

THE CULTURE OF COMMUNICATION IN THE KNOWLEDGE SOCIETY

Gender differences in the listening process

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Abstract

We can't speak about a "knowledge society" in the absence of a culture of communication, more precisely in the absence of a culture of non violent communication.

This type of culture produces the context for the affirmation and accomplishment of the human being, and it also intensifies the processes which imply creation and innovation in all the areas related to the social aspect.

In a world lead by man, non violent communication requires the valorization of the empathetic listening, of cooperation, in general and particularly in gender relation.

The paper intends to show that active listening represents an ability which must be learnt by all the people, but mostly by men who score greater deficiencies than women regarding this issue.

Keywords: *communication, listening, communication style, culture of communication, gender differences.*

Introduction

People can't help communicating. Non-communication is a form of communication. Although they communicate 11 hours a day (L. Sfez), most people is not satisfied by the communication quality. Their dissatisfaction is related to the violent or superficial or insufficient character of the interpersonal communication, to the sentiment that, too often, they are not listened and understood.

Or, in the development of the satisfactory human relations, one of the most important factors is the communication ability, the ability to demonstrate the kindness and the comprehension in communication. People complain the absence of such things, the insufficient¹ manifestation of the empathy and kindness in communication. Women complain more then man. Why? The paper bellow tries to find some answers starting from the analyze of the gender differences in communication, especially in listening

Listening is a very strong requirement both in interpersonal and organizational communication (J. Salome, 2002, p.102). Nevertheless, people are inclined to talk rather that to listen. We like to hear oneself rather than hear other people. And that is because each of us considers that his problems are the most important, simply because these problems belong to him. A famous history of an American producer, otherwise a seductive man but unable to listen. After he is talking to his girlfriend for an hour about his recent professional achievements, he stops embarrassed and tells her: Don't you want to say something? I have spoken so far only me. Would you like to tell me what do you think of my works?

How important and how difficult is to listen?

Listening is a very strong requirement both in interpersonal communication (J. Salome, 2002, p.102) and organizational communication.

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Although they spend most time listening, people does not pay enough attention to the listening skills. Studies show that the percentage time devote to the 4 communication skills favorites the listening, respectively: (53%). At considerable distance is listening (17%), speaking (16%), and the writing (14%). In conclusion, although we spend the most time listening, we allot the least time to the appropriation of this skill.²

Employees from the large companies spend about 60% of their time listening, while their senior staff only 57%.

In these conditions we may say that, in business, listening could be seen in euro, dollars, Romanian lei. Listening errors can result in a bankrupt of a company. Sperry corporation declared that if 100 millions commit an error of listening of 10\$, the total cost would be \$ 1 billion.

Researchers discovered that there is a direct connection between the listening skill and workloads. Employees that participated to trainings regarding the development of listening skills – even before the initiation in computers techniques –have been more productive than those who did not received training in listening.

In a survey of the most 500 successful US companies, 59% of respondents said that they have paid for listening courses for their employees.

When the researchers surveyed 450 graduates of the economy sector about the communication skills they need to work, they said that listening is the most important quality for the professional success. When they were asked what kind of skills they wanted to have achieved in high school they answered “listening”.³

Active, comprehensive listening is necessary in any field, not only in business. The need to practice it is felt at least as much in school as in family. Psychological studies show that, in a relationship, if the two would frequently practice emphatic listening, the level of the marital satisfaction would increase and the divorce rate would drop significantly. A good communication represents the key to a harmonious couple relationship.

2. Content

Obstacles in the listening process socio-cultural and psychological factors

Listening, like any other skill, must be learned and practiced. There are cultures, societies that realize and sustain that need more than others. There are some subcultures, mentalities that ignore that need, as for example the institutions, the companies specified for the primitive capitalism. These institutions were guided exclusively by the express requirement to increase profits, to face competition not always fair. Usually they ignore the human being need to be listened, understood and heard. In their search for profit, they sacrifice satisfying the human need, ignoring the boomerang effect of this sacrifice.

In developing country, small companies, with limited financial resources, even if they have a flexible, even if they have modern organizational culture, even if they are managed by resonant

² Sperry Corporation, Your Personal Listening Profile(Sperry Falls Church, VA:1980), p.4

³ DiSalvo, Vicent, David C. Larsen, William J. Seiler, ”Communication Skills Needed by People in Business, Communication Monographs 25 (1976):274

managers, they do not afford to spend money to improve employees communication and listening problems. On a simple Google search demand on the offer and demand of courses/ trainings in communication in Romania, we observe the existence of a gap in favor of the offer. A lot of consultancy/ training companies appeared. These companies offer services regarding the development of the communication skills, the interpersonal and organizational efficiency etc. Requests from private companies are however modest, especially for small companies.

