



LISTENING INTELLIGENCE

Combining Active Listening and Cognitive Diversity
to Elevate Team Performance



Listening Intelligence combines the best of active listening and cognitive diversity to elevate team performance to a transformational level. These two concepts—**active listening** and **cognitive diversity**—have recently gained traction within business communities as important tools to enhance team creativity, cohesiveness, and productivity.^{1,2} But they have generally only been considered each on their own. While both of these tools benefit individuals and teams respectively, they also carry hidden drawbacks when implemented one without the other that may lead to potential decreases in collaboration. Listening Intelligence, on the other hand, merges the high value of active listening and cognitive diversity, fashioning a combination stronger than the sum of its parts. Companies are only recently beginning to experience the seismic impact when these two components are skillfully combined.

Active Listening – Setting the Stage for Successful Communication

In addition to its ability to improve everyday conversations, active listening has also become a popular topic within the business and educational communities. A term first coined in 1957 by psychologists Carl Rogers and Richard Farson, active listening is an intentional skill used by an individual on the receiving end of a conversation. When exercising active listening, a listener is intently focusing on what is being said, and then conveys to the speaker that they were truly engaged.³ Upon its introduction, the term made such an impact that it quickly grew beyond the field of psychology into other contexts such as education, business, negotiation, and even diplomacy. While the term “active listening” has taken on slightly nuanced definitions across industries, the main concept remains consistent: we can *hear* what is being said, but it takes additional effort and practice to truly *listen* to what the speaker is saying. Some specific components of active listening are:

- Paying full attention to the speaker
- Showing that you are paying attention through eye contact and body language
- Withholding judgment, and
- Reflecting back to the speaker what you are hearing to demonstrate that you truly heard them.^{6,7,8}

Active listening: Intently focusing on what is being said, and then conveying to the speaker that they were truly heard.⁴

Cognitive diversity: Variances in perspectives or information processing styles. These are not predicted by factors such as gender, ethnicity, or age.⁵

How Active Listening Improves Company Culture and Performance

Studies show that on average, we retain only 25% of what we hear,⁹ and this deficit can have a staggering impact on a business’s performance. Large businesses lose an estimated \$15,000 *per employee* per year due to miscommunication, which amounts to an approximate \$50 million in total yearly loss.¹⁰ Improvements in communication can help address this astounding loss.

When looking at how an individual’s ability to listen affects the speaker, researchers Weger, Bell, Minei, and Robinson found that speakers who received active listening responses “felt more understood than participants who received either advice or simple acknowledgements.”¹¹ When a speaker feels understood, they are more likely to form a satisfying relationship with the listener and feel relaxed, thus creating a meaningful and productive conversation. Additionally, employees who work under supervisors with higher listening skills and attitudes report experiencing less stress, having higher worksite support, and feeling more control over their job.¹² The fact that *just* an improved ability to listen can result in employees experiencing less fatigue, anxiety, and depression is powerful, both for the individuals and the company as a whole. Better performing employees support greater team cohesion and higher productivity in getting projects over the goal line, which ultimately increases business results.

Where Active Listening Falls Short

While active listening provides the basis for any type of successful communication, when used alone to solve workplace communication issues it can have its shortcomings. Misunderstandings happen all the time and, while active listening can reduce mishaps, it's no silver bullet for smoothing out conversation. **It is critical to understand your own cognitive biases;** what you are listening to and for while actively listening may or may not align with what the speaker is intending to convey.

Cognitive Diversity and Its Impact Within Business Teams

Although not as pervasive as active listening, the concept of cognitive diversity is gaining traction as an important factor for improved efficiency and innovation inside high performing business teams. At its most basic level, cognitive diversity relates to differences in the way individuals process information. It describes how people differ in their perspectives, vary in the way they process information, and think differently overall.¹³ As strategy consultant Steve Graham explains, "Cognitive diversity is the inclusion of people who have different styles of problem-solving, with diverse perspectives, based on varied demographics that creates uncommon experiences and unique associations, typically leading to divergent outputs."¹⁴

In general, teams that have higher cognitive diversity are resourceful, versatile, and dynamic, which results in not just a highly creative team, but also a group that can respond to issues more innovatively. They are typically able to come up with unique solutions, take idea-generation to a new level, and overcome groupthink.

Cognitive Diversity is Only Part of the Solution

Despite the significant benefits it brings, cognitive diversity isn't always a recipe for success. Differences in thinking can also lead to discord. According to a recent study by Harvard Business Review, *less than 10%* of people believe that their colleagues seek to understand different perspectives.¹⁶

The authors of the study suggest getting out of your silos and listening with an open mind to your teammates' unique ideas to combat this problem. Employees and managers who make a concerted effort to understand different perspectives create more cohesive and productive teams.

