

# Active Listening: the Leader's Rosetta Stone

by MAJ Joel P. Cummings

In the movie, "Dumb and Dumber," Lloyd demonstrates how a person can hear what someone is saying without listening to what that person is saying. Lloyd's lack of listening skills prevent him from understanding the other person's point of view. Lloyd does not know he is a poor listener. The combination of these two deficits creates entertaining interpersonal conflicts. We laugh at Lloyd because he reminds us of someone we know, perhaps ourselves.

Although Lloyd provides a humorous example, poor listening skills may lead to more interpersonal conflict than is necessary. Understanding how to be a good listener is the key to improving interpersonal relationships. A good listener can be an effective communicator as well as an empathetic leader. Therefore, if effective communication and empathy are leadership traits worthy of development, then developing your listening techniques is a good place to start.

I came to this realization during my year at the Army's Command and General Staff College. Before the course, I received my Multi-Source Assessment and Feedback survey based in large part from my leadership position preceding the course. The feedback from my subordinates and peers made me realize that I needed to work on my listening skills. In hindsight, I learned not to assume my subordinates would give me the feedback I need unsolicited. Throughout my CGSC year, I learned about and reflected on how to be a better leader by being a better listener. Now that I have resumed a leadership role, I find these theories highly effective in practice.

Army leadership doctrine recognizes the importance of listening to those we lead to make better plans and decisions.<sup>2</sup> Field Manual 6-22, *Army Leadership*, calls this skill active listening.<sup>3</sup> "Active listening helps communicate reception of the subordinate's message verbally and non-verbally," according to FM 6-22. "To capture the message fully, leaders listen to what is said and observe the subordinate's manners."<sup>4</sup> Active listening is an essential component to the leadership competency

*Lloyd: What do you think the chances are of a guy like you and a girl like me ... ending up together?*

*Mary: Well, Lloyd, that's difficult to say. I mean, we don't really. ...*

*Lloyd: Hit me with it! Just give it to me straight! I came a long way just to see you, Mary. The least you can do is level with me. What are my chances?*

*Mary: Not good.*

*Lloyd: You mean, not good like one out of a hundred?*

*Mary: I'd say more like one out of a million. [pause]*

*Lloyd: So you're telling me there's a chance. ... Yeah! [Moments later, Lloyd discovers Mary is married.]*

*Lloyd: Husband? Wait a minute ... what was all that one in a million talk?!*

of "communicates."<sup>4</sup> Leadership doctrine also recognizes that communication is essential to the other seven leadership competencies.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to the described leadership competencies, active listening could also develop the leadership attributes in FM 6-22, especially empathy. Empathy is defined in FM 6-22 as "the ability to see something from another person's point of view, to identify with and enter into another person's feelings and emotions, enabl[ing] the Army leader to better care for civilians, Soldiers and their families." Empathy cannot be achieved if we are hearing, but not listening to, what the other person is saying. Furthermore, empathic listening facilitates the ability of a speaker to fully express his or her thoughts and feelings.

In this vein, FM 6-22 describes how an Army leader actively listens during a counseling session: "Active listening implies listening thoughtfully and deliberately to capture the nuances of the subordinate's language." Through this technique, the active listener may discover the imbedded meaning in what the person is saying.<sup>6</sup> Throughout counseling, the manual places more emphasis on listening rather than speaking.

Given the importance of active listening in Army leadership doctrine, this article will explore how to become a better Army leader by being a better listener. Army

doctrine recognizes active listening as a prerequisite to effective communication. Active listening also achieves the shared understanding required of empathy. But if the value of listening is that obvious, why doesn't everybody do it? It's because active listening is easy to understand but difficult to master. The discipline needed to actively listen, especially when under stress, requires extensive practice, patience and emotional endurance.

The process is more difficult and complex than this article may suggest. However, practicing effective communication skills such as active listening develops other leadership attributes and competencies.

In this way, active listening is the Rosetta Stone of leadership. Like a decoder, active listening helps a leader translate interpersonal communications. Armed with an understanding of communication skills, leaders can unlock other dimensions of influencing behavior.

