# 6

# The Skills of Listening-Centered Communication

*Judi Brownell*

The discipline of Communication has traditionally focused on the speaker and on message creation rather than on the listener and the skills of reception. Brownell argues that this approach needs to be revisited, and that listening must become the central focus if individuals are to become effective communicators. Her listening-centered approach to communication is presented and discussed in the following chapter.

Taking a symbolic approach to understanding the communication process, Brownell proposes that only through effective listening can individuals share meanings and align their behavior to accomplish goals. Communication, she suggests, is "listener-defined"; a message means whatever the receiver thinks it does. This view contrasts with the standard practice of highlighting the speaker's task. Brownell believes that unless speakers first listen to understand their partner's perspective, they cannot hope to design effective messages. Listening becomes particularly vital as individuals travel more frequently and as organizations become more global and diverse.

Brownell's HURIER model is presented as an aid to developing effective listening skills. The listening process is viewed as a cluster of interrelated components that can be identified, assessed, and improved. Speaking is the *outcome* of effective listening – it is how the listener responds after he or she has heard, understood, interpreted, and evaluated the other person's ideas.

Finally, Brownell presents the rationale for and challenges of a skills approach to listening. She identifies several issues and questions that arise from taking a skills approach to listening improvement and instruction, and addresses each in turn. She concludes by looking to the future, reemphasizing the need for effective listening as individuals strive to share meanings and build relationships with those from other backgrounds and cultures. In a rapidly changing world, the skills of effective listening are vital to individuals' professional success and personal well being.

What is most central to human interaction? Is it the ability to express thoughts clearly, to gain recognition for ourselves and our ideas? Or, is it our ability to understand, to empathize, to appreciate and focus on

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the "other"? If the goal of effective communication is to create shared meanings, all of these functions play a role. But where do we begin? This paper argues that our choice of a starting place is significant as it not only defines our approach to communication, but also influences the nature of our relationships, expresses our values, and reflects our world view.

First, a listening-centered approach to communication is presented and discussed. Then, the skills-based HURIER model is described as an example of a behavioral approach to listening. Its six interrelated components are defined, and the challenges of a skills-based approach to listening-centered communication are reviewed. The chapter ends by emphasizing the need for listening development to be viewed within a larger social framework.

## Listening-Centered Communication

The complex, multi-faceted process we call communication has been studied from numerous perspectives depending upon the researcher's discipline, purpose, and methods. Our earliest models recognized distinct functions related to the roles of "sending" and "receiving." As new theoretical frameworks evolved, a majority of communication scholars came to agree that relational approaches most accurately describe the dynamic, nonrepetitive, and continuous nature of human interaction. Scholars concluded that sending (speaking) and receiving (listening) do not occur in a sequential, linear fashion; rather, individuals continuously receive and respond to stimuli, processing and creating meaning from cues as they speak. What was once explained by a stimulus – response model came to be viewed as transactional (Clampitt, 1991). The question, "How much time do you spend each day listening?" becomes irrelevant. If you are engaged in human communication, listening never stops.

If we apply a symbolic lens to examine human communication, we recognize even more vividly how central listening is to the process by which meanings are created and shared. Through listening, individuals learn how to behave; they work to align their actions within a particular communication context and to distinguish appropriate from inappropriate responses. Whether visiting in-laws or entering a new organization, the ability to align behavior and recognize situational norms has much to do with our ability to listen.

From this perspective, communicative activity becomes listener-defined; a message "means" whatever the listener believes it means. Speakers are

at the mercy of listeners who interpret what they hear and act on that basis. Individuals as listeners actively participate in a creative process, controlling the type and amount of information received and then processing it according to their unique cognitive structures, schemata, interests, needs, and other individual influences. These individual variables suggest that potentially important verbal and nonverbal cues are often missed entirely. On other occasions, meanings may be elicited where messages were never intended. Speakers, from this perspective, are truly at the mercy of the listeners who – literally – have the last word.

