

Importance of Conscious Attention Capacity in Removing the Causes of Active Listening Distractions

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Abstract

In today's dynamic and disruptive business settings, a listening skill, particularly an active listening skill, is a very worthy and critical activity since our conscious attention is exposed to the barriers of distraction to a great extent. Business settings, as well as private situations, require active listening as a precondition for a higher level of understanding and clarity, for a quality exchange of information, which in turn leads to creative and more efficient work and vice versa. This paper is aimed at shedding light on the capacity of conscious attention being the loose end and the prerequisite for the active listening system. The paper analyses and points out the nature of digital and mental distractions in the communication process, which are dominant when the capacity of conscious attention is on a low level. Both types of distractions result in a low level of effective communication, with a negative impact on the application of active listening. The culture of mindfulness is a promising tool for raising the capacity of conscious attention insofar as it reduces the distractions to their minimum and results in more powerful effective communication.

Keywords: critical leadership skill, culture of mindfulness, digital distractions, interpersonal communication, mental distractions

1 Introduction

Modern business settings, designed by unconditional digital transformation, artificial intelligence and fast innovative processes, exist in an atmosphere with a high level of dynamicity and uncertainty, so that management leaders are constantly seeking ways to equip both themselves and their employees with the management skills for such a distractive setting and to turn it to their advantage. Newer and more agile pragmatic processes have been the key to management for quite some time (Euchner, 2013).

By analysing the most recent business settings, Bughin & Woetzel (2019) underline that the demands for social and emotional skills, such as communication and empathy, will grow

almost the same way as the demand for many other advanced technological skills. Automation will also encourage the growth of the need for higher-rank cognitive skills, especially critical thinking, creativity, and complex information processing.

The basic skill of not only interpersonal communication but also of social and emotional intelligence is the skill of active listening. Clarity of thoughts and a better understanding of situations can overcome the complexity of a situation due to undermining of the business settings stability (Vaidya et al., 2020), which points out the importance of the active listening skill, its understanding, and its efficient and agile application.

The fact that an average person listens effectively in only 25 % of all listening activities (Banor et al. 2014) is alarming. Why is it so? There is a moment in interpersonal communication when it is important to be conscious and to consciously activate and apply active listening as the most desirable and most humane ability and skill, nevertheless, most of the time we fail to apply it. That moment ignites active listening, empathy towards others and oneself. In order to recognise it, we need to be able to notice it. Consequently, we need a critical level of capacity of consciousness and conscious attention which is more dominant than the capacity of mental distraction and old-school listening patterns that are automatically triggered (Roser and Gazzaniga, 2004).

Research so far has underlined the importance of active listening skills, effects of digital and mental distractions, but little attention has been paid to the importance of the impact of the conscious attention capacity and its leverage on the level of communication and active listening efficacy. This paper is aimed at shedding light on the impact of the conscious attention capacity as the main factor for eliminating mental and digital distractions of active listening, as well as on the necessity to develop that capacity. The paper advocates the benefits of the application of a culture of mindfulness.

2 Literature Review and Methodology

At the beginning of the new decade, human interaction, the personal touch, and emotional intelligence have increasingly become important for strategic development and application in a business world comprised of innovation, digital transformation, and artificial intelligence. Coaching aimed at building the skill of interpersonal communication has been highly valued. There are but a few companies that have not invested in some form of communication skills. Moreover, not only in the field of business, such skills as interpersonal communication have been recognised in many other forms of social functioning (Weger et al. 2010). The CEMS research “Leadership in a Post-Covid-19 World” (2020), indicates that the skill of effective communication will grow more than prior to the pandemic.

In their research of the impact of interpersonal communication skills on organisational commitment, Bambacas and Patrickson (2008) underline that focusing on clarity and frequency of the messages has a crucial role in effective managerial communication. Additionally, they point out that the abilities of active listening and collaborative leadership are very important, yet often missing in reaching organisational commitment.