Active listening is not a passive activity. The term *active listening* includes the listener's responses and body language while listening. Active listening draws out what the speaker is trying to convey. The active listener confirms that the message received is the message intended. In the end, active listening creates the impression on the speaker that the listener received the intended message. Active listening creates a feeling in the speaker that his or her views are important to the organization.

## What active listening looks like

In *People Skills, How to Assert Yourself, Listen to Others and Resolve Conflicts*, Dr. Robert Bolton breaks down listening behavior into three skills clusters, each having four supporting listening skills.<sup>7</sup> By breaking listening behavior into its component parts, Bolton simplifies the task of listening. Practitioners of active listening may focus on one skill at a time. Later, the active listener may work to integrate several skills at the same time. Bolton's list of listening-skill clusters is in Table 1.

The skill cluster of *attending* is a good place to start. Attending represents the physical, non-verbal aspect of listening. When a person attends to what another is saying, that person is listening with his or her whole body, according to Bolton. Attending conveys a psychological presence of the listener with the speaker. The speaker feels that he or she has the listener's undivided attention. This non-verbal message is communicated in four ways: posture, body position and motion, eye contact and environment.

**Posture of involvement.** Attending starts with a *posture of involvement*. "Communication tends to be fostered when the listener demonstrates a relaxed alertness with the body leaning slightly forward, facing the other squarely, maintaining an 'open' position and situating himself at an appropriate distance from the speaker," Bolton wrote. A listener with a posture inclined to the speaker motivates the speaker to open up. The listener is "on the edge of his seat," so to speak. The listener moves so that his or her shoulders are squared with the speaker and his or her eyes are at the same level as the speaker. If a desk is in the way, the listener should move so that no physical barrier is blocking the non-verbal message of involvement.

**Open body position.** The posture of involvement requires the listener to maintain an *open body position*. Tightly crossed arms and legs signals defensiveness or being closed off. On the other hand, during a seated conversation, leaning forward to rest your elbows on your knees could convey an open position while at the same time signaling a posture of involvement. This nonverbal message is best conveyed from about three feet away. In our culture, this is about the right distance to convey a psychological presence without making someone feel uncomfortable.

**Appropriate body motions.** While maintaining an open body position, the listener should use *appropriate body motions* to convey an attitude of attentiveness. A listener who is as still as a statue will project a cold or aloof feeling. A listener who makes distracting motions and gestures telegraphs a divided attention. An active listener is aware of his or her repetitive movements. Appropriate body motions are in response to what the speaker is saying as opposed to stimuli unrelated to the speaker. An active listener may be so in tune with the speaker that his or her gestures synchronize with the speaker.

**Eye contact.** Just like with maintaining appropriate body posture and body movements, *eye contact* is essential but fails if

Listening skill cluster	Skill
Attending skills	Posture of involvement
	Appropriate body motion
	Eye contact
	Non-distracting environment
Following skills	Door openers
	Minimal encouragements
	Infrequent and open questions
	Attentive silence
Reflecting skills	Paraphrasing
	Reflecting feelings
	Reflecting meanings
	Summative reflections

**Table 1. Dr. Robert Bolton's listening-skill clusters.**

overdone. Too little eye contact is an obvious nonverbal cue that the listener is psychologically absent from the discussion. Too much eye contact, such as staring, may make the speaker uncomfortable. The active listener knows how to softly focus on the speaker, shifting his or her gaze at the right time and place before resuming eye contact. The listener shifts his or her gaze to the speaker's hand gestures or an object to which the speaker is referring. After that break in eye contact, the listener resumes the soft focus on the speaker's eyes. Eye contact not only conveys the message of attentiveness but also allows the listener to read the speaker's nonverbal messages.

**Non-distracting environment.** The context of appropriate posture, movement and eye contact must be in a *non-distracting environment*. The listener will have a hard time focusing if another conversation is nearby or a radio is playing. In addition to noisy distractions, barriers like a desk or service window create a physical barrier to the nonverbal aspect of communication. When the listener senses a distraction, the active listener tries to remove or minimize the distraction.

