Preparing Students for Multicultural Environments:

Listening as a Key Management Competency

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Our world has become, in a very real sense, the global village we first glimpsed through the electronic media not so very long ago. Issues related to multiculturalism and diversity dominate discussions among business educators and practitioners alike. If any one organizational phenomenon characterizes the 1990s, it may well be the growth of multinational corporations and the internationalization of the American work force.

Although listening is a complex, multifaceted process, three aspects of listening are proposed as essential to effective cross-cultural understanding. Each is explained, and suggestions are provided regarding how these topics might be integrated into existing management offerings. Problems of assessment are discussed, and the notion of a listening environment is proposed as an important concept for organizations characterized by diversity. The responsibility of management educators in preparing students for the challenges of cross-cultural communication is emphasized throughout.

Importance of Listening to Management Education

Listening has been repeatedly identified as one of the most essential but problematic management communication competencies. Studies of communication in organizational settings (Brownell, 1991; DiSalvo, Larsen, & Seiler, 1976; DiSalvo & Steere, 1980; Harris & Thomlison, 1983; Stanley & Shockley-Zalabak, 1985) point to listening as a key management competence. When executives are asked to rank the communication skills they find most critical to their job success, listening is consistently placed at the top.

Researchers focusing specifically on listening behavior have come to similar conclusions (Brownell, 1990; Lewis & Reinsch, 1988; Golen, 1990; Rhodes, 1985; Sypher, Bostrom, & Seibert, 1989). Listening has been linked to such key outcomes as higher performance, increased

job satisfaction, and improved interpersonal relationships. The introduction of higher numbers of nonnative speakers into the American workforce, coupled with growing opportunities for managers to practice in other countries and cultures, makes effective listening an ever more critical competence.

In spite of substantial evidence regarding its importance, listening remains the "problematic" communication skill (Bennett & Olney, 1986; Downs & Conrad, 1982; Hunt & Cusella, 1983; Smeltzer, 1979). Personnel managers, CEOs, middle managers, human resource professionals, and line employees alike have identified listening ability as a weak link in management practice. Although increasing attention is being given to teaching listening at both the secondary and postsecondary levels (Coakley & Wolvin, 1990), the vast majority of individuals entering American organizations will not have had any specific training in how to listen. A recent study of Fortune 500 companies indicates that approximately 58% of these organizations offer their employees some type of listening instruction (Wolvin & Coakley, 1991). Still, listening specialists find much of the training short-term and sporadic. To have lasting results and to meet the challenges of listening in multicultural environments, management educators must address key listening competencies early in the educational process by integrating these topics into their classrooms. As future managers, students must learn to recognize and practice effective listening within the ongoing activities of organizational life.

What Management Students Need to Know

Assumptions about listening vary widely, as do definitions of the process. As Lewis and Reinsch (1988) note, academic and workplace definitions of effective listening may be discrepant. It is not difficult to find at least 50 definitions of listening, each proposing a slightly

different approach to understanding this complex human activity (Glenn, 1989; Wolvin & Coakley, 1988). Some researchers propose that listening is predominantly a covert activity concerned with cognitive processing (Lundstein, 1979; Weaver, 1972), whereas others believe listening can most profitably be approached from a behavioral perspective (Brownell, 1986, 1990; Steil, Barker, & Watson, 1984). In management education, the latter approach appears to be most appropriate, because it enables educators to focus on specific listening behaviors and to make judgments regarding listening effectiveness.

Specialists are in general agreement, however, that listening can be taught and learned. Over the past few decades educators have developed increasingly effective methods of teaching skills and assessing the outcomes of instruction. Effective listening, however, requires more than the simple application of principles and strategies. The "good listener" must also be personally motivated to listen; he or she must not only demonstrate the required behavior, but most also want to receive the message. This aspect makes listening particularly challenging for educators who seek to improve their students' performances in cross-cultural work environments.

As a tool for improved intercultural understanding, the dimensions of motivation and skill development are particularly relevant. This dichotomy implies that not only must managers demonstrate effective listening skills, they must also sincerely be concerned with understanding the other person and his or her perspective. Once again, the need for an other-centered orientation is nowhere more apparent than in multicultural organizations. Although effective listening enables managers to perform their task functions more efficiently, our concern here is equally with how listening serves to establish and maintain effective work relationships.

CRITICAL LISTENING COMPETENCIES

This article focuses on three selected aspects of listening that are likely to have a direct and positive influence on management students' ability to understand and respond appropriately to those whose backgrounds, assumptions, and values are unlike their own. By recognizing differences in perception, developing empathy, and providing a nonjudgemental response, organizational leaders can create strong listening environments. Such environments are characterized by open communication and support collaborative communication practices.