The importance of active listening is based on the fact that it enables the listener to clarify the meaning and accuracy of what the interlocutor has said, to verify his/her feelings, and finally to sum up and confirm what was said by motivating him/her to continue the discussion (Baden, 2012).

2.1 Active Listening – Critical Leadership Skill for Entering the New Decade

As estimated by the Center for Creative Leadership (2020) it is vitally important for business operations in modern conditions to develop the ability to react with empathy by attentive reasoning when solving problems, the creation of a highly personalised experience, eliminating difficult situations, and facing high-stake decisions with calmness. The Center proposes that, regardless of the level of management, four fundamental skills will be critical in the future, including self-awareness, communication, influence, and learning agility. Given that these four skills are based mostly on the quality of interpersonal communication skills, the active listening skillset is seen as crucially important. Numerous studies indicate the importance of applying active listening skills not only in the sphere of business, such as sales departments (Comer and Drollinger, 1999), but also in the field of education (Jalongo, 1995; McNaughton et al. 2008), social services, marriage counselling (Cole and Cole, 1999), health organisations (Jahromi et al. 2016) and in many other fields.

2.2 Essence of Active Listening

To understand the essence and importance of active listening it is important to be aware of the distinction of the terms to hear and to listen. Hearing is a passive activity, i.e. a random automatic response of the brain to a sound that does not require effort, as opposed to listening which is a conscious activity, purposeful and focused (De Vito, 2000). Conscious effort to hear something can be termed as listening. Listening includes five phases of conscious activity: receiving, understanding, remembering, evaluating, and responding (DeVito, 2000). Thus, if we want to listen, and not only to hear, it is necessary to be conscious, focused, i.e. to be present at the moment when we intend to listen. Listening begins with conscious attention perceived as conscious presence.

A qualitatively higher level of listening therefore results in the notion of active listening. Generally defined active listening in a therapeutic sense represents the attempt to demonstrate unconditional acceptance and unbiased assessment of the therapeutic experience of clients (Weger et al. 2010). That means that active listening requires the listener to try to understand the speaker without interpreting one's own experience.

The notion of active, or empathic listening, originates from the research and work of Carl Rogers (1951) who set a milestone in humanistic psychology through the client-oriented theory. As stated in Farson and Rogers (1955), active listening occurs when constructive human relations are created among a group of ordinary people, and it consists of three core elements: accurate empathic understanding, unconditional positive regard, and congruence.

Trenholm and Jensen (2004) highlight that active listening in interpersonal communication encompasses at least three elements: unconditional attention through non-verbal involvement/presence, paraphrasing the speaker's main messages and feelings, restating the

speaker's words, and asking questions intended to help the speaker to elaborate on his/her beliefs or feelings.

In the practice of leadership skills coaching, six main skills are most often selected to develop active listening: paying attention, withholding judgment, reflecting, clarifying, summarising, and idea-sharing. The benefits most often stated include: learning to listen, know specifically what to do or to avoid in being a better listener, avoid misunderstandings and wasted time, and use your superpower of listening to understand and resolve conflicts.

Persons who do not have a developed active listening skill do "hear" what is said, but rarely "listen" to the whole message. Most frequently, they hear only what their perceptive filters choose or understand. They are confused by their own thoughts, or by what is going on around them, and they formulate their responses before their interlocutor has finished speaking. As a result, they lack key information and clarity that most often lead to distorted conclusions and ineffective decision.

2.3 Importance of Active Listening

The advantages of active listening are multiple (Bauer et al., 2009), the most important ones being: avoiding misunderstanding, increased trust, showing respect, revealing the core of the problem. Besides, a higher feeling of responsibility appears, since instead of offering ready-made solutions, active listening ignites independent thinking and independent finding of solutions. As a result, a more independent and more responsible feeling is achieved, which consequently, has an impact on personality development because active listening tends to constructively change the listener's attitudes resulting thus in the experience of growth, strengthening of self-esteem, and self-respect.

