LISTENING PAYS!

ACHIEVE SIGNIFICANCE THROUGH THE POWER OF LISTENING

by Rick Bommelje

One of the questions on a 360-degree Listening Behavior Assessment for leaders asks observers, "What suggestions do you have for her/him to improve their listening behavior?" Following is a sampling of responses:

- Interrupting is one of his worst behaviors, so he should listen fully before giving his input.
- She can be very black and white in how she looks at things and it can sometimes come across very strongly in her reactions when it might not be necessary.
- He should show patience with those who do not express themselves in the way he would want. Also, sometimes he doesn't respond with the familiar "social niceties" that a speaker expects, i.e., nodding and making eye contact.
- He never follows up ensuring that he has completed the task or assignment given. If you want to know the details (i.e., who, what, when, where, & why), you have to go back to him in order to find out what happened. This kills his creditability.
- Sometimes she may have to leave her agenda at the door and gauge where the other person is coming from at the time. She may shut down if she has an emotional reaction to something she's heard.

Consider the negative impact that these nonlistening behaviors might have on the leaders' immediate employees, teams, and organizations. Imagine the costs—loss of morale, productivity, trust, respect, credibility, and performance, just to name a few. The bigger question is, "What would others say about your listening behavior?"

I have spent the past twenty-five years practicing, teaching, and researching in the listening field. Many leadership and business books indicate that listening is a vital skill. Yet, most people give it little priority. The phrase "active listening" has been overused and usually refers to behaviors such as giving eye contact, nodding, and paying polite attention. The reality is that listening is so much more. The purpose of this article is to describe a practical framework that can maximize your listening effectiveness.

What would others say about your listening behavior?

The LISTENING PAYS Framework

The LISTENING PAYS framework (see Figure 1) consists of the six specific strategies that occur in listening behavior. It is called LISTENING PAYS because it can yield tremendous value and it applies to every aspect of life and all career fields. Framed in the shape of a hexagon, Build a Solid Foundation is the base strategy. This strategy is given full attention after summarizing each of the other five strategies.

The second strategy is Develop Healthy Habits, which includes the five top listening habits. Habits are behaviors that are created through continual rep-

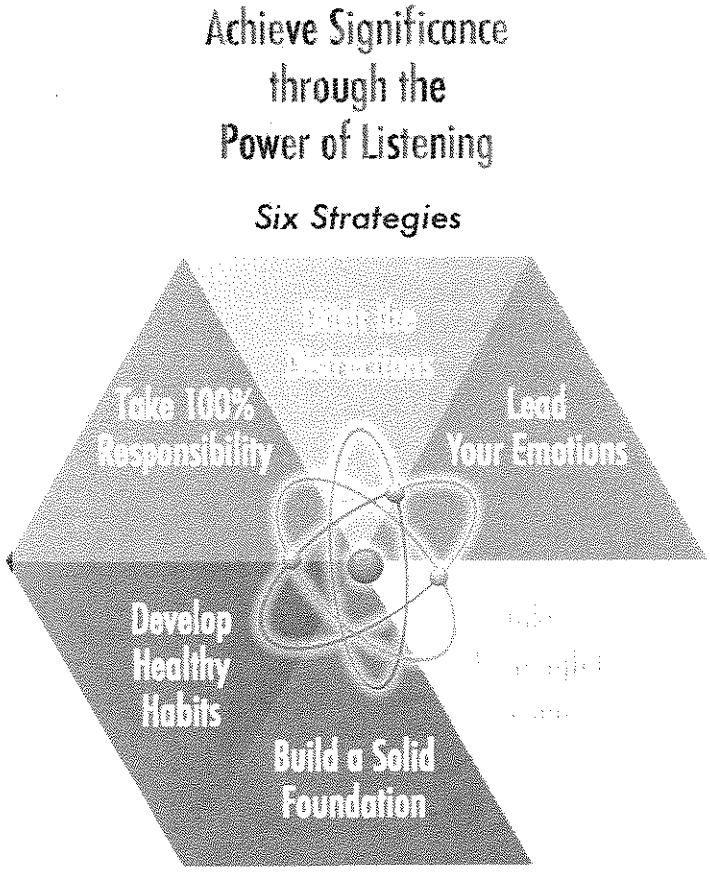


FIGURE 1. LISTENING PAYS! FRAMEWORK

etition. There are five healthy habits that great listeners consistently practice:

1. Find something of interest in the message.
2. Concentrate on content of the message first, and the delivery of it second.
3. Focus on the main point of the message versus just the facts.
4. Take notes, written or mental.
5. Pay genuine attention.

Take 100 Percent Responsibility is the third strategy, which shows the level of commitment that it takes to listen effectively, including being fully aware of the five purposes of communication: social, informative, emotional, persuasive, and entertaining. Peak performing listeners take 100 percent responsibility to recognize which purpose another person is displaying and respond accordingly.

We live in a distraction-filled world, and strategy 4, Ditch the Distractions, reveals what can be done to remove both internal and external distractions. The main point is to tolerate no distractions that you can control. The way to do this is to focus on one thing at a time—and to know what matters most. This idea is simple to understand, yet it's difficult to implement, especially in a world that prides itself on multitasking. Ironically, extensive research studies have refuted the concept of multitasking. The remedy is to 'focus,' which serves as an acronym: "*F*ollow *O*ne *C*ourse *U*ntil *S*uccessful."

Strategy 5 is Lead Your Emotions, which offers specific steps to combat emotional triggers and hot buttons. The key is to respond and not react to situations. In addition to identifying your emotional triggers, it is important to anticipate triggers in your interactions. Practice gaining self-control through disciplined thought by reminding yourself that you decide your response. For many people, leading their emotions is not easy; however, it makes a huge difference in relationships.

The sixth strategy is Take Meaningful Action, prompting you to intentionally respond to create value. In order to accomplish this, the level of listening mastery must be elevated. This involves five important stages that occur in a sequence of increasing mastery.

First, you *commit* or decide to change.

Second, you *know it*—open your mind to learn what to do.

Third, after you know it, you *do it*—act on what you know.

Fourth, when you've acted on what you know consistently over time, you can *be it*—you've made the practice of listening a part of your nature.

The fifth and final stage is to *teach it*—you take what you've learned and pass the knowledge on to others.

The strategies are connected together, and the atom in the middle of Figure 1 represents energy—*your energy*—flowing continuously through them. The strategies are continually in motion. There is a tremendous payoff to the power of listening. When combined together, these six strategies can help you achieve significance. The meaning of '*significance*' will be different for each person. For example, it might mean reaching a special goal, accomplishing your fullest potential, finding meaning and joy, living in alignment with your purpose, or repairing a broken relationship. Whatever significance you are seeking, listening can help you attain it. Essentially, the quality of your listening is equal to the quality of your life.

Build a Solid Foundation Using SIER*

The base strategy of the LISTENING PAYS framework is Build a Solid Foundation. As the central part of the foundation, one of the most successful approaches to great listening is the SIER* Listening Formula. Listening is a complex process that can be simplified and mastered by understanding and applying five stages that make up the process. SIER* is an acronym that stands for *S*ense, *I*nterpret, *E*valuate, and *R*espond. The asterisk designates the *memory* fac-

tor of listening. Each stage is essential, and, to get the greatest value, you have to do them in order.

The first stage of the listening process is to *sense*. Effective listeners focus first on fully taking in a sender's messages using all of their senses: sound, sight, smell, taste, and touch.

After you have sensed the message, you have earned the right to proceed to the second step, *interpret*. This is understanding the speaker's message correctly so that your understanding matches the speaker's intent. You can ask yourself the basic questions: "Do the words mean the same to both of us? Are we talking about the same thing?" When interpreting the message, it's important to withhold your judgment until you fully understand what the speaker is trying to say. This can be very challenging. The fact is that most people have made a judgment about what someone is saying, or even about the speaker himself, before that person is through talking. In the fast-paced world we

The key is to respond and not react to situations.