I practiced attending skills when I became the deputy staff judge advocate in a legal office. On Day 1, I realized that my office was not structured for listening. I noticed that my L-shaped desk protruded into the middle of my office. If someone entered, my desk would be between us. Also, my computer monitor would be at the left corner of my eye. An email popping into my inbox could cause my eyes

to flicker in that direction. Furthermore, the nearest open chair was across my desk, which invited people to sit with a desk between us.

To create an environment conducive to active listening, I turned my desk so it lined the corner wall of my office. This opened up the center of the floor. If someone entered my office, I would have to turn my back on my computer to greet him or her. If someone needed to talk at length, I would move to a small table in my office. In one-on-one settings, I would position my chair at the table to face the other person and to the side of the table. The table would be a mere armrest, as my shoulders were mostly squared off to the speaker. (See Figure 1.) Although I am not always a good listener, I structured my environment to facilitate good listening.

Although nonverbal cues promote effective communication, sometimes *following skills* are needed to nudge the speaker. Following skills are used when the speaker is having a hard time expressing an idea, or at least needs time to express it fully. Perhaps the speaker is trying hard to choose the right words on a touchy subject. Following skills help the speaker work out the message so the listener can understand its true meaning. These skills are directed at the listener's primary challenge: to stay out of the other person's way during the conversation.

**Door openers.** The use of *door openers* is a following skill – a way to let someone know you want to listen to what he or she has to say. Door openers typically have four parts:<sup>8</sup>

1. Describe the other person's body language;
2. Give an invitation to talk or to talk about the reason for that body language;
3. Use silence or a pregnant pause to allow the other person to decide what to say (if the person chooses not to talk, usually it is best to respect that person's privacy and move on); and
4. Attend with appropriate posture, movement and eye contact.

A listener can use door openers to initiate a conversation when someone acts like something is bothering him. You say, "Hey, you look ticked off. What's up?" Door openers can be in the middle of a conversation if you sense the other person is avoiding a subject. "Is this project upsetting you? What's the matter?" Door

openers target the emotions behind a conversation to understand the speaker's perspective.

**Minimal encouragements.** Like door openers, *minimal encouragements* is a following skill that gets the listener out of the speaker's way but keeps the listener participating in the conversation.<sup>9</sup> Minimal encouragements are one- or two-word responses (hence, "minimal") which encourage the speaker to keep talking. Although the listener could use a simple "mm-hmm," several other responses could work such as "Go on," "Oh," "Tell me more" or "I see." These responses do not require agreement with the speaker. The listener is simply conveying the message of respectful attendance.

A minimal encouragement could be combined with a door opener in the following conversation. Speaker: "I can't figure out what to do. I guess I am just confused." Listener: "Confused?"

Following skills like these help draw out the true meaning when the speaker has a hard time articulating the message.

**Infrequent, open questions.** When a speaker is searching for words, the listener actually is more helpful by asking fewer questions. If a question is needed, an open question is best, such as "What's on your mind?" "An open question provides space for the speaker to explore his thoughts without being hemmed in too much by the listener's categories," according to Bolton.

Closed questions direct an answer such as "yes/no," "true/false" or a multiple-choice answer. If an open question is called for, ask one question at a time. Even with open questions, less is more.

**Attentive silence.** In addition to infrequent questions, active listeners know the value of silence. Attentive silence gives the speaker time to think about what he or she is going to say. Silence lets the speaker set the pace of the conversation. Together with nonverbal cues, silence can nudge a speaker to say what is really on his or her mind. Instead of filling the silence with talk, the listener can use the pause to focus on attending to the other, observing nonverbal cues and thinking about what the speaker is trying to say. Silence conveys patience. The message of patience may help the speaker relax. The silent patience of the listener also conveys respect to the speaker. When the speaker falls silent, this may also mean the speaker finished saying what he or she planned to say.

Letting the conversation fall silent for a moment may be a good way to transition to the next phase of effective communication. The next step in the conversation is to ensure that the message the listener received is the message the speaker intended. For this step, *reflecting skills* are needed.

