

LISTENING NEEDS IN THE WORK FORCE

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My interests in listening as one of many communication skills needed in the work force goes back to the early 1970's. As director of the Business and Professional Communication program at the University of Nebraska I found it necessary to identify which communication skills people were using once they entered the work force. The goal was to transfer these skills back to the classroom through activities and exercises. Di Salvo, Larsen, and Seiler in 1976 (Communication Skills Needed by Persons in Business Organizations, Communication Education, Vol. 25:4, pgs 269-275) identified listening as one of the three communication skills from a list of ten that was needed for job success. Since that first study I have continued to investigate communication skills found in various career fields. In this report I would like to briefly discuss three sources of information that I am currently working with which directly or indirectly deal with listening in the work force.

The first source of information is a review of approximately 50 reports that in one way or another focus on communication skills in the world of work. This review is an extension of two earlier reviews that were reported in Communication Education (V. Di Salvo, A Summary of Current Research Identifying Communication Skills in Various Organizational Contexts, Vol. 29, July 1980) and at Central States Speech Association Convention (V. Di Salvo and others, An Identification of Communication Skills, Problems, and Issues for the Business and Professional Communication Course, Milwaukee, 1982). The reports approach the topic in a variety of ways, such as asking CEO's, Business Executives, Personnel Directors,

Directors of Training as well as people from a variety of careers such as accounting, engineering, marketing, social work, health care, scientists, government agencies, law, management, and production to mention a few. It is important to note that most of the studies were conducted by people outside the field of communication. Based on an analysis of these reports, listening was judged to be one of the super critical skills needed by people for organizational success.

The second source of information comes from a data bank that I have been building over the years. The data has been collected through three research projects (a discussion of the projects can be found in Dallinger and Di Salvo, The Communication Activity Questionnaire, presented at Central States Speech Association, Milwaukee, 1982) and numerous consulting experiences. The same list of 17 communication skills (found in Appendix A) was given to approximately 650 people who were asked to identify the most important skills for job success (a detailed listing of career types and communication skills can be found in Appendix B). Based on the 16 career types and how frequently they mentioned each skill, listening came out on top having been mentioned in every career field. Listening was judged to be an essential skill for everyone in the work force regardless of career choice.

The final source of information focused on how people at work describe communication. Approximately 200 people have been asked to define how they see communication at work. The definitions ranging in length from one word to 25 words or so typically talk about communication as the sending, exchanging, expressing, flowing, passing, conveying, transmitting,

circulating, giving, relaying, transferring of information, ideas, messages, wishes, feelings, thoughts, subject matter, instructions, suggestions, policies, goals to other people, to do a job, to employees, to others .... First of all I realize that my listing of terms is an oversimplification of the definitions we have collected but nevertheless they do capture the essence of how people in organizations see communication. For our purposes the definitions do not include listening. People either assume that listening is part of communication and do not mention something taken for granted or people see listening as being separate from communication. In either case listening is not highlighted as being important to communication.

In summary, from the first two sources of information it is quite clear that communication is one of, if not the most important aspect of one's organizational activity. Proficiency in various communication skills is essential, required, and expected, is often valued above technical expertise or skills, and is likely to play a role in being promoted. Based on which skills were mentioned most frequently and considered most important and/or problematic, listening was rated as a super critical skill needed by people in the work force. Even though we give listening such a lofty rating we have to be concerned about people not mentioning listening as being part of communication. It would appear that this would be one of the challenges we must answer because the evidence is overwhelming in supporting listening as a super critical skill for people in the work force.

## APPENDIX A

### SEVENTEEN COMMUNICATION SKILLS

1. Advising (dealing with individuals in order to counsel, and/or guide them with regard to a variety of problems)
2. Persuading (dealing with others in order to influence them toward some action or point of view)
3. Instructing (teaching of skills or knowledge, either in an informal or formal manner on a one-to-one basis)
4. Interviewing (conducting interviews directed toward some specific objective)
5. Routine Information Exchange (the giving and/or exchanging of information of a routine or simple nature)
6. Public Speaking (making speeches or formal presentations to large audiences outside the organization)
7. Oral Report Giving (making presentations to those within the organization)
8. Negotiating (dealing with individuals in order to reach an agreement or solution)
9. Giving Orders (telling someone what to do, or communicating decisions from superiors)
10. Small Groups (participating as a member either voluntary or required in some form of small group)
11. Small Group Leadership (acting in a leadership role for a small group)
12. Conflict Resolution (being directly involved in solving a conflict between others or a group of others)
13. Relationship Building (getting along with people, good personal adjustment, and harmonious work relations)
14. Listening (listening empathically and providing reflective responses)
15. Giving Feedback (purposefully responding to others, modifying or redefining messages until the meanings are clear)
16. Soliciting Feedback (actively seeking responses from others)
17. Motivating (getting others to complete job tasks, arousing interest)

APPENDIX B

SIXTEEN CAREER AREAS AND IMPORTANT  
COMMUNICATION SKILLS

CAREER FIELD	SKILL
AGRICULTURE	advising, persuading, instructing, routine information exchange, giving orders, conflict resolution and listening
ARCHITECTURE	persuading, giving orders, small group leadership, relationship building, listening, motivating
BANKING	advising, persuading, instructing, routine information exchange, giving orders, relationship building, listening, giving feedback, soliciting feedback, motivating
COUNSELING	interviewing, relationship building, listening, giving feedback, motivating

DATA PROCESSING	advising, instructing, routine information exchange, relationship building, listening, giving feedback, soliciting feedback
DENTAL HYGIENE	persuading, instructing, relationship building, listening, giving feedback, motivating
ENGINEERING	advising, routine information exchange, negotiating, relationship building, listening, giving feedback
FINANCE	advising, persuading, routine information exchange, relationship building, listening, giving feedback
HEALTH CARE	routine information exchange, oral report giving, giving orders, relationship building, listening, giving feedback, soliciting feedback, motivating
HOTEL&RESTURANT	persuading, instructing, giving orders, conflict resolution, relationship building, listening, motivating
LAW	advising, persuading, interviewing, negotiating, conflict resolution, listening
MANUFACTURING	persuading, instructing, relationship building, listening, motivating
NURSING	advising, instructing, interviewing, listening, giving feedback, motivating
OFFICE PERSONNEL	instructing, public speaking, giving orders, relationship building, listening, giving feedback
SALES	advising, persuading, negotiating, relationship building, listening
TEACHING	advising, persuading, instructing, interviewing, routine information exchange, listening, soliciting feedback, motivating