Listening = SIER*

SENSE

- Use all of your senses to take in the message: hear it, see it, smell it, taste it, touch it.
- Recognize not only what people say, but how they say it and show it.

INTERPRET

- Withhold judgement until your understanding is complete.
- Encourage the speaker to keep speaking.
- Clarify your understanding of the message (ask questions, repeat back in your own words, summarize and check for agreement).

EVALUATE

- Test the message against the evidence available.
- Probe with follow-up questions to deepen understanding.
- Identify if the message is a fact, an opinion, or a prediction.
- Take time to discern, to be confident that you have intentionally evaluated.
- Decide your response.

RESPOND

- Recognize that how you respond is not only what you say, but how you say it and show it.
- Before responding, ask yourself: "Will my response add value?" (If the answer is no, adjust what you say or show.)
- Take care to respond rather than react.
- Share your response with conscious intent.

**If you choose to bring information into long-term memory, consciously move it through each stage in the process.*

* MEMORY

FIGURE 2. BUILD A SOLID FOUNDATION

live in, many people are unaware of how much they want to talk more and listen less.

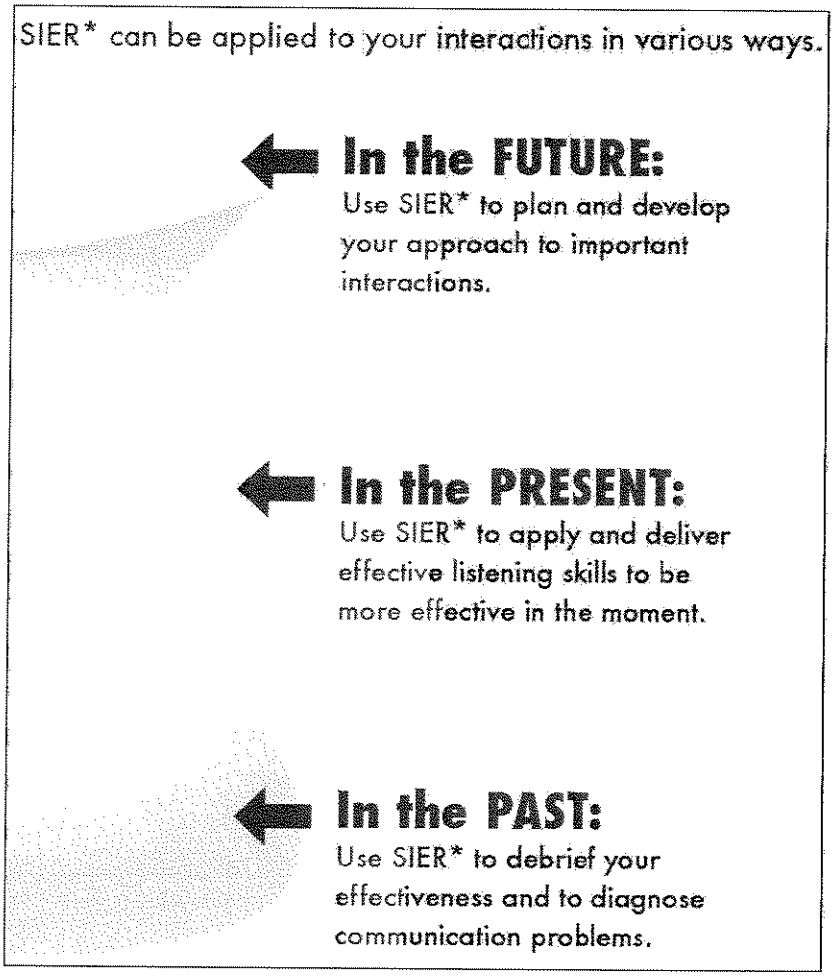
Only after you have completed the first two stages can you properly move on to the third stage, *evaluate* the message. You can then decide whether you like or dislike, agree or disagree with, accept or reject the speaker's message. This is where you make judgments about what you are interpreting.