The more an individual understands the listening process, the more likely she is to achieve the goal of shared meanings. Those who discount perceptual differences or who ignore important nonverbal cues cannot hope to coordinate actions or achieve goals, as their interpretations of their partner's meanings are likely to be inaccurate. Even when individuals have similar backgrounds and a common body of experience, sharing meanings is difficult. When cultural diversity increases, listeners must work even harder to account for perceptual filters, assumptions, and value orientations. An American woman visiting friends in Paris, for instance, is likely to imagine an "early dinner" at five o'clock, only to discover that early in France is closer to seven o'clock.

While recognizing that the best you can do is to approximate your partner's intentions, learning to attend to, understand, interpret, and evaluate the communicative cues in your environment increases the likelihood that meaningful communication will occur. It should be evident that communication effectiveness requires that these processes take place *before* an individual speaks, and that the extent to which meanings are shared has much to do with the quality of participants' listening.

Even at the macro level, receiver-centered approaches are essential to making wise strategic communication choices. Organizational leaders who are flexible and who adapt to the unique needs of their workforce by considering employees' perceptual filters, beliefs, and assumptions as they design organizational communication strategies have a distinct competitive advantage. Research in this arena makes clear that senior managers' assumptions about how employees receive and process information are often inaccurate. This lack of congruence may result in costly misunderstandings, lack of commitment, and low morale (Brownell and Jameson, 1996).

In listening-centered communication, then, listening is positioned as the primary process influencing communication outcomes. This framing has implications for a variety of other decisions. Communicative

activity *begins* with the multi-stage process of listening – a process which concludes with a response (often verbal) that is most often identified as "speaking." It is the quality of the listening that determines the effectiveness of the interaction. It is therefore the listening process and its role in human interaction that deserves our primary and full attention.

## A Skills-Based Model of Listening-Centered Communication

It may be useful to review one of the growing number of theoretical frameworks scholars have used to understand listening behavior better. The HURIER model is presented as an example of a behavioral approach that understands listening as the central communication function. In this framework, listening-centered communication is conceived as a cluster of interrelated, overlapping components. Figure 6.1 presents the HURIER model of the listening process which illustrates the relationships among six skill clusters.

As you can see, the listener's response is the final component of the listening process and is influenced by the five processes that precede it. Speaking is viewed as the *outcome* of listening. The effectiveness of the speaker's message or response relates directly to how well the individual listens. The assumption is that only *after* listening has taken place can a communicator speak effectively. With this in mind, each component of the HURIER model is briefly described below. Later we will examine how the situational dimensions of purpose and context also affect the listener's response.

### *Component 1: Hearing*

The HURIER model begins with an individual making decisions about what to focus attention on within the context of an environment filled with stimulus options. As we well know, this component – what is called *hearing* in the model – is influenced by the individual's cultural orientation, past experiences, interests, attitudes, beliefs, and a range of other personal variables and filters that account for individual and cultural differences. You will notice that the HURIER model suggests that these filters continue to influence every component of the listening process.

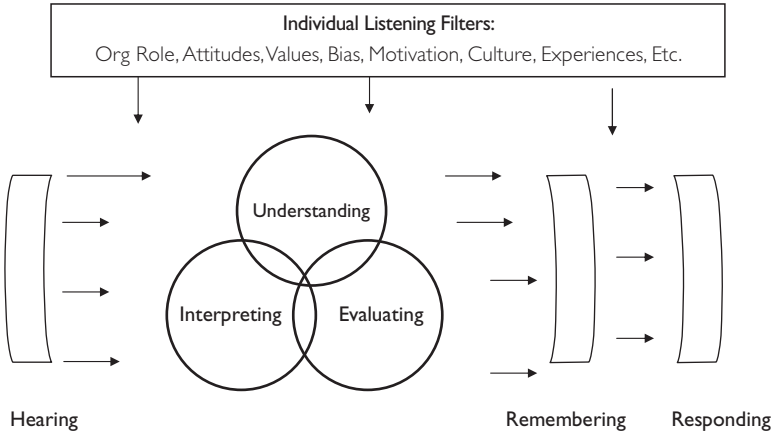


**Figure 6.1** The HURIER Listening Model

### *Component 2: Understanding*

Having attended to and "received" the particular stimulus, the next stage in the listening process is understanding. This information processing phase corresponds to reading comprehension and addresses the literal meaning of the words or signs received. Obviously, such factors as the individual's familiarity with the language affect the accuracy and extent of listening comprehension.