Further supporting this point, industrial-organizational psychologists Abby Mello and Lisa Delise found that cognitive diversity and cohesion have a significant inverse relationship in the business world, meaning companies that have greater levels of cognitive diversity have less cohesive teams.¹⁷ However, companies that had high conflict management skills (i.e., effective communication) eliminated this inverse relationship. Those teams that have the ability to actively listen and manage conflict through good communication skills are able to master the cognitive diversity within their teams, rather than allow it to create a

Wozniak & Jobs: Cognitive Diversity in Action

One salient example of the value of cognitive diversity was demonstrated by the partnership between Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak that gave us Apple.¹⁵ Steve Wozniak has been described as a "master of analytics." Very technical and data focused, he never imagined selling his original computer model that would ultimately become the basis for the first Apple computer. Steve Jobs, on the other hand, focused on the big picture: he saw the uniqueness of the computer and imagined how it could change the world of computer platforms.

The combination of these two ways of thinking—focusing on the details vs. seeing the big picture—allowed creativity and innovation to blossom in their enterprise. The partnership between Jobs and Wozniak exemplifies cognitive diversity performing at its best. While their differences led to heated debates, their divergent thinking ultimately enabled them to build a company and product far greater than what would have existed had either of them went their own way.

disconnected network of individuals. This combination allows them to uncover new solutions within the mix of unique perspectives that were previously buried.

How Active Listening and Cognitive Diversity Combine for Better Success

A team that has high active listening skills but low cognitive diversity will likely enjoy a culture of healthy communication, but may lack the divergent thinking supportive of truly creative innovation. Active listening alone can reinforce monolithic thinking.

Conversely, individuals who make up a cognitively diverse team may each hold a unique perspective crucial to the team's overall success, but when lacking a healthy communication culture, this strength could easily get buried under discordant, siloed thinking that stalls productivity and ultimately threatens the company's bottom line.

So how do we cultivate teams that are cognitively diverse, while simultaneously ensuring the healthy communication necessary for them to flourish? The key is **Listening Intelligence**, which is effectively the merging of active listening and cognitive diversity. Specifically, it is the greater awareness and ability that arises when we understand how we ourselves listen and then adapt our listening style depending on the speaker and the context. Once we become aware of our listening filters, we can start listening for and recognizing an expanded range of input. Additionally, we can begin to speak into other people's listening styles to enhance the chance that the value of what we are trying to communicate lands most effectively. We'll explore this concept further over the next few sections.

Understanding the Four Listening Styles

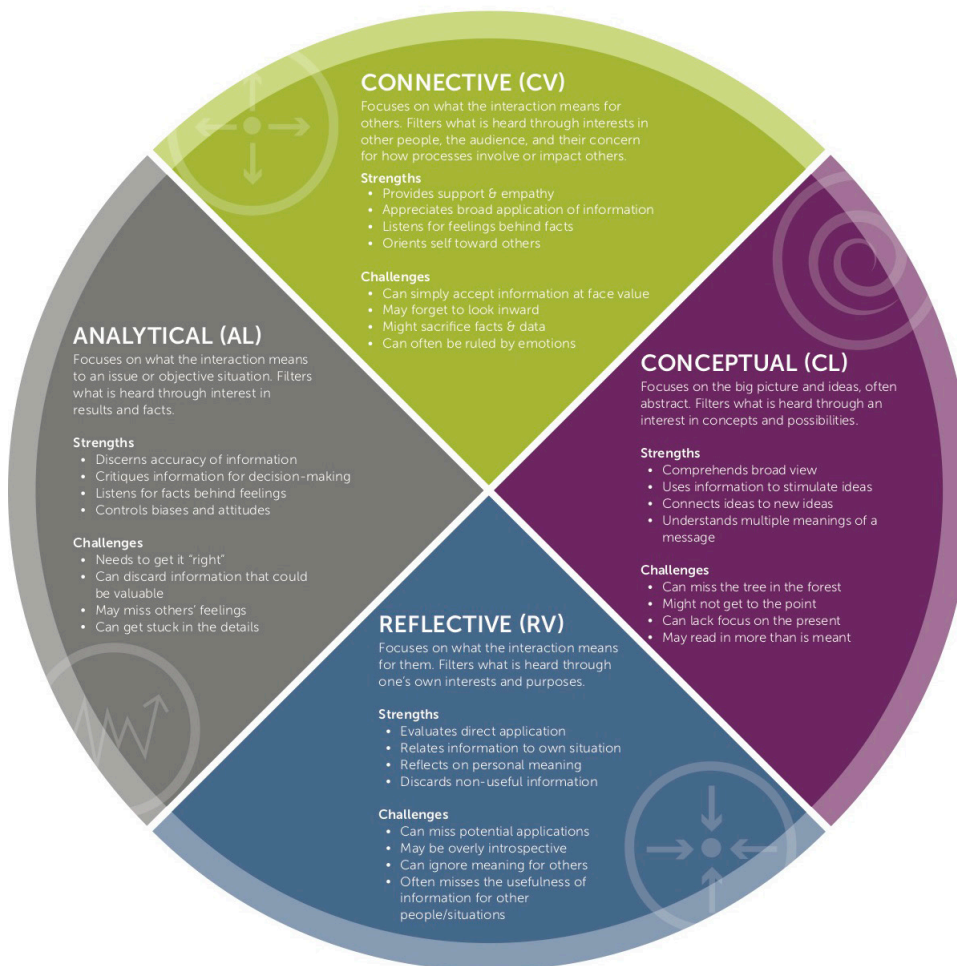
Researchers have identified four main styles of listening: Connective, Reflective, Analytical, and Conceptual, which work together to give us a better picture of how and what individuals listen for in conversation.¹⁹ The graphic below describes the kind of information each of these unique listening styles focus on, along with their attending strengths and potential challenges.