In addition, there are common mentalities especially in post communist societies, where the listening is confounded with obedience. I think there is also a terminological confusion. For example, in Romanian "listener" means also obedient. There are confusions which could contribute to reduce individual aspiration to learn listening.

Besides socio-cultural factors, there are many psychological factors that create obstacles to listening. In the famous work „Communicating effectively”, Saundra Hybels, Richard L. Weaver II, Mc. Graw Hill emphasize the fact that listening is not an easy thing and that there are many psychological causes that generate loss of attention, such as: cognitive dissonance, anxiety, dominant listener attitude and passive listener attitude.

According to the cognitive *dissonance*, a person feels a conflict, a contradiction, a discomfort if she/he has two or more information/opposite attitudes toward the same person or the same thing. For example, the students may think about Professor X is an erudite person as well as they believe that the sexual harassment allegations against him are probably true. Students who hold these convictions simultaneously (the teacher is good but the sexual harassment) suffer of cognitive dissonance.

To draw out from the conflict, a solution would be for students to ignore, to reject the information that causes (the accusation of sexual harassment, in our case). It is a reaction that we have especially when accepting all information that we could put in conflict with people important to us. On the other hand, listening carefully this information is necessary if we want to sustain and respect others' ideas.

Anxiety is another psychological factor that jams the listening process.

You pass an important exam. You gave a bad answer to a simple mathematic problem. You are looking for the error but you don't find it. You become more and more nervous, anxious. You don't even hear when the teacher gives you a clue regarding your error. You lost totally your self confidence and your anxiety level is so high that you are not capable to listen any more. The anxious person feels a permanent anxiety, an intense and unjustified fear facing a real danger that affects his capacity to listen.

Researchers in the field shown that if teachers tell students that they will receive difficult tests, the students will be inclined to anxiety, and this will affect their listening capacity.⁴

The dominant listener attitude is another disturbing factor in listening.

A lot of people don't want to listen at all; they prefer to talk all the time. These kinds of people can not dialogize. They engage in endless monologues, ignoring nonverbal and disapprobative cues from the speakers (inexpressive look, absent look, discreet verification of the time etc) for dominant listeners the only problems, experiences that deserve to be discussed are their problems and experiences.

⁴ Ayres, Joe, A. Kathleen Wilcox, and Debbie M. Ayres, receiver Apprehension: A Qn Explanatory Model and Accompanying Research”, *Communication Education*, 44(1995):223-35

Listening is affected also by the passive, disinterested attitude of some speakers. The lack of interest for a certain subject determines the student to not listen the teacher pleading even if it is a good, documented theory. Listening effort is even higher as the subject seems less interesting, exciting.

Sometimes, people think that listening doesn't implicate efforts. Depending on what you listen, you need a variety of listening skills. Listening involves effort and skill as well in speech as in writing.

Gender style in communication ; listening style

We don't need special studies to discover that women and men listen differently, have different listening styles. Phrases like: „He doesn't hear me when I talk to him” , “My boyfriend/ my husband doesn't know to engage in a dialogue, he doesn't listen to me” are met much more frequently to women than men.

Usual gender differences in communication are often due to conflicts between men and women. It seems that sometimes there are two distinct communication styles: the masculine style and the feminine style. A better understanding of the differences between these styles may reduce the divergences between men and women.

Jane Tear (cited Meier, 1991) summarizes what most experts consider to be the usual differences between the masculine communication style and the feminine communication style.

The men often use the conversation in a competitive mode, probably in view to settle the dominant position in a relationship, while women tend to use conversation in an associative mode, hoping to establish a friendship relation. Women tend to use good listening behaviors (such as eye contact, shaking their heads in sign of approval, focusing on the speaker and asking relevant questions), while men seem to focus less on listening and more on response. Men tend also to speak a lot but are less disposed to reveal personal information about them. Women tend to communicate as a modality to contact people and ideas.⁵

Deborah Tannen's work completes the synthesis of Tear communication styles. In his work, „*You don't understand : Women and men in conversation*”, Tannen (1990) relates the conversation of a couple which were driving with their personal car. The woman asked: „Would you like to stop the car and drink something?”; her husband answered sincerely: „No” and he didn't stop. Later, he felt frustrated hearing that his wife is upset because she wanted to stop the car and to drink something. He was asking: „Why didn't she said what she wanted? Why she has played with me?”

The woman was not so much upset about the fact that he didn't do what she wanted, but that her husband didn't take care about her desire. From her point of view, she was always interested of her husband desires while he didn't respect her preferences.

