

I Can't Hear You; You Don't Sound Like Me—Overcoming Listening Barriers by Style Type

We all have different communication styles and our style preferences can get in the way when we attempt to listen actively. What are those basic style types and what challenges do they face?

Four Basic Communication Styles

The four basic communication styles are, according to the I-Speak® instrument, Thinker, Feeler, Intuitor, and Sensor. Thinkers are primarily concerned with the communication of ideas and tend to verbalize their thoughts deliberately and without emotion. They may be perceived as remote and slower paced. Feelers are more concerned with relationships and feelings and, while slower paced as well, tend to be much more emotive—they wear their hearts on their sleeves. Intuitors are concerned primarily with the big picture and idea generation and skip from subject to subject quickly while showing ample emotion. Sensors are bottom-line oriented and move quickly to conclusions without showing their emotions, generally.

The biggest problems occur when the speaker and the listener have neither primary component in common. That is, they have neither pace nor degree of emotion in common. Thinkers and Feelers share pace; Intuitors and Feelers are emotive and Thinkers and Sensors are poker faced; Intuitors and Sensors share pace. But when Feelers attempt to communicate with Sensors or when Intuitors try getting through to Thinkers, real difficulties can occur. Add gender to the mix, and problems abound.

Let's look at some possible listening challenges, by type.

Sensors

Sensors are sometimes impatient, especially if they don't see how small talk, personal information, or details are adding value. "Get to it!" they think to themselves and they interrupt abruptly in hopes of moving the conversation to more productive ground. Regardless of your own type, when presenting to a Sensor, try to limit "sharing" and chit-chat, check in regarding the agenda and time allowed, quickly cover the ground you'll cover, and move through your major points in a logical manner.

Sensors Speaking to Sensors—A Special Case

Keep your ego in check so that clashes don't occur. Sensors, on the win/win scale, think "you lose, I win." They are driven to succeed. Demonstrate or outline quickly how they'll benefit from your proposal, in economic terms if your conversation is in the business arena.

Sensors Listening

Think of the outcome you want from this conversation. It's fair to state your objectives and your preferences at the outset, if you are in the driver's seat, as you are when you are the speaker's superior (in the employment sense) and when you are the buyer and not the seller, for example. If you can do so without derailing the speaker, you may ask for less detail. "Sarah, I appreciate your effort to inform me fully. I'm comfortable with just the major points for now. Please touch on those and I'll ask for more detail if necessary. Alright?" If you are the "passenger" in this conversation, try not to rush the speaker or show your impatience in any way. This includes pen tapping, foot jiggling, eye rolling or any other non-supportive body language.

Breathe deeply and slowly in order to calm yourself and slow down enough to be receptive. Ask questions to clarify, and not to correct or criticize. Make notes to help yourself stay focused on the speaker's message, especially when the pace is slower than you'd like. Listen for the outline of the message, and note the supporting points. Do your best to encourage the speaker, and make him or her feel at ease. Nod, say "uh huh" or "I see," and make eye contact—but don't stare the speaker down. It's good to have the look of eagles, but it's not so good to look predatory or hostile.

If you are listening to an Intuitior or to a Feeler, and they are expressing more personal detail or emotion than you are accustomed to, try to bear it in good humor and, depending on the circumstances, consider sharing a little information or emotion on your end. "It's nice that your weekend was so exciting. Mine was fun as well." Smile and pause very slightly and then go on. "I understand you wanted to talk about the CRM project. Are we still on track and on time?" To move the conversation forward, state what you've heard so far, then ask focused questions and even closed-end questions, in a pleasant way. Intuitiors in particular think widely and not necessarily in a step-wise fashion. Timely and judicious use of questions, posed in an open and friendly tone, can help keep the conversation on track without being overbearing.

Thinkers

Thinkers Listening

Thinkers avoid sharing emotion in their business communications, for the most part. They are not as comfortable with personal information or with excited utterances as Feelers and Intuitors can be. If you are a Thinker, listening, try to listen interestedly and signal your preference for less personal and emotional content by gently recognizing the speaker's contribution and responding—but not in kind. Instead, as above for Sensors, say something like "I'm sorry to hear that your children were ill. I hope they'll recover soon and you'll be able to get some rest." And then, depending on the relationship and who's on first (that is, is this a client or your supervisor or is it a colleague or someone who reports to you), either share information of your own and/or volunteer assistance, or turn the conversation to the business topic at hand. So you might say to your client, "Is there something I can do to be helpful? I hope you'll let me know when things are back to normal. Do you want to continue with our [business topic] or would another time be better for you?" To a colleague, you might say, "That's

tough...let me know when they're better. [Pause briefly.] "Could we talk about the brief, or do you need some time?"