### *Component 3: Remembering*

While memory is a separate mental process, it functions within the context of listening-centered communication because the usefulness of information is dependent upon the communicator's ability to act on what is received, either immediately or at some later point in time. Memory, then, is directly related to an individual's ability to formulate an appropriate response.

### *Component 4: Interpreting*

Nonverbal cues play a particularly significant role in the next stage of the process, what we call "interpreting." Glenn, in her 1989 review of listening definitions, concluded that the process of interpreting was common to almost all listening definitions. While use of the term varies,

most scholars agree that interpreting messages requires that both verbal and nonverbal cues be considered in assigning meaning. This richer context allows for literal meanings to be modified by such things as tone of voice, posture, facial expression, and contextual knowledge. An effective listening-centered communicator would observe his or her partner's appearance and other variables of the communication context before assigning meaning to the message conveyed; she would, as some researchers suggest, "define the situation" (Weick, 1995).

### *Component 5: Evaluating*

The component of evaluation in listening-centered communication refers to the process by which an individual makes a judgment about the accuracy and validity of the information received. This is the stage at which effective communicators assess what they have heard by weighing evidence and reasoning, recognizing emotional appeals, and drawing other conclusions that will affect their subsequent listening response. Emphasis is placed on the need to understand a message before judging its value.

### *Component 6: Responding*

The outcome of effective listening, then, will be an appropriate response. The communicator's "message" may be verbal or nonverbal, and constitutes the final stage of an integrated, multi-faceted system. This response is influenced by all that has come before it and, since listening is continuous, the communicator continues to process new information as he or she is speaking. This implies that continuous listening enables a speaker to modify messages as he observes his partner's facial expressions, hears his tone of voice, and adjusts to his interpretations of whether the message he is sending is eliciting the anticipated outcomes.

## Translating Cognitive Processes to Observable Skills: Educators Bridge the Gap

While educators cannot change the covert nature of mental activity, what they have done is to translate the unobservable listening process into corresponding skill sets that are then accepted as *indicators that*

*listening is taking place*. Other sets of observable behaviors, such as leaning forward or nodding, have been shown to *facilitate the listening process*. Viewing listening from a behavioral perspective enables educators to develop specific instructional strategies around these concrete components of an often elusive process. While the limitations of such an approach are recognized, behavioral models have made listening instruction accessible to educators at all levels.

While the appropriateness of an individual's speech – demonstrated either in interpersonal or presentational contexts – is the most obvious indicator of listening effectiveness, there are five other components in the process that deserve our attention as well. As previously discussed, the HURIER model suggests the following listening tasks – hearing, understanding, remembering, interpreting, evaluating, and responding. Each of these is described in terms of the skills that either indicate or facilitate each stage.

For example, while we cannot observe the process of hearing or attending, we can teach students to "do" such things as: (a) focus on the speaker; (b) choose an appropriate physical location where distractions are limited; and (c) take notes or engage in an activity to increase involvement. Likewise, while we cannot observe the process of understanding, we have measures to assess listening comprehension and also to "teach" activities that have a high probability of increasing shared meanings. Asking questions, paraphrasing, and discriminating between main points and supporting details, all contribute to the component of understanding. Box 6.1 provides examples of skills associated with each of the listening processes.

## Listening-centered Communication: Challenges of a Skills Approach

There are a number of issues and questions that emerge as a result of teaching listening-centered communication from a behavioral approach. Four of the most frequently mentioned topics follow.

