examine the issues that make it difficult for hospitality managers to assess employees' listening behavior.

Assessment instrument concerns. First, there are relatively few standardized instruments that have proven reliable indicators of workplace listening effectiveness. The

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Listening is essential to:</th>
<th>Total respondents</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Language</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean ((n = 83))</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>Men ((n = 69))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building employee morale</td>
<td>4.74</td>
<td>.470</td>
<td>4.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitating service customization</td>
<td>4.81</td>
<td>.448</td>
<td>4.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increasing employee satisfaction</td>
<td>4.59</td>
<td>.585</td>
<td>4.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decreasing misunderstandings</td>
<td>4.78</td>
<td>.445</td>
<td>4.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improving organizational performance</td>
<td>4.48</td>
<td>.741</td>
<td>4.45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Means are based on a scale of 1 (highly disagree) to 5 (highly agree).

---

34 Brownell, 2008, loc.cit. (chr.cornell.edu).
most frequently used assessment instruments have been designed for and applied in educational environments rather than business settings. While employees may score well on memory tests when they are administered in a quiet testing situation, for instance, they may find it more challenging to remember special requests in the midst of a convention check-in. In addition, the competencies addressed by assessment instruments do not always correspond to the behaviors that are targeted in an organization’s training sessions or critical to service encounters. I have also observed that written measures are too frequently used to assess what is largely a behavioral response.

**Skill transfer.** Ensuring transfer of listening skills from training settings to the workplace remains a challenge. While employees may demonstrate target behaviors in the classroom, the workplace, as I said above, presents a challenge for those with newly acquired skills. Correlations between performance in training simulations and performance in subsequent service and workplace settings are often weak.

Moreover, merely possessing a particular listening competency does not make an employee effective on the job. Motivation, as discussed previously, is a major factor in determining the level and persistence of newly acquired behaviors (as well as performance on standardized tests). Employees must not only be motivated to perform well, but they must also demonstrate the social sensitivity required to take into account situational factors so that newly acquired listening behaviors are applied at the right time and in the right place. In that regard, a front-desk clerk who listens attentively to an extended guest monologue while a long line forms at the check-in counter has not mastered effective listening behavior.

**Listening authenticity.** It’s also possible that individuals who are perceived as effective listeners actually do not listen any better than their colleagues do. Little research has been conducted to establish a correlation between those individuals who are perceived as listening well and the scores they receive on objective measures of listening ability. The fact is that service employees may display nonverbal behaviors associated with effective listening without actually paying attention to what is said. This issue comes into sharp focus because hospitality employees are frequently required to provide “emotional labor” as part of their job responsibilities, as they greet guests with a cheerful and positive demeanor. Researchers and practitioners alike are challenged to determine the balance between “acting” interested and concerned and offering an authentic emotional response. This issue touches the essence of what it means to listen effectively in service settings.

### Challenges to Improving Listening Effectiveness

Survey respondents also realized that changes in the service environment would present challenges to effective listening. The second, qualitative section of the survey asked managers to provide examples of what they perceived to be the most pressing listening challenges of the future (a number of respondents described more than one type of challenge). A content analysis of these responses revealed three general challenges. As identified by two trained coders, whose inter-rater reliability coefficient was .96, the challenges are: (1) listening for service customization, (2) listening in diverse work environments, and (3) technology’s influence on listening. Each of these challenges is briefly discussed below.

#### Listening and Service Customization

Twenty-seven percent of respondents mentioned the challenge of service customization and the increasing demand for individualized service. As one manager noted, “…it seems that diners and guests are feeling more entitled than ever before and are very eager to tell you what they wanted and didn’t receive.” Another respondent suggests that “disgruntled guests and employees just want to be heard.”

---


addressing service customization, a third manager expressed the belief that “customized service comes naturally to an organization where everyone has developed a ‘listening culture.’”

These and similar comments address the issue of providing service to a well-traveled, discriminating customer base. As line employees are called upon to master broader service expertise, managers find that not just anyone is capable of “delighting” customers—and not every employee listens carefully to guests’ concerns and responds appropriately. To succeed in this environment employees must develop what researchers call adaptive behavior—a response that depends on effective listening.