The ability of active listening in business settings enables a person to clearly understand tasks, guidelines, and expectations, to build rapport with colleagues, managers, and clients. Additionally, it helps find basic meanings of what others might say, and therefore, give support to efficient teamwork and resolution of challenges in business settings (Tyagi 2013).

The above indicates that the skill of active listening is not only very important and useful, but also a prerequisite of any high-quality interpersonal communication. This poses a question of why people, on average, are poor listeners. As stated in the introductory part, only 25 % of an average person's listening is effective, which is an alarming proportion. Surely, the causes of the above issue include both the individuals' capacity of conscious attention and their exposure to the barriers of listening, which are manifested mainly as distractions.

3 Results – Distractions as Barriers of Conscious Attention and Active Listening

Distraction can be defined as "something that prevents someone from giving their attention to something else", usually more important. Contrary to interruption, which is urgent but not important, and captures full attention, distractions are not urgent and do not grab our full attention, but while on-going, they prevent work being performed at the usual rate (Spira and Feintuch, 2005). Therefore, being distracted represents the state of being unable to think about

or pay attention to something, i.e. an inability to concentrate or pay attention to something more important.

In order to listen actively, it is particularly necessary to be aware of what we hear, i.e. to consciously direct our attention to what is important and to sustain that conscious attention, which is primarily distracted by the factors of our inner environment, i.e. our unconscious thoughts (Killingsworth and Gilbert, 2010) and then by potential other factors that in current times are most often digital aspects of distraction. They are manifested most frequently in the form of e-mails, social networks, web searching, receiving and sending messages, smartphone checking, scrolling, etc.

3.1 Digital Distractions

Digital distractions have been an unprecedented challenge for quite some time. Consequently, they have generated considerable research interest. The addressed results indicate that:

- 3 in 4 employees say that two or more hours a day are lost in productivity due to distractions (New Career Builder Survey, 2016);
- 74% of both Millennials and Generation Z are distracted at work. Although office noise has been stated as the main distraction at work, 69% of Millennials and Generation Z have identified their smartphones as the second greatest distraction, and almost half of the respondents stated that many distractions result from the choices they have made (Udemy in depth, 2018);
- Respondents in the 13-46 age group were anxious and disoriented because of the usage of digital devices (Babu and Nedunchezian, 2020);
- 49% of surveyed undergraduate students stated that the “off-task” usage of digital technology was distractive (Neiterman and Zaza, 2019);
- Distractions significantly affect interpersonal communication so that 2 out of 3 persons (64%) tune out from a personal meeting to digitally communicate with someone else (Harmon.ie, 2011).

Additionally, it can be noted that digital distractions significantly prevent persons from focusing their conscious attention on active listening as a precondition of healthy and useful communication. Measures for reduction of distraction (Sarkar, 2019) are good, but what enables such measures to be implemented are consciousness and presence which make a distinction between active listening and distraction. However, even more important is the fact that digital distractions are only consequences of mental distractions.

3.2 Mental Distractions

When it comes to digital distractions, it is important to find out their cause. When searching this cause, we enter the field of our mental world, i.e. the world of our thoughts. More than ten years ago, the psychologists Matthew Killingsworth and Daniel Gilbert (2010) pointed out that the human mind is connected to the state of continuous distraction. Their study, with a sample of 2250 adult persons, concluded that we spend 47% of each waking hour in the state of mind wandering, also called stimulus-independent and task-unrelated

thoughts. According to the APA Dictionary of Psychology, it is “a condition in which thoughts do not remain focused on the task at hand but range widely and spontaneously across other topics”.

An unconscious activity of mind wandering, which represents our unconscious thoughts, is an experience so normal and natural for us that we usually do not pay attention to it. It is manifested through unconscious wandering of our thoughts about what happened in the past and about the events that might happen in the future or will never happen, says Killingsworth and Gilbert. It has been proven that we spend a lot of time thinking about what is actually not happening around us. Thus, we are only physically present, while being mentally somewhere in the future or in the past, which has its emotional price.