### *Role of motivation in listening behavior*

Few other skills are as dependent on motivation as listening. Individuals vary significantly in their listening behavior, yet the causes

**Box 6.1** HURIER Listening skill clusters

*Component 1: Hearing messages*
Improve concentration
Use vocalized listening technique
Prepare to listen

*Component 2: Understanding messages*
Recognize assumptions
Listen to entire message without interrupting
Distinguish main ideas from evidence
Perception check for accurate comprehension

*Component 3: Remembering messages*
Understand how memory works
Isolate and practice each memory process
Practice with difficult material

*Component 4: Interpreting messages*
Understand the nature of empathy
Increase sensitivity to nonverbal cues
Increase sensitivity to vocal cues
Monitor personal nonverbal behaviors

*Component 5: Evaluating messages*
Assess the speaker's credibility
Recognize your personal bias
Analyze logic and reasoning
Identify emotional appeals

*Component 6: Responding to messages*
Become familiar with response options
Recognize the impact of each response option
Increase behavioral flexibility

of these differences remain poorly understood. Beyond establishing that intelligence correlates with listening ability, the only thing we know for certain is that there is a strong link between motivation to listen and listening effectiveness. In fact, some researchers have suggested that, if we can assume a threshold level of intelligence, then motivation accounts for up to 70 percent of an individual's listening success.

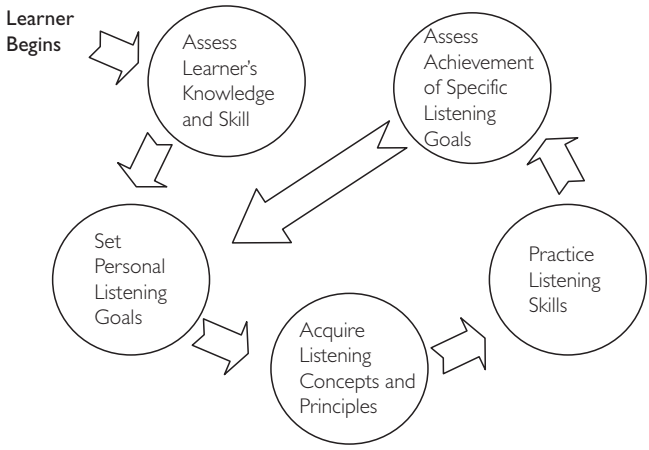


**Figure 6.2** The listening assessment cycle

*Correspondence between what is taught and what is assessed*

Too often there is a lack of correspondence between behaviors being taught and those that are actually assessed. Assessment measures must be selected with consideration for how instructional goals match the dimension evaluated. In this regard, the HURIER model provides one of the clearest blueprints for skill development and testing, as discrete components, related skill sets, and targeted assessments can be developed and aligned. As mentioned previously, cognitive processes cannot be observed directly. Consequently, written and oral indicators must be used to assess behavioral outcomes which are themselves substitutes for the actual listening process.

A self-assessment instrument accompanies the HURIER model and was designed to help learners identify their listening behaviors and to understand the larger skill clusters into which separate skills fit (see Appendix I). An integrated system we call the Listening Assessment Cycle (Figure 6.2) is then readily constructed as learners (a) assess their current performance, (b) set personal goals by identifying the components where improvement is needed, (c) acquire relevant principles and accompanying skills, (d) practice new listening behaviors, and finally (e) take a structured assessment that matches exactly the behaviors that were practiced. When educators and students are clear on listening goals and outcomes, instruction becomes more consistent and is likely to have greater impact. By focusing on observable skills, educators

are better able to align individual student needs, instructional strategies, and assessment measures.

### *The challenge of skill transfer*

As in other types of instruction, there also are challenges in skill transfer. Observing students as they demonstrate the target skills in a classroom situation is not a predictor of their likelihood to demonstrate and experience success with these skills outside the classroom. In addition, newly learned skills are not likely to persist in environments that do not support the acquired behavior. Demonstrating skills in a controlled classroom laboratory situation does not ensure that learners will be able to apply these skills appropriately or effectively in out-of-class contexts.