The fourth stage is *respond.* This stage is often overlooked in the listening process. This means taking action. It is what you say or what you show nonverbally. There is a big difference between responding and reacting. *Responding* is leading your emotions, while *reacting* is being swept up with your emotions whether they be positive or negative and letting them lead you.

All of these four stages are connected together by '*memory*,' or remembering. This is the asterisk. By consciously moving through each stage in the process, you deposit what you want to into your long-term memory bank so that you can retrieve it at a future time.

Listening leaders profit from following the five stages of SIER*. As you apply the SIER* model, it is critically important to remember that

- Each stage must be completed in sequential order.
- Each stage involves different skills.



Source: Adapted from *Listening Leaders* by Dr. Lyman K. Steil and Dr. Richard K. Bommelje.

FIGURE 3. OPPORTUNITIES TO APPLY SIER*

The quality of your listening is equal to the quality of your life.

- Each stage can be mastered with conscious practice.
- The success of each stage can be observed and measured.

Three Ways to Profit by Applying SIER*

There are three ways that leaders can use SIER* and create abundant value. The hourglass in Figure 3 illustrates this. The sand in the top is your future; the sand in the bottom is your past. The grains of sand flowing through the tube represent the present moment, otherwise known as the "now." SIER*ing occurs in the moment. The challenge is for you to continually keep your consciousness in the present—to *be here now.* However, the awareness that comes from SIER*ing can also help you examine your listening effectiveness in the past and prepare for interactions in the future.

Present: Use SIER* as an Application Tool

Effective listening leaders *consciously apply* every stage of the SIER* model while they are engaged in every communication. During the present-tense process of listening, it is important to intentionally and sequentially focus on each of the SIER* stages by asking yourself the following questions:

- Am I fully and completely sensing the speaker?
- Does my meaning match the speaker's meaning?
- Am I asking questions to clarify?
- Am I withholding evaluation until warranted?
- Am I controlling my personal prejudices and emotions?
- Am I evaluating in a complete and thorough fashion?
- Am I responding in a timely, clear, and relevant manner?

The present-tense ongoing application of SIER* can be a very valuable tool in any leader's quest for assuring and enhancing dynamic communication.

Future: Use SIER* as a Planning Tool

Like great orchestra leaders, winning coaches, military geniuses, and outstanding business strategists who establish detailed plans for action, effective listening leaders create strategic listening game plans to ensure greater success in their future communications. As Napoleon observed, "For everything you must have a plan."

The SIER* model has value as a planning tool for both senders and receivers. Productive senders will plan to send a message that heightens the listener's success at sensing, interpreting, evaluating, and responding. Equally important, productive listeners will plan and position themselves to succeed at each SIER* stage as required. For example, effective listening increases when listeners position themselves to sense completely, interpret with matched understanding, evaluate with skill as required, and respond appropriately. Planning will be strengthened when you:

- Identify and deal with potential listening distractions.
- Control your environment to ensure complete sensing.
- Study the subject and match the speaker's language and intended meaning.
- Request repetition when you do not hear or remember the speaker's message.
- Seek clarification when you are unsure of the meaning of any message.
- Withhold judgment until your comprehension is complete.
- Lead your emotions.

- Evaluate a speaker's message content, support, and reasoning.
- Respond and provide helpful and relevant feedback.

Planning and applying the plan, to listen more effectively at every stage of SIER*, is guaranteed to enhance the end result.