The consequence of our unconscious wandering is the state in which we find ourselves after that. It is a state of unease and discontent because we take the worries from wanderings through the future and the guilt from the past. This state is unconsciously manifested in us through emotions of dissatisfaction and fear, as explained by Goleman (2005). Thus, we have an unconscious need to free ourselves from such uncomfortable emotions. Since we are not trained to rule such emotions, we tend to, mostly unconsciously, free ourselves from them by suppressing through external distractions of different forms, including the digital ones. Thus, a wandering mind is not a happy mind (Bradt, 2010).

3.3 Distractions and Active Listening

Although we might look directly at our interlocutor and try to listen, it happens that our mind is racing with other irrelevant thoughts or digital distractors that prevent us from listening attentively. When any of the distraction forms appear, it occurs that we are not consciously present with our attention and we cannot hear everything that has been said. We miss very important details, we listen only to what we consider important, we fail to make key questions, etc. Consequently, this results in misunderstandings or ambiguity which can be followed by conflicts in communication, and time is wasted on subsequent clarification.

The fact that mental distractions imply the digital ones singles out two important moments:

- It is very important to accept the culture of efficient managing of our important resources, i.e. our conscious attention, our conscious presence at the event to be able to effectively manage distractions such as digital ones.
- Managing our conscious attention requires us to have a growing capacity of consciousness so as to be more present at the moment and to bring our wandering mind into the state of “happily present mind”.

In order to decide to actively listen to someone, it is necessary to be in the state of presence and motivation, and surely to possess competence of the active listening skill. Two major issues are raised here: how can we nourish, sustain the conscious presence and attention so as to result in efficient, healthy communication, and how their capacity can functionally increase and contribute to active listening and gaining clarity that we need today more than ever before.

4 Discussion – Conscious Attention Capacity

Given that we are very intensively exposed to mental and digital forms of distraction, for the activation of knowledge of active listening the level of capacity of consciousness for presence at the given moment is indispensable. It is very important to have the ability to increase and sustain the capacity of consciousness and presence.

With an adequate level of the capacity of conscious attention, a person is able to recognise the moment of an important choice and to pause amid a stable inflow of stimulants from the environment, and to consciously make a decision on how to act. Thus, according to psychiatrist Victor Frankle, “Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lie our growth and our freedom.” It is about the possibility of choice to respond consciously, instead of unconsciously, reflexively, in the form of reacting with unconscious behaviour patterns, passive listening, which do not result in a desired outcome of clarity. The essence is to be able to recognise that moment. The purpose of this paper is to indicate the very significance of this moment as a factor of efficient, empathic, and more agile communication.

Therefore, the culture of mindfulness has been established as a good tool for building, increasing, and sustaining the capacity of consciousness, which is very important today to balance the challenges of the digital era, information overload, and permanent distraction.

4.1 Culture of Mindfulness Aimed at Increasing the Conscious Attention Capacity

Though mindfulness has been a concept for centuries, related to the spiritual world, it has been revived to respond to the challenges of our digital era. It is aimed at helping us to be in the state of presence, given that our mind tends to travel in the past and into the future, as opposed to present time life. The effect of the mindfulness practice is a peaceful mind, released from the constant, unconscious “jabbering” of thoughts, anxiousness and grief which is capable of recognising and accepting inner thoughts and feelings thus transforming them into peacefulness.

Mindfulness is defined as “consciousness that appears by intentional paying attention to the present moment, without judging and developing experience from one moment to another” (Brewer, 2016). It originates from Eastern meditation practice and is coached through various meditation exercises of bringing full attention to the presence and without thinking (Marlatt and Kristeller, 1999). Mindfulness is, therefore, the quality of presence – the experience of openness and consciousness at the present moment, without judging and criticising, and meditation is the practice of mind exercising for everyday awareness.