### *Situational demands on listening*

Listening-centered communication can also be influenced by the demands of the particular situation. Situational variables related to the (a) listening purpose and (b) context or setting affect the degree to which each component, or skill cluster, is required for effective listening to occur. For instance, while listening to a friend in trouble might depend heavily on identifying nonverbal cues, listening to directions requires comprehension and memory processes. When listening to someone in a supervisory or higher status role, a formal and unfamiliar office environment may affect concentration and the subsequent response. Figure 6.3 suggests how situational demands – listening purposes and contexts – might affect the listening process.

## Looking to the Future: What We Know, What We Need to Know

What we know is that the boundaries of our world will continue to expand throughout the coming decades. We are more likely than ever before to encounter individuals from other countries and other cultures on a daily basis – in our homes, at work, in our schools. Building a global village takes hard work. It requires "reaching out, reaching in"; it requires that individuals as communicators focus their efforts on creating shared

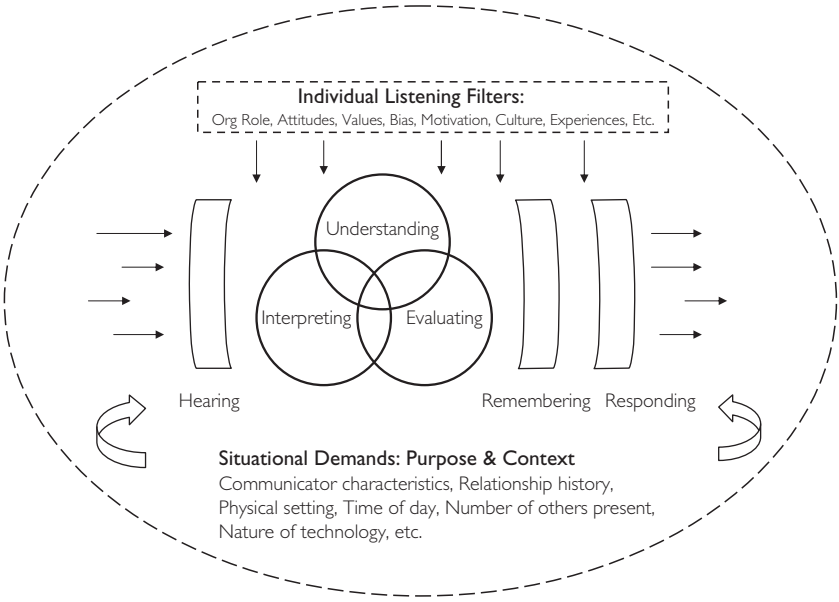


**Figure 6.3** The HURIER Listening Model: Situational demands

meanings. The *only* way that we can develop meaningful relationships within our families, communities, and across continents is through effective listening. As we have seen, this requires that every individual shift his or her attention to the task of understanding better the attitudes, values, needs, and orientations of fellow communicators.

We also know that there has never been a greater need for the skills of effective listening than in these times of constant and often revolutionary change. The specific frameworks in which listening skills are taught or the specific definitions applied to desired behaviors are of relatively little consequence. What is imperative is that educators at all levels identify a method by which they can contribute to the future success and well being of their students through listening instruction. A skills approach clearly facilitates this goal. But listening-centered communication begins not with skills in the classroom but with attitudes in the home. It's an orientation that places value on mutual understanding and respect, on recognizing and responding to differences and change. Yesterday's children grew up with "show and tell" – tomorrow's children will be better prepared for the future if this traditional activity becomes "listen and learn."