Past: Use SIER* as a Diagnostic Tool

SIER* can also be applied in the past tense and serve as a diagnostic tool. A careful diagnostic review of the fulfillment of each stage of SIER* will help listening leaders assess what worked and what did not work. In the case of a communication breakdown, the use of SIER* as a diagnostic tool will help identify the stage at which the breakdown began. Communication breaks down because of specific faulty listening habits and behaviors, and listening leaders will profit by identifying the "starting point" of the breakdown. If the failure begins at the sensing stage, the negative impact will always be noted at the I, E, and R stages. In turn, if the failure begins at the interpretation stage, the negative impact will show up at the E and R stages. When the failure begins at the evaluation stage, the negative impact will be seen at the R stage. Of course, the failure can begin at the responding stage, in which case the negative impact will be measured at the R stage. Not remembering critical information (for example, people's names) points to a memory failure. In short, any past-tense diagnostic utilization of SIER* should begin at the first stage to discover where the failure originated. Sequential diagnosis of the stages will aid your orderly consideration of the following:

- Did you fully and correctly sense the speaker's message?
- Can you remember and repeat the essence of the message to the speaker's satisfaction?
- Did your interpretation match the speaker's? Did the meanings coincide?
- What was the extent of your and the speaker's agreement or disagreement?

There is a big difference between responding and reacting.

- Was there evidence of logical evaluation?
- Did you respond in an appropriate, timely, clear, and measurable way?

Two major benefits result from using SIER* as a past-tense diagnostic tool. The first benefit is the opportunity to correct the problem at the micro level, since that is where the breakdown originated. The second benefit is the opportunity to learn how to avoid the problem in future-tense planning and present-tense application activities. Viewed in a three-dimensional time frame, you will find profit in applying the practical 3D formula (Present-Future-Past).

Small Actions Add Up

Several years ago, I had the privilege of interviewing Bob Darbelnet, president and chief executive officer of the American Automobile Association (AAA). As the leader of AAA, Bob practices what he calls four small listening strategies that have effectively served his organization:

1. Practicing an authentic, open door policy. In fact, there are no doors on any of the executive leadership team member's offices at AAA.
2. Holding regular listening meetings in which all associates are encouraged to participate. This includes the opportunity for questions to be asked during the meeting or submitted anonymously before the meeting.

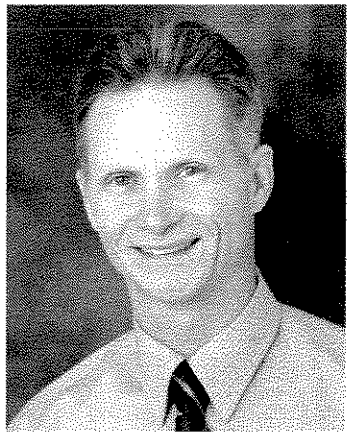
3. Honoring all questions, even those that deal with highly strategic issues.
4. Striving to create an atmosphere of informality by inviting all associates to call him 'Bob'. He concluded the interview by emphasizing, "We take listening very seriously at AAA."

Responsibility Row

While returning home from a speaking engagement, I happened to be sitting in the exit row of the airliner. Prior to takeoff, the flight attendant gave specific instructions to those of us who were in the two exit rows. After completing her presentation, she asked a simple question: "Do you agree to perform these duties if we are placed in an emergency situation? I need a verbal yes or no, right now." Every passenger clearly stated, "Yes" as she made eye contact with each one of us. Prior to walking toward the front of the plane, she turned back to the exit row passengers and said, "I thank you, the airline thanks you, and the FAA thanks you. This is not first class. You are sitting in the responsibility row!"

Conclusion

The reality is that each of us is sitting in the responsibility row in every communication exchange, especially as listeners. Listening is at the heart of every success that you, your team, and your organization will accomplish. Practicing the solid foundation of SIER* in each exchange will dramatically increase the likelihood of achieving positive results. SIER* can also stand for *S*uccess *I*n *E*ach *R*elationship. As all thoughtful and highly effective leaders know, it is the many small steps that make the long journey productive. The main point is . . . Listening Pays!



Rick Bommelje is a professor in the communication department at Rollins College in Winter Park, Florida. He teaches courses on listening and leadership and was selected as one of the top 300 college professors in the nation by the Princeton Review. A past president of the International Listening Association, he was inducted into the Listening Hall of Fame in 2011. Rick is coauthor of the pioneering book on listening leadership, Listening Leaders, and his latest book is the business fable LISTENING PAYS.