Listening competence is at the core of adaptive behavior, facilitating service customization, and promoting customer satisfaction. Vilnai-Yavetz and Rafaeli studied adaptive behavior and suggested that it be understood as a distinction between skeleton and tissue. “Skeleton” aspects of service consist of the essential content and behavior required to complete the process—what any service provider would do. “Tissue” aspects are individualized behaviors that either enhance or damage the relationship and service experience (examples of damaging behavior include “leakage” in facial expressions, sighs and other nonverbal signs of impatience, or long silences with little effort to put the guest at ease).

Employees who are able to operate effectively at the “tissue level” were found to be strong in tolerance of ambiguity, self-monitoring, and service orientation.

Customizing service requires that those attributes which create value for a guest be identified, often in the course of conversation, and used to enhance the service experience. It may be useful to think of guests as “100-percent diverse,” with each individual posing special needs and requiring individual attention. It becomes clear that listening is central to service delivery that seeks to increase satisfaction and loyalty through a better understanding of guest needs and uses that information in the service encounter.

Listening in Diverse Hospitality Environments

Issues related to the challenges of listening in a diverse workplace were mentioned by 37 percent of all respondents. The qualitative responses invoked the dangers of missed communication due to language and cultural differences. For instance, one respondent noted: “The largest challenge in our work environment is the variety of languages spoken. …Unless the organization offers rewards for those who challenge themselves to learn another language…listening will be hindered.” Another manager described the difficulties encountered with the “diversity of team members working in an international environment” without a strong company culture or consistent “house rules.” Another explained that, in managing a multicultural workforce, it has been particularly difficult to “understand the different nuances and phrases even though everyone is speaking English.”

While it is common knowledge that no two individuals share the same experiential base and that each person perceives the world in a slightly different manner, the profound impact of the substantial effects of diversity on listening behavior is not often addressed in the workplace. The three types of diversity most likely to affect hospitality employees are culture, gender, and age.

Cultural diversity. When both employees and customers are culturally diverse, differences in values, beliefs, nonverbal communication, and norms of behavior can be profound. From a service perspective, researchers have been particularly interested in an attribute called “warmth,” which is communicated largely through the listener’s nonverbal behavior. While warmth encourages guests to approach and communicate with service providers, nonverbal sensitivity enables employees accurately to interpret what they hear by attending to guests’ nonverbal cues. Clearly, cultural differences in the expression and interpretation of

nonverbal behavior create the potential for misunderstandings and interfere with perceptions of such key qualities as interest, sincerity, and friendliness.\(^49\)

**Gender diversity.** Gender also introduces differences in employees' nonverbal communication. North American women, for instance, are more likely to smile, make eye contact, and display nonverbal behaviors that indicate interest and empathy than are their male counterparts.\(^50\) Women who do this are frequently evaluated as being better and more attentive listeners.\(^51\) In addition, women are generally more accurate at interpreting nonverbal cues than men are.\(^52\) While researchers have identified clear gender-related distinctions in listening behavior in nearly every culture, most conclude that the majority of these differences can be attributed to social influences and not biological predispositions.\(^53\)

**Age diversity.** Hospitality professionals will increasingly confront age as a source of communication differences, as the number of older employees and travelers increases.\(^54\)

Research on listening demonstrates that the behaviors associated with competent listening change with a person's age.\(^55\) Young adults and seniors report different listening needs, different listening goals, and different listening strategies. This finding becomes particularly useful when interacting with guests or clients who are older adults, as advanced age often leads to changes in hearing, memory, and other listening functions.\(^56\) The need for patience and empathy when listening in service encounters is consequently heightened, and anticipating the needs of older adults in service settings will become increasingly important.