As you listen, try to make eye contact from time to time, and nod occasionally—not necessarily to signal agreement but to signal that you are listening. Make note of the questions you'd like to ask, so that the speaker can talk without frequent interruptions. You can ask for more detail after the speaker has provided their commentary. You may find it difficult to follow the seemingly random discussion threads when you listen to an Intuitior, but listen you must, and try to do so with suspended judgment. Ask questions, when the speaker seems to have concluded, to connect the dots. "If I heard you correctly, you were talking about our staffing needs for this project, and I wasn't sure how that connected to our ability to finish the BigCo brief....can you help me with that?" Intuitiors tend to skip rapidly from topic to topic, sometimes without finishing their thoughts, and they are very creative. Gaps and lack of connections don't always bother them; they are more interested in the big picture and in ideas rather than details. Help them by providing a framework through your questions and cherish their offbeat approach for its own merits.

Feelers will speak at a pace more natural for you, but again may share more emotion and personal information than you would like. As you listen to a Feeler, it important to support them with good will. Nod, smile if the topic dictates, say "um hum," make eye contact, and keep your body language open. Draw out facts gently, since relationships are key for Feelers. Their bumper sticker might say "Mean People Suck," and they often want to feel respected, cared for, and included.

Feelings can be negative as well as positive, and with Feelers in particular, it is important to remember never to interrupt someone who is speaking with emotion—regardless of the emotion. (Of course, you need not stand silently while being abused, but within reason, try to let an angry person finish.) It's good to validate the emotion shared with comments that indicate you heard their emotion as well as their message. "If I've understood you, you think that Peters has treated you unfairly for no discernible reason, and it makes you furious. Do I have that right?" This approach—feeding back your understanding of the feeling as well as the thought—is more likely to produce a good result than ignoring the feeling (since it makes you uncomfortable) and simply focusing on the facts.

Fellow Thinkers are not likely to pose a problem for you, but you may find that Sensors don't provide sufficient detail or background. You will frustrate them if you interrupt them to clarify or to fill in all the details as you go along. Try to wait until they've given their overview and then ask questions judiciously. The key is to understand the main points and clarify as necessary. Consider whether you might want to do some offline research to fill in, rather than asking so many detailed questions that the Sensor shuts down or simply tunes or cuts you off. Estimates suggest that 70% of lawyers are Thinkers by style type, but the majority of CEOs and GCs (who must hone their business skills to rise to those ranks) are Sensors. Be careful not to ask questions simply to satisfy your own need for precision and completeness. Ask the important questions and backfill on your own. Listen with an eye (or ear) toward their bottom line....their "here's how I

win” message point. Consider, with a client, asking if there is someone else he or she would prefer you ask the more detailed questions. “I don’t want to take more of your time than you can spare. I have some detailed questions about the timeline surrounding this transaction. Is there someone on your staff who could provide the detail, then I’ll verify it with you. Would that work?”

Feelers

Feelers are focused on making relationships work and on the human interplay in any situation. Their emotions often run high. They are the most susceptible of all the styles to their surroundings; they often adapt naturally, but they can also be derailed easily if under pressure. Only 5-10% of lawyers score in this category; this communication style is either not naturally occurring among law students or the style is trained out of them. Depending on the nature of your client base, however, you may more frequently encounter Feelers among it. Feelers are not commonly found in the C suites, but they do exist and deserve special attention when found.

If you are a Feeler, you may already use an active listening style. You may find that you nod, smile, make eye contact, tilt your head, furrow your brow and so on. You may find that you “feel” the emotions of the speaker, should the speaker be displaying emotion. Be careful not to be inappropriately caught up in another’s emotional state. Empathy is good, falling down when your friend stumbles is not. Be sure to listen for the facts as well as the feelings. If you are female, and the speaker is male, be careful not to be too solicitous or to say “you POOR THING (or other words to that effect).” Be sure to let the speaker maintain “face.” Say instead, calmly yet warmly, “that sounds tough.” “I empathize.” And then move on (unless you are dealing with another Feeler—then more words to express your understanding of their plight can be appropriate).

Intuitors

Seeing the forest rather than the trees is the preferred style of an Intuitior. Creative, energetic, vivacious, and unstructured, Intuitors can come across as flighty or frivolous.

Special listening problems for Intuitors include dealing with a brain that generates thoughts much more rapidly than the speed of sound. The speaker may be discussing a problem with moving goods shipped from China through the Port of Los Angeles, and that may trigger your thoughts about viewing the Splendid China exhibition at the Dallas Museum of Fine Art. Take notes and make eye contact. Try to outline the speaker’s ideas. Think of listening as a form of meditation; when your mind strays, and stray it will, simply bring it back and say to yourself, “listening.” If you have wandered mentally for longer than can be permitted, and you are at a loss for some of the facts, excuse yourself and say, “I’m sorry—I was concentrating on your comments, but I lost you momentarily. Would you mind backing up to the shipping schedule?” Then, make every human effort to stay with the speaker. Practice listening when not so much is at stake. Listen to radio or TV commentary and pride yourself on “staying on message.” Again, staying physically present by turning toward the speaker and making eye contact

frequently while taking notes can be helpful. If you find that you are thinking, “this is boring,” listen harder for the feelings behind the facts, and make note of questions you’d like to ask. Think Zen: Be here now.