Appreciating Differences in Perception

International marketers have learned the hard way that what is appropriate in one country may offend their neighbors who do not share a common language, set of assumptions, or values. Language differences, however, are only a small part of the intercultural communication challenge. Perhaps the most important step toward effective cross-cultural communication is recognizing that each person's frame of reference, made up of such factors as his or her attitudes, needs, prejudices, thought patterns, expectations, and values, filters all subsequent experiences.

Differences in individuals' frames of reference is the most basic reason why intercultural communication is difficult. Even when the language is understood, employees from different cultures may not share the same "meaning" for the words used. Even such seemingly simple concepts as "office party" or "getting to work early" may elicit different responses from different employees. Those who feel comfortable in their work environments may welcome formal opportunities to socialize; to someone from another culture, however, an "office party" may elicit anxiety and confusion. Because time is a culturally determined concept, the meaning of "early" is unlikely to be shared by those from different cultural backgrounds.

Cultural values, too, often result in communication barriers because individuals make choices and set priorities on the basis of their beliefs about what is important. Individuals hoping to work in organizations characterized by diversity must not only recognize and appreciate differences in perception, but must also develop empathy— a basic competency for cross-cultural understanding.

Developing Empathy

A great deal of research has been reported on empathic listening (Basch, 1983; Bruneau, 1989; Howell, 1982, Stewart, 1983). Traditionally, empathy has implied role-taking, putting yourself in the other person's position so that as a listener you can understand the world from the speaker's viewpoint. Empathic listeners pay attention to the nonverbal as well as to the verbal aspects of the message, to the person speaking as well as to the substance of what is being communicated. As one author suggests, empathy involves both "objective" and "subjective" understanding of another person (Schutz, 1967).

A more recent and useful approach to conceptualizing empathy has been to take a relational perspective (Broome, 1991). In communicating empathy, listeners must be open both to the speaker's meaning and to the meanings that are developing in the relationship. Participants do not give up their own frameworks so much as negotiate shared meanings within the context of the interpersonal encounter (Broome, 1991). Empathy is a dynamic, relational process enabling individuals to establish shared meanings even when their backgrounds are dissimilar.

Empathic listening takes great concentration and requires the listener to focus complete attention on the communication situation. Sensitivity to nonverbal cues is key; listeners must closely observe facial expressions, body posture, movement, gesture, and consider tone of voice,

and must interpret these elements in light of the entire communication context. This is a difficult role, one that employees perceive their managers have a great deal of difficulty performing (Brownell, 1986). The demands of cross-cultural communication, however, multiply this difficulty because interpretations of behavior vary from one culture to the next. For example, limited eye contact, which may be understood as insecurity or disinterest in the United States, may simply reflect deference and respect in Asian countries.

Regardless of the difficulties, the deliberate effort to understand the other person's worldview is essential. In addition to a sincere interest in understanding the person speaking, empathic listeners must also demonstrate concern through the responses they make.

Providing an Appropriate Listening Response

The nature of a listener's response influences the speaker throughout the interpersonal communication encounter. Individuals send and receive messages—verbal and nonverbal — simultaneously. Listeners who communicate that they are interested and attentive encourage the speaker to continue.

Listeners have a variety of choices regarding how to respond. Although categories vary, common response styles include: supportiveness, questioning, being evaluative/judgmental, giving advice, defensiveness, or using silence. Different responses elicit very different reactions in the speaker and thereby either inhibit or facilitate the development of shared meanings. Those listeners who remain open-minded and nonjudgmental regardless of cultural differences, who provide supportive feedback and who reinforce the speaker for sharing his or her ideas, cannot help but have a positive impact on the relationship.

Students must not only become better listeners, they must also behave in ways that lead others to perceive them as effective and concerned receivers. Because cultural differences may lead to different interpretations of similar behaviors, it is essential that receivers learn as much as possible about their partner's culture and constantly "perception check" to make sure that their intentions are accurately communicated. The more knowledge individuals have about potential cultural differences, the better able they will be to choose appropriate listening responses.

These three listening dimensions may appear simplistic and straightforward; however, integrating them as themes into management classrooms takes deliberate effort and planning.

Integrating Listening Into Management Education Courses

A survey of 15 top business schools indicates that a growing number of management programs are introducing courses related to international business; many schools now offer concentrations or sets of electives to prepare students for a multicultural business environment. Although the need for academic preparation is being met through such titles as "International Business," "International Finance," or "International Law," few offerings address the daily cross-cultural communication challenges managers confront on the job. Although the substance of such courses is important, the implementation of any management task will require individuals who are able to understand and communicate within a multicultural environment — whether that environment is across the ocean or down the hall. In situations where specific cross-cultural communication courses are unavailable, management educators can begin to address the need for effective listening in any classroom where organizational behavior and human resources issues are discussed. The overall goal in introducing this topic is to make students more effective cross-cultural communicators so that they are better able to accomplish management tasks and

establish healthy work relationships. This goal is accomplished by increasing students' awareness of the importance of effective listening, encouraging and reinforcing appropriate listening attitudes and behaviors, and sensitizing students to the various communication dimensions where cross-cultural misunderstandings are most likely to occur. The following, based on the three listening topics reviewed above, are suggested as feasible objectives for such classes:

1. to increase students' recognition of perceptual differences and how they affect cross-cultural communication;
2. to increase students' ability to empathize with others, particularly those whose values and assumptions are different from their own; and
3. to increase students' awareness of cross-cultural communication dimensions and to teach them listening responses that encourage open, two-way communication.