One factor that creates a challenge in intergenerational communication is that listeners can process what they hear nearly four times faster than the normal speaking rate.\(^57\) This considerable "gap"—the difference between speaking speed and thinking speed—opens the possibility that one's attention may wander. If your youthful front desk employee asks a question of an older guest, the gentleman may need to reflect and contemplate a response. During this time, the multitasking front-desk attendant might be tempted to check the weather, file receipts, or perform some other task that takes his focus away from the guest. Those who have become accustomed to the high-speed digital world find maintaining attention under these circumstances even more of a struggle.

### Listening Influenced by the Use of Technology

The pace of activity in hospitality organizations—often the result of increasing applications of technology—directly

---


54 Dreashlin, *op.cit.*
Influence of technology on listening: management challenges

- "I am so busy that when I am interrupted I often listen with one ear and continue with the task at hand. I am afraid I will miss some important detail when this happens, and it happens often."

- "A future challenge will be the younger generation who spend so much time ‘texting’ and using shortcuts in both text and language. My biggest fear is that we’re creating a generation of individuals who are losing the ability and willingness to write and speak correctly."

- "Listening is made more difficult because of information overload. Automated phone calls, phone referral systems... exacerbate the overload. Critical communications are relegated more to reading via e-mail and log book entries (rather than listening)."

- "We pollute ourselves with often unnecessary communication through emails, IMs, and phone calls and are exposed to information overload. Future listening challenges will be the constant improvement of communication devices that do not necessarily help listening."

- "E-mails and the PC in general. Too much time is wasted in front of your screen and this interferes with listening."

- "We are always in a hurry... not taking the time to listen... too much dependence on technology."

- "We are expected to multi-task. That can be hazardous to good customer service, especially when a staff member is on the phone or computer taking a reservation."

The internet now connects customers, suppliers, and the workforce in ways that have dramatically changed traditional roles and added to employees’ stress. Given the volume of available information, service employees must be trained to determine what is important and what can be trusted. What has been called the "human factors gap," the difference between the information-processing capacities of employees and the machines they use, often has the negative consequence of reducing listening effectiveness.

Employees become stressed by information overload in their efforts to determine the importance and relevance of large quantities of information. In addition, employees are tempted to focus their attention on the technology rather than on their interaction with the guest. One thought-provoking proposition is that younger generations are actually bonding with machines as computers become the medium through which experience is accumulated, knowledge increased, and business contacts maintained.

Despite the challenge of electronic media, such technologies bring managers, employees, and customers in the service chain together in a real-time, interactive process. As one author notes, there will always be a difference between being "plugged in" and actually “connecting.” While achieving a balance between high tech and high touch has never been more challenging, listening will always be a key competency that creates quality in the service experience.

Conclusion

It seems clear that listening competence is a central but often neglected aspect of service excellence. Service employees who listen to their colleagues and to their customers not only reduce errors and solve problems more effectively but also develop strong relationships which lead to increased trust and loyalty. Not all employees have the same potential for listening effectiveness and managers would do well to consider those intangible and difficult-to-assess characteristics that determine a strong service “fit.” In addition, hospitality managers themselves have a responsibility to demonstrate a high level of listening competence in their daily activities. As coaches and mentors, they must support listening practice and improvement organization-wide.

In a future certain to require even greater levels of listening competence, managers would do well to focus on and foster this key service skill.

---


The Executive Path
Hospitality Leadership Through Learning

The Office of Executive Education facilitates interactive learning opportunities where professionals from the global hospitality industry and world-class Cornell faculty explore, develop and apply ideas to advance business and personal success.

The Professional Development Program

The Professional Development Program (PDP) is a series of three-day courses offered in finance, foodservice, human-resources, operations, marketing, real estate, revenue, and strategic management. Participants agree that Cornell delivers the most rewarding experience available to hospitality professionals. Expert faculty and industry professionals lead a program that balances theory and real-world examples.

The General Managers Program

The General Managers Program (GMP) is a 10-day experience for hotel general managers and their immediate successors. In the past 25 years, the GMP has hosted more than 1,200 participants representing 78 countries. Participants gain an invaluable connection to an international network of elite hoteliers. GMP seeks to move an individual from being a day-to-day manager to a strategic thinker.

