



Listening and Hearing vs Understanding

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

We have all experienced the phenomenon where we have tried to explain something to an individual who appears to be paying full attention. The individual was alert and nodded many times giving the impression of understanding. Later on we found that the individual internalized almost none of the information we were trying to convey. This article explains why this happens and offers some antidotes.

To internalize a message, one must not only pay attention, but the information must sink into the brain enough for recall and action. Listening can be happening even though there is little comprehension. A typical example of this occurs when dealing with two people who have different primary languages.

I noticed this phenomenon often when working with technical people in Asia. They were able to understand English, so we used that for communication. They would nod and give verbal cues (like "uh huh") when I talked, but later would not be able to recall the meaning. They were being polite and did not want to upset me, so they took in what they were able to without internalizing the message.

Here is a gag from the famous erstwhile Goon Show on BBC. The dialog that illustrates the problem is between Minnie and Henry, an old feeble couple:

Henry: Minnie, Cambiar las sábanas en número 23.

Minnie: What's that Henry? I can't understand you.

Henry: Oh geesh. I said, "Cambiar las sábanas en número 23." Now, Minnie, did you understand me that time.

Minnie: Yes! You said, "Cambiar las sábanas en número 23."

Henry: Very good! Well then, why don't you do it?

Minnie: What does it mean, Henry?

There are many methods to help determine if a person has internalized a message, but each one has the potential to deceive or annoy either party. Here are six ways to do it along with the caveats for each method:

1. **Repeat the information** - Describe the same information paraphrasing yourself so the listener hears the instruction twice but with a different style. If the instruction involves an action, then a demonstration may help. If there is an abstract concept, then using the VAK model will help. This is where you frame the information in a way consistent with the listener's primary channel of taking in information (visual, auditory, or kinesthetic). This repetition style can feel pretty cumbersome to the speaker and the listener, but having a real verification is the most secure way of determining if the person listened, heard, and understood the instructions.
2. **Look for body language** - If someone has good eye contact and following skills (like grunting, nodding, or saying "uh-huh") you have a good indication the person is paying attention. If the person is texting or otherwise gazing off into space with a blank look, you should assume little information is being internalized until you confirm otherwise. But paying attention does not guarantee understanding, so you can be fooled.
3. **Ask a question** - This method assumes the person has heard and internalized the content. By asking a simple question, you can get more information about the level of communication going on, but it is also not sufficient because of the phenomenon described above with Minnie. The person may be able to recite the words, but not really understand their true meaning.
4. **Parrot the information** - Have the other person repeat back the essence of your message. Here you are requesting the person do "reflective listening." This is an excellent way to test the level of understanding, but it can be annoying, especially if you have a lot of information to convey. One antidote in the case of instruction is to get the person to actually do the task.
5. **Ask for a demonstration** - if the information is an actionable instruction, like how to adjust a carburetor, then you can ask the individual to show you the process you just described.
6. **Observe the person over time** - To get a true reading of the level of understanding, the best method is to monitor what the person does for several repetitions after the information was shared. The caveat here is that if the person does not do the activity right, it could be a motivation problem rather than a failure to understand.
7. **Write it down** - Having a written set of instructions or a check list is an obvious way to enhance the information transfer process. Multiple exposures to the same information using different modes will make the information stick better, and a

written document can be referred to anytime in the future if memories start to fade.

When addressing a group, you will have different levels of understanding all around the room. One person may grasp 95% of your meaning while another may understand only 5% of what you intended to convey. The distraction factor will be different from person to person. One individual may appear to be listening, but he is daydreaming about something completely separate from your conversation. On the flip side, a person may be making little eye contact and multitasking, like texting a friend, but actually be listening carefully to your information. How do you know who got the message and who did not?

There is no 100% sure way to confirm people got the message unless you want to devise some kind of written or online verification test. For extremely important instructions, like some kind of emergency or medical procedure, it would be wise to go the formal route. For unimportant topics, like which pizza box has the pepperoni, the need to confirm the message was understood is less important.

Good communication involves work. It is not wise to just expect people to internalize some instructions fully based on just one verbal description. It is imperative to have a verification process in place that will ensure full understanding. The extra time and effort are well worth it because there will be far fewer disappointments.



Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP, is a consultant, trainer, speaker, and author in the areas of leadership and trust. He is the author of: *The Trust Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals*, *Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online*, and *Leading with Trust is Like Sailing Downwind*. Bob has many years as a senior executive with a Fortune 500 Company and with non-profit organizations. For more information, or to bring Bob in to speak at your next event, **contact him at** www.Leadergrow.com, bwhipple@leadergrow.com or 585.392.7763