Every individual uses these four styles of listening throughout their day, but habitually listens through a particular style (or styles) more than others. These listening styles can be scientifically assessed in individuals, who can then receive a personal "listening profile" to learn their strengths and potential challenges to be aware of.

Since listening is a brain-based function and no two brains are alike, individuals actively listen for different types of information. A speaker's words may hit our ears, but that's no guarantee we actually get the full extent of what they're trying to convey. If we can understand the type of information we habitually listen to and for, we can better understand our cognitive biases relative to others on a diverse team. Additionally, since the way we listen is habitual rather than hard-wired, we can begin to make conscious shifts in our listening to expand our range of input, becoming more sensitive to the ways people around us think and communicate.

High level managers estimate that conflict avoidance and unproductive conflict cost their companies an estimated \$22,000 per day.¹⁸ Cognitive diversity can help solve this problem by fostering cohesion, thereby boosting creativity and productivity, but only if there is a high level of communication in the team that allows members to avoid unnecessary conflicts from occurring and to successfully work through conflicts when they happen.

Listening Intelligence: The greater awareness and ability that arises when we understand how we listen, and then can adapt our listening style depending on the speaker and the context.



How Teams Can Achieve Listening Intelligence

Ultimately, Listening Intelligence can be developed through three distinct steps. First, each individual deepens their own awareness of their listening style by taking a listening assessment and understanding their profile. This provides the foundation of where an individual is starting from, so they can start to observe themselves and know how to adjust going forward. Second, with this new self-awareness, individuals can creatively adapt how they listen depending on the speaker and the situation. Finally, individuals can utilize their understanding of others' listening habits to *speak into* those preferences, maximizing the chance that what they're communicating is truly understood.

Case Study: The Power of Listening Intelligence

As a case in point, a marketing team at a large international company was facing challenges in team cohesiveness, struggling with conflict, and was not executing profitable marketing campaign strategies. Members of the team were becoming increasingly siloed, defending their internal teams' priorities and points of view against the others. Active listening was a foreign concept at best, and cognitive diversity was acting as a threat, rather than a strength to capitalize on. When looking at just the varied backgrounds and areas of expertise on their team, they had an impressive blend of views, perspectives, and approaches to their work, which could prove extremely beneficial if harnessed skillfully. However, this team did not have a strong culture of listening to match the exceptional diversity that was present.

The chief marketing officer (CMO) was a visionary leader who preferred to think “big picture.” She was constantly listening for interesting new ideas, brainstorming, and proposing new directions, which are prominent attributes of a Conceptual Listener. From her point of view, the other team members weren’t “keeping up” with her inspirations. She especially clashed with the VP of Acquisitions who, by contrast, was an Analytical Listener. He held strong sway on the marketing team with final authority over most financial decisions, and he listened intensely for the facts, figures, and details that were often missing from her proposals. Even though acquisitions were slowing and membership churn was high, he was quick to negate new corrective ideas without offering alternatives of his own. Their disagreements were becoming increasingly obvious and vocal in front of the team, which, as another executive put it, was breaking apart at the seams.

After being introduced to their listening profiles, each of these executives was able to learn about their unique listening habits and cognitive biases. They understood how they hadn’t been recognizing the value inherent in the others’ perspectives. Knowing this, they were then able to lean in and begin *actively listening* to each other’s styles, and as a result, see how powerful the others’ strengths were. The head of the executive team came to better understand the VP of Acquisitions’ frustrations with her lack of substantiating evidence for her ideas, and when she began to include facts and figures with her proposals, he became much more receptive. He, in turn, began to appreciate ideas for their inherent value, even when the details hadn’t been considered yet, such as during team ideating. Understanding their listening profiles opened their viewpoints, allowing them to integrate their two very different ways of thinking and listening. The diversity of their cognitive abilities coming together through listening was explosive. By elevating their Listening Intelligence, these two heavy-hitting executives became less reactive and more successful than any of them had imagined was possible. The marketing team became highly cohesive and transformed the company through highly productive marketing campaigns over the next two quarters, which resulted in 10x growth.

Conclusion

The above case is just one specific example of how Listening Intelligence can transform low-performing teams into paragons of successful collaboration. While active listening can ensure focus, a cognitively diverse team brings many different ways of thinking, speaking, and listening. Whether your team is in sales or you are founding the next breakthrough technology, with Listening Intelligence, you are able to leverage both active listening and cognitive diversity, bridging the gaps that can lead to fractured, dysfunctional teams. Listening Intelligence, then, becomes the adhesive that pulls teams together, allowing them to become productive, cohesive, and collaborative.

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