The Online Path

Online courses are offered for professionals who would like to enhance their knowledge or learn more about a new area of hospitality management, but are unable to get away from the demands of their job. Courses are authored and designed by Cornell University faculty, using the most current and relevant case studies, research and content.

The Custom Path

Many companies see an advantage to having a private program so that company-specific information, objectives, terminology and methods can be addressed precisely. Custom programs are developed from existing curriculum or custom developed in a collaborative process. They are delivered on Cornell’s campus or anywhere in the world.
Cornell Hospitality Reports

Index

www.chr.cornell.edu

2009 Reports

Vol 9, No. 5 How Restaurant Customers View Online Reservations, by Sheryl E. Kimes, Ph.D.

Vol 9, No. 4 Key Issues of Concern in the Hospitality Industry: What Worries Managers, by Cathy A. Enz, Ph.D.

Vol 9, No. 3 Compendium 2009
www.hotelschool.cornell.edu/research/chr/pubs/reports/abstract-14965.htm

Vol 9, No. 2 Don't Sit So Close to Me: Restaurant Table Characteristics and Guest Satisfaction, by Stephanie K.A. Robson and Sheryl E. Kimes, Ph.D.

Vol 9, No. 1 The Job Compatibility Index: A New Approach to Defining the Hospitality Labor Market, by William J. Carroll, Ph.D., and Michael C. Sturman, Ph.D.

2009 Tools

Tool No. 12 Measuring the Dining Experience: The Case of Vita Nova, by Kesh Prasad and Fred J. DeMicco, Ph.D.

2008 Reports

Vol 8, No. 20 Key Elements in Service Innovation: Insights for the Hospitality Industry, by, Rohit Verma, Ph.D., with Chris Anderson, Ph.D., Michael Dixon, Cathy Enz, Ph.D., Gary Thompson, Ph.D., and Liana Victorino, Ph.D.

Vol 8, No. 19 Nontraded REITs: Considerations for Hotel Investors, by John B. Corgel, Ph.D., and Scott Gibson, Ph.D.

Vol 8, No. 18 Forty Hours Doesn't Work for Everyone: Determining Employee Preferences for Work Hours, by Lindsey A. Zahn and Michael C. Sturman, Ph.D.

Vol 8, No. 17 The Importance of Behavioral Integrity in a Multicultural Workplace, by Tony Simons, Ph.D., Ray Friedman, Ph.D., Leigh Anne Liu, Ph.D., and Judi McLean Parks, Ph.D.

Vol 8, No. 16 Forecasting Covers in Hotel Food and Beverage Outlets, by Gary M. Thompson, Ph.D., and Erica D. Killam


Vol 8, No. 14 Hotel Revenue Management: Today and Tomorrow, by Sheryl E. Kimes, Ph.D.

Vol 8, No. 13 Neats Beats Old Nearly Every Day: The Countervailing Effects of Renovations and Obsolescence on Hotel Prices, by John B. Corgel, Ph.D.

Vol 8, No. 12 Frequency Strategies and Double Jeopardy in Marketing: The Pitfall of Relying on Loyalty Programs, by Michael Lynn, Ph.D.


Vol 8, No. 10 Private Equity Investment in Public Hotel Companies: Recent Past, Long-term Future, by John B. Corgel, Ph.D.

Vol 8, No. 9 Accurately Estimating Time-based Restaurant Revenues Using Revenue per Available Seat-Hour, by Gary M. Thompson, Ph.D., and Heeju (Louise) Sohn

Vol 8, No. 8 Exploring Customer Reactions to Tipping Guidelines: Implications for Service Quality, by Ekaterina Kariniouchna, Himanshu Mishra, and Rohit Verma, Ph.D.

Vol 8, No. 7 Complaint Communication: How Complaint Severity and Service Recovery Influence Guests’ Preferences and Attitudes, by Alex M. Susskind, Ph.D.

Vol 8, No. 6 New Beats Old Nearly Every Day: The Countervailing Effects of Renovations and Obsolescence on Hotel Prices, by John B. Corgel, Ph.D.