Reflecting skills demonstrate to the speaker that the listener received the

speaker's idea as it exists in the speaker's mind. "In a reflective response, the listener restates the feeling and/or content of what the speaker has communicated and does so in a way that demonstrates understanding and acceptance," writes Bolton. These skills convey understanding and acceptance, not necessarily agreement.

**Reflective responses.** Generally, reflective responses have four parts, according to Bolton. First, the reflective response is nonjudgmental. In being nonjudgmental, the response summarizes what was said without a good or bad value attached. Second, it is a reflection of what the listener thinks the person has experienced. Third, it is concise. Fourth, the reflection conveys a meaning deeper than what the speaker said. Also, all reflective responses require the listener to give the speaker a chance to correct the listener's understanding.

There are four kinds of reflective responses. *Paraphrasing* briefly restates the essential facts of what the speaker has just said using the speaker's words. *Reflecting feelings* states the underlying emotion the speaker is expressing, both verbally and nonverbally. *Reflecting meanings* combines the first two skills by connecting the underlying feeling with the asserted facts. A reflected-meaning formula could be, "You feel \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_." Finally, you can bring all three reflecting skills together in a *summative*

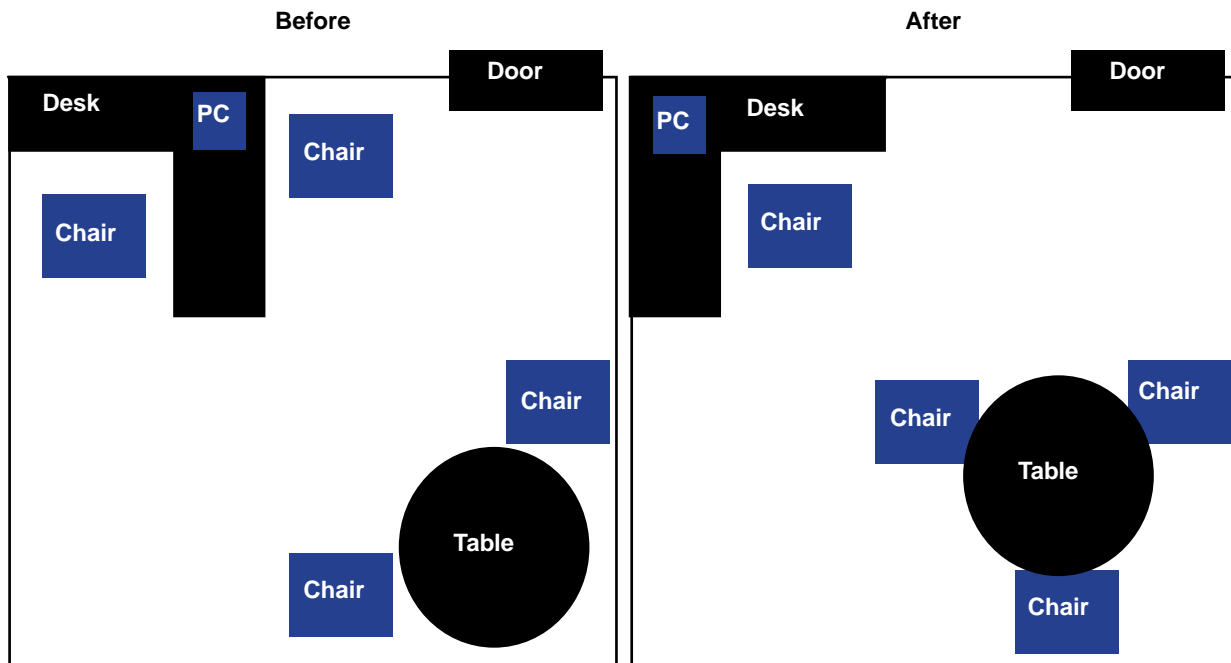


Figure 1. Before and after illustration of the author's office set up for active listening.

*reflection.* After some discussion, summative reflections work well to capture patterns and themes to draw a conclusion or tie up the conversation.