4.2 How Does Mindfulness Work?

The culture of mindfulness encompasses all forms of exercises and meditation that stimulate attendance to inner experiences which can appear at any time, such as bodily sensations, thoughts, or emotions. Additionally, meditation can focus on stimulation of attention to the environmental aspects, such as views and sounds (Kabat-Zinn et al., 1998). Particularly stressed with mindfulness practice is the lack of assessing and judging, whereas the perception of cognition and feelings is highlighted (Marlatt and Kristeller, 1999).

Although the application of the culture of mindfulness differs as for the learning approach, there are a few general guidelines for what is common for the majority of mindfulness exercises (Bauer et al., 2004). Often, the practitioners are required to focus on common activities such as breathing, walking or eating, and to watch it attentively. They are provoked to notice that their attention can wander in thoughts, memories, or fantasies. When that occurs, they promptly notice that their mind has wandered and then they return to the present moment, i.e., continue the targeted observation. Should any bodily sensations or emotions appear, the participants observe them closely. This way the mind is trained to stay at the present moment, which increases its capacity.

The culture of mindfulness has had a strong impact on the corporate culture of many famous companies over the decade. Large companies such as Bosch, SAP, Google, General Foods, Goldman Sachs, Ford Motors and Aetna have recognised the benefits implied in mindfulness, resulting in them training thousands of managers and employees in mindfulness practice. According to Greiser and Martini (2018) there has been a range of different mindfulness application programmes in corporate organisations.

Martin and Steffens (2016) stated that the need for the culture of mindfulness was originally created to raise the level of productivity and reduce stress embedded in modern business settings. They underline that the effects of its application reflect in a significant increase of the abilities of self-regulation and sustained attention. It positively affects the ability to focus, to raise awareness on the available options, to facilitate quality decision making, better interaction, and cooperation with colleagues.

On the other side, given that the culture of mindfulness had an intensive breakthrough in the corporate world, and subsequently in other fields, promoting mindfulness as a “universal remedy” has provoked negative reactions expressed through questions and doubts that the application and effects of welfare from mindfulness are overstated. Purser (2018) criticised it by indicating shortcomings of the culture of mindfulness because it overlooks the context of capitalism. According to him, the culture of mindfulness is perceived as a tool for achieving and maintaining wealth and power. This approach was named McMindfulness, i.e., capitalist spirituality (Purser, 2019). The analysis of this stance was published in the journal “Mindfulness” aimed at clarifying many ambiguities related to the culture of mindfulness (Lee, 2019). It is essential to conclude here that the purpose of mindfulness is to increase the capacity of consciousness about what happens in us and around us, which is in itself the first step in any personal as well as social change.

The culture of mindfulness, with its meditative tools, increases the capacity of consciousness so that daily it enables us to have the necessary clarity to know “what” really is important, i.e., to recognise opportunities, to respond with more agility to challenges and to easily apply knowledge for “how”. According to Bob Johansen (Euchner, 2013), the key managerial skill in the disruptive environment is clarity that accurately resolves the state of confusion. That is why it is the capacity of conscious attentions when applying active listening skills that is seen as a critical factor for maintaining clarity.

5 Conclusion

The low level of the capacity of conscious attentions and presence at the moment implies a high level of mental distractions that lead to activation of digital distractions in the outer environment. Both types of distractions result in a low level of effective communication quality, and consequently the inefficient application of the active listening skill.

More efficient deployment of active listening and more effective communication lies in the development of a higher level of consciousness capacity so as to reduce distractions to a minimum. Training your mind to learn to stay more in the present moment instead of wandering unconsciously in the past and future can result in the attainment of a higher level of consciousness capacity and in the ability to opt for responding to circumstances rather than reacting unconsciously. Existence at the present moment and awareness of one's own environment and factual circumstances, rather than our interpretation from the point of view of a wandering mind, are the essence of the ability to respond by active listening. This way we express empathy, understanding, respect, and clarity in particular. It is not a coincidence that basic human skills of altruism and mindfulness have remained the top leadership competencies for the "new management" of "new normal" businesses.

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