Vol 8, No. 4 Frequency Strategies and Double Jeopardy in Marketing: The Pitfall of Relying on Loyalty Programs, by Michael Lynn, Ph.D.


Vol 8, No. 2 Restoring Workplace Communication Networks after Downsizing: The Effects of Time on Information Flow and Turnover Intentions, by Alex Susskind, Ph.D.

Vol 8, No. 1 A Consumer’s View of Restaurant Reservation Policies, by Sheryl E. Kimes, Ph.D.
2008 Hospitality Tools
Building Managers’ Skills to Create Listening Environments, by Judi Brownell, Ph.D.

2008 Industry Perspectives
Industry Perspectives No. 2  Sustainable Hospitality, by Hervé Houdré

Industry Perspectives No. 3  North America’s Town Centers: Time to Take Some Angst Out and Put More Soul In, by Karl Kalcher

2007 Reports
Vol. 7, No. 12 Examining the Effects of Full-Spectrum Lighting in a Restaurant, by Stephani K.A. Robson and Sheryl E. Kimes, Ph.D.

Vol. 7, No. 11 Short-term Liquidity Measures for Restaurant Firms: Static Measures Don’t Tell the Full Story, by Linda Canina, Ph.D., and Steven Carvell, Ph.D.

Vol. 7, No. 10 Data-driven Ethics: Exploring Customer Privacy in the Information Era, by Erica L. Wagner, Ph.D., and Olga Kupriyanova

Vol. 7, No. 9 Compendium 2007

Vol. 7, No. 8 The Effects of Organizational Standards and Support Functions on Guest Service and Guest Satisfaction in Restaurants, by Alex M. Susskind, Ph.D., K. Michele Kacmar, Ph.D., and Carl P. Borchgrevink, Ph.D.

Vol. 7, No. 7 Restaurant Capacity Effectiveness: Leaving Money on the Tables, by Gary M. Thompson, Ph.D.


Vol. 7, No. 5 Enhancing Formal Interpersonal Skills Training through Post-Training Supplements, by Michael J. Tews, Ph.D., and J. Bruce Tracey, Ph.D.

Vol. 7, No. 4 Brand Segmentation in the Hotel and Cruise Industries: Fact or Fiction?, by Michael Lynn, Ph.D.

Vol. 7, No. 3 The Effects on Perceived Restaurant Expensiveness of Tipping and Its Alternatives, by Shuo Wang and Michael Lynn, Ph.D.

Vol. 7, No. 2 Unlocking the Secrets of Customers’ Choices, by Rohit Verma, Ph.D.

Vol. 7, No. 1 The Mixed Motive Instruction in Employment Discrimination Cases: What Employers Need to Know, by David Sherwyn, J.D., Steven Carvell, Ph.D., and Joseph Baumgarten, J.D.

2007 Hospitality Tools
CHR Tool 10 Workforce Staffing Optimizer, by Gary M. Thompson, Ph.D.

CHR Tool 9 Developing Hospitality Managers’ Intercultural Communication Abilities: The Cocktail Party Simulation, by Daphne Jameson, Ph.D.

2006 Reports
Vol. 6, No. 15 The Cost of Employee Turnover: When the Devil Is in the Details, by J. Bruce Tracey, Ph.D., and Timothy R. Hinkin, Ph.D.

Vol. 6, No. 14 An Examination of Guest Complaints and Complaint Communication Channels: The Medium Does Matter!, by Alex M. Susskind, Ph.D.

Vol. 6, No. 11 A New Method for Measuring Housekeeping Performance Consistency, by Michael C. Sturman, Ph.D.

Vol. 6, No. 10 Intellectual Capital: A Key Driver of Hotel Performance, by Linda Canina, Ph.D., Cathy A. Enz, Ph.D., and Kate Walsh, Ph.D.

Vol. 6, No. 9 Mandatory Arbitration: Why Alternative Dispute Resolution May Be the Most Equitable Way to Resolve Discrimination Claims, by David Sherwyn, J.D.