Here is an example of how reflecting skills would work. Imagine you are the battalion executive officer and supervisor of LT Smith, who is having a bad day. First, LT Smith was late to physical training. Since he has not been late before, you gave him verbal counseling and a warning. Later that morning, you notice he is acting distracted as if something is bothering him. Towards the end of the day, the battalion S-4 tells you that he had to put LT Smith at attention during a heated discussion about an overdue report. LT Smith's actions upset and disappoint you, but you resist an emotional reaction.

Since you want to know what is really going on with your Soldier, you decide to practice active listening to discover the root cause of the problem. You understand that unobserved reasons are often the cause of observed bad behavior. You take LT Smith to a shaded and discrete area behind the headquarters. You sit together on some crates while you position yourself for attentive listening. You relate your observations of his behavior and ask him what is going on. You let LT Smith talk using your following skills to draw out his explanation. After a brief silence, you feel that LT Smith has fully expressed himself.

You discover that LT Smith and his wife are having marital trouble over finances and child rearing. You could state a variety of reflective responses to check out your understanding of what he said. Your reflection could focus on the facts (paraphrasing). "You argued with your spouse, then you lost your cool with the S-4. Sounds like you are having a really bad day." Alternatively, your reflection could focus on the unstated feelings (reflecting feelings). "I know you didn't mean to, but your anger at home is affecting your duty performance. That must be frustrating." Also, you could focus on the underlying meaning of what he said (reflecting meanings). "You felt mad because the S-4 pulled rank on you."

You could also choose the most challenging reflective response in which you summarize the conversation into a few succinct sentences. "Your home life makes you frustrated. But you also did not see why the S-4 felt you disrespected him. You felt that you were in the right in the argument with the S-4 and he overreacted. Is it possible that your anger may

be preventing you from taking responsibility for your actions?" This response is challenging because it carries a greater risk of confrontation over the conclusions you have drawn. Understanding the risk of disagreement, you make sure LT Smith has ample opportunity to correct your understanding and you are careful to avoid defensiveness.

After you demonstrate understanding, you have a greater chance of communicating your message. You need to fulfill your responsibilities as his supervisor. Active listening does not change Army standards of discipline.<sup>10</sup> Understanding and acceptance does not require you to agree with LT Smith's point of view. Empathy is not pity or sympathy. Your message in this case may be best related in a written counseling covering the day's events. You could warn him of the negative consequences if he persists in his current course of conduct. You can tell him you will not tolerate disrespect to leaders. You could order him to seek a financial adviser or suggest a chaplain. If LT Smith admits he was in the wrong with the S-4, you could also encourage him to go apologize. Tough love and active listening are not mutually exclusive.

## Improving and measuring your listening skills

As in the preceding hypothetical scenario, active listening is about creating a feeling of understanding in the other person. This feeling can be measured; in fact, the Army has institutional mechanisms to evaluate how subordinates feel about their leaders. Army doctrine emphasizes feedback as an essential technique to leadership development across all competencies and attributes – emphasizes it so much that FM 6-22 mentions feedback 57 times.

Doctrine encourages leaders to seek feedback informally and often. Feedback can be formal as well. Formal feedback may be in the form of command-climate surveys or the MSAF, which is an excellent tool for all leaders to assess their leadership.<sup>11</sup>

Common to all the suggestions for improving listening skills is the discipline to listen well at all times – not just when it matters most to the listener. In his book, *What Got You Here Won't Get You There*, Marshall Goldsmith describes this as the ability that "separates the great from the near-great."<sup>12</sup> This is "the ability to make a person feel, when you're with that person, that he or she is the most important (and the only) person in the room." The skill Goldsmith describes is the endstate

that active listening achieves. Anyone can be an active listener when on a first date, when trying to impress someone or when listening to the boss.

"The only difference between us and the super-successful among us – the near-great and the great – is that *the great ones do this all the time*. It's automatic for them. For them there's no on and off switch for caring and empathy and showing respect. It's always on. They don't rank personal encounters in terms of importance. They treat everyone equally – and everyone eventually notices."<sup>13</sup>

Goldsmith writes that the skill that separates the great from the near-great is 90 percent listening. "And listening requires a modicum of discipline – the discipline to concentrate," he said. He suggests a listening-discipline exercise of closing your eyes and counting to 50 without letting any nagging thoughts invade your brain. This is a listening-concentration exercise that will improve your ability to focus on what another is saying, since active listening is disciplined listening.