Tannen considers that, in this case, husband and wife used different but valid communication ways and both have to learn how to decipher the communication approaches of each of: the man has to realize when his wife is asking what he would like- in fact she is not ask something (information) but she starts a negotiation about they -both of them - would like; the woman has to realize that, when the man answers "yes" or "no" is his decision and not the intention to negotiate something. (1990, p. 22)

⁵ *Marriage and the Family , Diversity and Strenghths* -David H. Olson--John DeFrain-

The study regarding the cultural listening styles emphasizes that women are better listeners than men. Deborah Tannen, the famous researcher in the linguistic field affirms that, in communication, the woman and the man belong to different cultures. While women are interested in relationships and networks/commitments, men are more interested in the competitive communication.⁶

This theory explains why husbands, often, manifest disinterest in listening to stories related by the wife regarding the new wardrobe of her colleague or the small office disputes. There are issues that are bothering women, but that don't concern usually males. In the same time, the wife gives less attention when her husband talks about the car repair or about the score of a football match.

The studies realized by Deborah Tannen emphasize that, in communication, the boys' cultures is based on the statute and on maintaining the statute; boys will search to remain in focus making a spectacle of oneself and telling jokes and blood and thunder/ "sensational" stories.

Tannen discovered also that, in a conversation between a woman and a man, women are inclined to play the listener role. The author sustains that the study of the old literature confirms that role for women as a very old role, coming from ancient times. Few things change until contemporary days regarding this role. For example, in XV century, Shakespeare, in "Julius Caesar", Portia asks Brutus to talk to her and to not have secrets from her. The same thing happened to the hero from "Beowulf", the legend of the XVIII century and the examples may continue.⁷

Generally, men socialize being competitive; they live in a hierarchical world in which every unanticipated meet with another person is seen as a challenge to their status. When the fight is over, the man is making a self-evaluation setting a success or a failure. Conversations between men are almost symbolic fights in which the competitors try to obtain a superior result, to protect him from threatening movements and to do not permit to be rejected. So, men are uncomfortable talking about their feelings as opposed to women because feelings can be interpreted as signs of weakness.⁸

Women tend to be close to people not as competitors, as individualist persons or independent person but as persons interconnected with each other. Women tend to socialize; men tend to compete. Tannen sustains that for women conversations represent „negotiations for approach in which people try to search and to offer approval and support and to reach a consensus” (Tannen, 1990, p. 25). Women tend to search a community and to try to keep their intimacy and to avoid isolation. Even if women are interested to obtain such a status and to avoid failure, these are not the most important aim in their life.

Even if, it seems that all of us need to have both a sense of independence and a sense of intimacy with other people, men incline to independence and women to intimacy. The greater is the difference in communication style between a man and a woman, the greater is the potential for misunderstanding. A woman, needing approach, will naturally want to tell her husband where she goes, with whom and when she will be back home. A man, needing independence and control, would understand with difficulty why it is so important to give her this information.

Similarly, a woman is more preoccupied to build a strong relation; she will tell her husband about every purchase that she wants to do – even on those which are relatively inexpensive. Her husband might not agree with asking her permission for every purchase, seeing in the diminution of the budget control the loss of the life control (Tannen, 1990, p. 26).

⁶ O'Brien, Patricia, "Why Men don't Listen...and What It Costs Women at Work", Working Women 18(2), February, 1993, 56(5), online: Infotrac, Expanded Academic ASAP

⁷ Deborah Tannen "Listening to Men, Then and Now", New York Times Magazine, May 6, 1999, pp.56ff

⁸ Olson, H., David, DeFrain, John, *Marriage and the Family, Diversity and Strengths*, p.71

Gender differences in conversational style may lead to misunderstandings if people are not aware of them. Women tend to see the conversation as an occasion to establish a relationship with another person; men tend to see the conversation as an arena where they establish the domination. Communication in an intimate relationship involves a continuous balancing of the needs for intimacy and independence. Tannen emphasizes that intimacy suggests that „we are close and identical” and independence suggests that „we are distinct and different”. Independence may also represent the base of a hierarchy in a relationship. – that is: „If I am independent of you and you are dependent of me, I am higher than you on the hierarchical scale. I am in power”. Perhaps that’s why men who socialize following power and control, tend to put more emphasis on independence than women. Independence is best for the world in which men were prepared to live. (Tannen, 1990, p. 28).

Tannen explains the naggy nature of the woman arguing that it comes from a different approach of the. Women are inclined to do what people ask from them. While men are inclined to reject if someone, especially a woman, is asking something from him. Women tend to repeat their requirements, becoming naggy, because they supposed that men think how they think. ”Of course he would do what I am asking from him even if would understand what I am asking”.⁹

Nobody is guilty about these differences in the attitude and the reactions of listening and communication. They are simply a reflection of the roles in masculine and feminine gender in the conversation styles. Tannen is careful to emphasize that women also love freedom and independence but they tend to emphasize more the interdependence and the approach. Similarly, men enjoy the approach but consider the independence more important.