By focusing on the importance of effective listening and by providing opportunities to practice a variety of listening behaviors in the classroom, students will begin to acquire essential insights and competencies.

Accomplishing Listening Objectives in the Management Classroom

One approach to teaching communication topics is to cover them as distinct units within existing management courses. Traditionally, students learn such communication topics as small group process, leadership styles, and conflict management at certain periods within a larger course framework. The attitudes and behaviors that are important to effective cross-cultural listening, however, are best developed as central threads running throughout a variety of management offerings and course topics. To clarify, several examples are given below.

First, as students discuss performance appraisals they can be introduced to the fact that organizational roles may result in differences in perceptions. This discussion might be expanded to include the additional challenges of appraising someone whose basic assumptions about the nature of work may be different from his or her supervisor's. In conjunction with teaching the procedures of performance appraisal, several students might self-define themselves as culturally different in some way from other classmates. A specific appraisal interview between two students who represent different cultures might then be role played.

A sales representative may be advised that her overt and physical displays of affection can be misinterpreted by customers with different cultural backgrounds. Likewise, a foreign front desk clerk may have to be coached to speak less abruptly to guests, who become offended by his straightforward manner. Subsequent discussions might focus on the process of establishing empathy, providing an appropriate listening response, and still communicating performance goals.

Second, multinational organizations will be faced with many cross- cultural communication situations. Conflicts between customers and service representatives may arise when each party holds different expectations or definitions of service. Although meals are savored and prolonged in some cultures while companions enjoy each others' company, in other cultures "power" meals are initiated as a forum for getting down to business and efficiency is valued. When guests' expectations are different from the type of service provided, conflicts and dissatisfaction results. Customers may believe an employee is rude or inconsiderate when, in fact, he or she is simply displaying the norms of a particular culture.

Students could profitably discuss examples of such conflicts, and determine what listening strategies would be most helpful in establishing mutual understanding regarding the nature of the services provided.

Third, one of management's basic tasks is to motivate employees. In sessions on motivational strategies, the topic of cultural differences leads naturally to discussions of effective listening. How do managers make decisions regarding the most appropriate incentives for various employees? How does understanding perceptual differences and empathic listening contribute to a manager's ability to understand the employee and thereby make more appropriate decisions regarding motivational strategies?

Fourth, participative management is practiced in most organizational settings. Employees will only feel comfortable sharing their ideas and discussing their concerns if they believe their manager listens to them. Managers who are sensitive to cultural differences and who provide culture-appropriate responses communicate (both verbally and nonverbally) interest and understanding, thereby encouraging employees to participate and increasing overall workgroup morale.

Awareness of an employee's cultural background can help managers determine the most appropriate way to encourage participation. Although a direct question such as, "Do you agree with the current policy?" may elicit a forthright response from some employees, others would be reluctant to openly disagree. Individuals from Asian cultures, for example, may have to be approached in a much more indirect manner in order for them to feel comfortable expressing their true thoughts. Through examples and role- plays, students might better realize the impact various listening responses have on employees' willingness to communicate.

In all the above tasks, the importance of effective listening to establishing cross-cultural understanding is emphasized. Individual inventories and discussion questions also reinforce listening concepts. Students' consciousness is heightened through discussions and exercises that examine the types of encounters they are likely to experience on the job and their response in terms of personal listening behaviors (Brownell, 1986; Purdy & Borisoff, 1991; Wolvin & Coakley, 1989).

LISTENING ASSESSMENT

A commitment to making students effective cross-cultural listeners implies that their success in achieving this objective can be measured. Unfortunately, there are few topics that pose as many assessment problems as listening behavior (Rhodes, Watson, & Barker, 1990). To begin, listening, as discussed earlier, is affected by an individual's motivation. When practicing managers are given standardized listening tests (Bostrom, 1983; Watson- Barker, 1984), they may achieve high scores even if their workplace listening skills are perceived to be poor. By concentrating on the task at hand and "trying hard" — something that might not be typical of their listening behavior on the job — individuals may do well in controlled paper-and-pencil testing situations.