When practicing listening, Goldsmith advocates eliminating the desire to impress the other person with how funny or smart you are. "Your only aim is to let the other person know that he or she is accomplishing that," according to Goldsmith. Let the speaker be the center of attention. Focus on what the speaker is saying, not on planning your response. Keep your mind from wandering by monitoring your listening behavior, moderating your responses and looking for nonverbal cues. Then do this all time in every interpersonal encounter.

Army leaders have the opportunity to practice this skill and increase their discipline every day. Army leaders do not have to be active listeners to their subordinates to compel compliance. Fortunately, subordinate Soldiers generally have the discipline to follow orders in the face of toxic or nearly toxic leaders. However, this provides an amazing opportunity for Army leaders who strive to actively listen. Imagine the difference in fostering commitment over mere compliance.

## Conclusion

Just as the Army strives to foster commitment over compliance, it also encourages its leaders to be active listeners. Active listening is a means to a valued end. Active listening is the beginning, not the end, of becoming a leader who "influenc[es] people by providing purpose, direction and motivation while operating to accomplish the mission and improving the organization."<sup>14</sup> Since



Army leadership doctrine encourages this behavior, why not dig a little deeper into these practices? You will find a benefit to effective communication outside of your profession as well.



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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> "Dumb and Dumber," New Line Cinema, 1994, written and directed by the Farrelly brothers, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0109686/quotes>.

<sup>2</sup> Field Manual 6-22, Oct. 12, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> FM 6-22, Figure A-5. Competency of *communicates* and associated components and actions.

<sup>5</sup> FM 6-22, Figure A-5, "Leaders communicate effectively by clearly expressing ideas and actively listening to others. By understanding the nature and importance of communication and practicing effective communication techniques, leaders will relate better to others and be able to translate goals into actions. Communication is essential to all other leadership competencies."

<sup>6</sup> FM 6-22: "Stay alert for common themes. A subordinate's opening and closing statements as well as recurring references may indicate his priorities. Inconsistencies and gaps may indicate an avoidance of the real issue. Certain inconsistencies may suggest additional questions by the counselor."

<sup>7</sup> Bolton, Robert Dr., *People Skills, How to Assert Yourself, Listen to Others and Resolve Conflicts*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> FM 6-22: "Inexperienced leaders are sometimes uncomfortable when confronting a subordinate who is not performing to standard.

Counseling is not about leader comfort; it is about correcting the performance or developing the character of a subordinate. To be effective counselors, Army leaders must demonstrate certain qualities: respect for subordinates, self-awareness, cultural awareness, empathy, and credibility."

<sup>11</sup> GEN Ray Odierno, Army Chief of Staff, in <http://msaf.army.mil/LeadOn.aspx>: "I believe that multi-dimensional feedback is an important component to holistic leader development. By encouraging input from peers, subordinates and superiors alike, leaders can better 'see themselves' and increase self-awareness. A 360-degree approach applies equally to junior leaders at the squad, platoon and company level as well as to senior leaders. The ability to receive honest and candid feedback in an anonymous manner is a great opportunity to facilitate positive leadership growth."

<sup>12</sup> Goldsmith, Marshall, and Reiter, Mark, *What Got You Here Won't Get You There*, New York: Hyperion, 2007.

<sup>13</sup> Goldsmith, emphasis in the original.

<sup>14</sup> FM 6-22.

## ACRONYM QUICK-SCAN

**CGSC** – Command and General Staff College

**FM** – field manual

**MSAF** – Multi-Source Assessment and Feedback (survey)



**SSG Gustavo Padilla (left), talks with his sponsor, SSG Kofi Kyereme, both from Task Force 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion 27<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery, 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade Combat Team, 1<sup>st</sup> Armored Division, Multinational – Baghdad, before his appearance before the SGT Morales board at brigade headquarters. (Photo by SGT Daniel Nochols)**