Women are often perceived in family as „gabbers”, unlike men who can act as „strong and silent”. This phenomena, has also the origin in the differences between the masculine and feminine gender roles. Women wishing to affiliate are doing this through communication. Men, being competitive, tend to be aware of what they are saying. Women, by contrast tend to seek social situations centered on conversation as for example taking lunch together. A good conversation heart to heart build intimacy and warm feelings. (Many homosexuals prefer conversational style that is based on the intimacy development)

In group of men, men tend to be the gabbers but a lot of this conversation between them is guided to the performance, to the attempt to establish the domination. When the subject is politics, sport or other debates which could be discussed vigorously, men lead the conversation. This communication style oriented to performance is not about privacy but to clarify who has the power.

Men, also, tend to focus on the problems solution, while women focus on sharing their feelings regarding the problems. Because of these differences of concentration, men often think that women talk only about problems and women feel frustrated and misunderstood.

Masculine and feminine gender roles start to influence boys and girls from early age. Generally, boys are playing in open air, most of the times in big groups, hierarchically structured. Girls tend to play more in small groups or pairing, and their life resumed to a relationship, as for example: „the best friends”. For girls, intimacy represents an essential factor in a relationship. (Tannen, 1990, p.43). During adolescence, men and women fight to integrate among others. Although they are attracted to each other, they have problems to understand each other. These problems continue during dating and in marriage. It is logically to argue that gender role differences contribute to the unhappiness experienced by many people during their marriage.

⁹ Olson, H., David, DeFrain, John, *Marriage and the Family, Diversity and Strengths*, p.72

When women start to be implied in the executive/ administrative or professional field, their problem is to catch/ achieve men attention. When Sandra Day O'Connor, the first woman judge, was asked what problem she had in her career, she answered that the biggest problem was to make others listen to her. Finally she found a technique to determine people listen to her: 'I have trained myself to speak slowly – pronouncing rarely each word –when I wanted to obtain from somebody complete attention. (O'Brien, Ibid.)

The strategy she has chosen is an effective strategy. Usually, people are doing exactly the opposite: when they see that they are losing somebody attention they tend to talk faster and faster.

Another mistake that women often do in business administration – said O'Brien- is to smile and to wait their turn to speak. Thus, they are risking waiting for their turn not to come. They should change their attitude and to touch the men technique chipping in a discussion when they have something to say. Men are not accustomed to wait for their turn. Patricia O'Brien advises women who want to be heard at work, to stay in the center of the conference table, there where they can not be ignored, to speak determined, to avoid uncertainties such as : "Maybe I am right...but...","I think so, but I am not sure,..". They need to have a convinced attitude in a dialogue, to be on subject and to avoid details.

Studies that have focused on the gender differences regarding the communication styles and especially Tannen studies gave rise to many controversies. According to Elizabeth Aries (Tannen & Aries, 1997), the main counterargument for her researchers is that she unnecessarily polarizes the differences between men and women, diminishing the importance of the fact that men and women communication styles largely overlap. This is an argument similar to that which Sandra Bem gives to the gender roles: The differences between individual women and individual men are bigger than the differences between women as group and men as group. In fact, even if men and women as groups may differ, there are many persons in each group that defy the stereotypes. The key is to recognize that the communication styles seem to differ on average, but the averages do not tell the whole story, they are not an exhaustive reflection of reality.¹⁰

Conclusions

Studying the gender differences in communication and in listening, we conclude that they are not insurmountable obstacles in communication, in the development of healthy and constructive relationships between speakers of the opposite sex. We need more mutual tolerance, more mutual investment in understanding the styles communication specific to the gender.

Both sexes need to develop their availability to accept and to understand these differences concerning the communication style. Such behavior is enriching, beneficial for some and for others. As Tannen observed (1990, 1993) we could learn from each other. Women could learn to accept some conflicts and differences without consider them as a threat of their intimacy; men could learn from women that interdependence does not represent a threat of their personal liberty.

Finally, we can not say that the masculine communication style is better the feminine style and not vice versa. Tannen suggested that „the best” communication style is a flexible style: finding that delicate balance between differentiation and connectivity.

¹⁰ Olson, H., David, DeFrain, John, *Marriage and the Family, Diversity and Strengths*,p.74

Rather than blame each other for the attitude and for the communication style, men and women would be better to avoid „the blame game” and focus on cooperation in order to find acceptable solutions for some and for others. While blame is a competitive effort where a part try to beat the other, authentic communication represents a cooperation effort in which the participants focus on understanding.

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