In most cases, educators measure listening behavior by establishing indicators that will be accepted as evidence that listening has taken place, and making judgments on that basis. Those who are perceived as good listeners because they demonstrate the appropriate verbal and nonverbal behaviors are rated more favorably than those who do not "act like a good listener acts." In organizational contexts in particular, perceptions of listening are the basis on which

judgments of individual listening effectiveness are made (Brownell, 1990; Husband, Cooper, & Monsour, 1988; Lewis & Reinsch, 1988).

But whether or not there are strong correlations between those who are perceived as good listeners and those who score well on standardized listening tests remains uncertain. In cross-cultural work environments, this dichotomy is likely to widen as definitions and indicators of effective listening may vary from one setting to the next. The complexities of crosscultural communication make it apparent that listening must be viewed as a multifaceted, dynamic activity.

Nevertheless, we can assume that individuals who demonstrate an overall positive regard for their partners, demonstrated by such behaviors as concentrating on the message, providing supportive responses, and refraining from interrupting, encourage more frequent and open communication. Regardless of how much an individual may actually hear and remember, unless he or she is perceived as a sincere listener, other organizational members will not respond in ways that contribute to maintaining healthy work relationships.

Because cultural diversity implies that the same behaviors may be interpreted in different ways depending on the background and practices of the individual participants, those who manage in organizations characterized by a culturally diverse workforce must constantly ask, "How does this employee perceive and interpret my behavior?" The better understanding managers have of cultural differences, the better able they will be to practice culture- appropriate listening behavior and to remain sensitive to cultural differences in all communication contexts.

Another factor affecting listening behavior concerns self-monitoring — an individual's ability to accurately assess his or her behavior and its impact on others (Snyder, 1974). The results of several recent studies indicate that managers perceive themselves as better listeners on

almost all dimensions than do their colleagues (Gilbert, 1985; Husband, 1987). Managers'

selfratings of their sensitivity to subordinates' nonverbal communication, and subordinates'

judgments of their manager's sensitivity, were significantly discrepant (Brownell, 1990). This

finding is particularly troublesome when cross-cultural aspects are considered, because the

likelihood that nonverbal behaviors will be misinterpreted increases with increased diversity.

Constant perception-checking is necessary in order to maintain common understandings

regarding the impact of specific listening practices.

In the classroom, management educators must take responsibility for providing as much

feedback as possible on their students' listening behavior and helping them align their self-

perceptions with the perceptions of those from different cultures. The classroom serves as a

valuable and rare laboratory experience where individuals can explore alternative responses and

receive guidance regarding how to modify habitual behaviors in keeping with the specific needs

of their unique communication partners. Managers have little hope of improving their

communication competence in the workplace if they cannot bring their self-perceptions in line

with the impressions they make on their colleagues. Clearly, effective listening in diverse work

environments is challenging even for the most skilled communicators.

Listening Environments

As role model and mentor, managers constantly influence the communication behaviors

of their workgroup (Daniel, 1985). One of the most important ways in which managers can

ensure more effective cross-cultural interaction is through facilitating strong and supportive

listening environments. The concept of listening environment has recently been discussed as a

factor in creating high-performing organizations (Peters, 1988). Although the listening

environment is directly affected by the manager's attitudes and practices, perceptions of the environment, once established, influence employees' attitudes and subsequent work behavior (Lindley, 1984). The listening environment, then, is a combination of objective and subjective aspects, influencing the organization's culture as it is shaped by individuals' understanding of what is expected of organizational members.

Employees' background, culture, and role relationships—as well as their attitudes, personal agendas, and values—influence how a particular set of behaviors will be experienced. When we talk about effective listening we must do so with the understanding that we are referring to listening as it is perceived and interpreted by members within a particular context. The notion of listening environment is an important one for those who seek to promote effective cross-cultural communication. If all employees understand that listening is practiced and valued, cross-cultural understanding is likely to become a reality. The attitudes and practices essential to establishing this sort of environment must begin with tomorrow's managers, those students in our management classrooms.

Conclusion

Much advice has been given to practicing managers regarding how to create healthy and productive organizations. In the decades ahead, two characteristics of high-performing managers will be (a) their skill in mobilizing and satisfying a diverse workforce, and (b) their ability to communicate effectively both at home and in other parts of the world. In these endeavors, effective listening is critical.

Managers influence their employees in many ways, perhaps none more than by what they do and what they pay attention to in the course of daily activities. It becomes apparent that

educators have a similar influence on their teaching environments; the behaviors that we hope

will be valued in the workplace might first be modeled, cultivated, and reinforced in the

classroom.

By emphasizing three simple but vital listening concepts—perceptual differences,

empathy, and appropriate response styles —students cannot help but be better prepared to face

the global village that spreads outside their windows. When management educators demonstrate

that listening is valued by paying attention to students' listening behaviors, they are shaping and

reinforcing one of the most essential leadership competencies. As educators prepare future

managers for the cross-cultural communication challenges ahead, they will be fostering not only

excellent classrooms, but excellent companies as well.

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