And what, then, do we need to facilitate listening-centered communication? We need commitment, and we need evidence. Communication scholars, educators, and practitioners must become convinced that listening is central to creating community and advancing knowledge. This can only happen if substantially more research is focused on the core processes involved in creating shared meanings. As it becomes apparent that listening is related to global outcomes such as international conflict and business performance as well as to everyday personal misunderstandings, more urgency will be placed on discovering best practices for teaching listening effectiveness. It is likely that skills-based approaches will provide not only a clear and concrete framework for improving and assessing listening behavior, but will also serve as a means of drawing attention to the role this critical competence plays in helping to realize our brightest future.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1 What is meant by "listening-centered" communication? What are the implications of framing listening rather than speaking as the fundamental communication skill?
2 In what ways does the listener have more influence on communication effectiveness than the speaker when viewed from a meaning-centered perspective?
3 Why is listening so important to effective intercultural communication? Provide a concrete example.
4 Describe each of the six components of the HURIER Listening Model. Which component do you believe is most troublesome for you as a listener? Explain.
5 If you could chose only one component of the HURIER Model to be taught to all children before they leave school, which would it be and why?
6 What do you think is missing from the HURIER Listening Model? What questions are left unanswered?
7 Given the chapter discussion, what do you believe are the key challenges of a behavioral approach to understanding and improving listening?
8 What is meant by "situational demands" on listening? Give an example of two different listening contexts and purposes, and discuss how listening requirements might differ.
9 If you could create the perfect "listening context," what would it be like? Describe features such as communicator characteristics, time of day, physical setting, and so forth.
10 When you "look to the future," in what specific ways do you see listening effectiveness as an important competency?
11 What does the author intend as the underlying fundamental difference between approaching communication as "listen and learn" rather than "show and tell"?

## Appendix 6.1: HURIER Listening Assessment Instrument

1. Each of the questions is the listening assessment below corresponds with one of six listening components:
   - Hearing
   - Understanding
   - Remembering
   - Interpreting
   - Evaluating
   - Responding

2. It might be fun, before you go any further, to guess how you will do:

   I think I will score highest on component _____

   I will probably score lowest on component _____

3. When you have completed the questionnaire, process your scores in the following manner:
   - Write the number of points you assigned to each response on the appropriate line below.
   - Add up the points you gave yourself for each of the following sets of questions.
   - Place your total for each set in the "total" space.

| *Hearing* | *Understanding* | *Remembering* |
|---|---|---|
| 4 _____ | 5 _____ | 3 _____ |
| 15 _____ | 11 _____ | 7 _____ |
| 16 _____ | 25 _____ | 10 _____ |
| 20 _____ | 28 _____ | 18 _____ |
| 24 _____ | 32 _____ | 31 _____ |
| Total _____ | Total _____ | Total _____ |

| *Interpreting* | *Evaluating* | *Responding* |
|---|---|---|
| 2 _____ | 1 _____ | 6 _____ |
| 12 _____ | 8 _____ | 9 _____ |
| 14 _____ | 22 _____ | 19 _____ |
| 17 _____ | 23 _____ | 26 _____ |
| 21 _____ | 29 _____ | 27 _____ |
| Total _____ | Total _____ | Total _____ |

4. What does this information tell you about your self-perceptions of your listening behavior?
5. Rank each of the six components according to the question totals.

| | *Points total* | *Rank* |
|---|---|---|
| Hearing | _____ | _____ |
| Understanding | _____ | _____ |
| Remembering | _____ | _____ |
| Interpreting | _____ | _____ |
| Evaluating | _____ | _____ |
| Responding | _____ | _____ |

6. In what skill areas are you high?
7. Which one do you see as a potential problem?
8. How did your actual ranking compare with your earlier guess?
9. Use the chart below to assess each skill area:
   - 30–25 points: you see yourself as an excellent listener
   - 25–15 points: you consider your listening skills adequate
   - 10–15 points: you perceive some problems in your listening behavior
10. You might also ask yourself:
    - Is there a particular component with a significantly different total – either higher or much lower than the others?
    - How do you think someone else would rank your listening behaviors?
    - Take the role of one of your team members, your spouse, or some other important person and answer the questionnaire from that person's perspective. How did you do?

**Listening Self-Assessment**

Respond to each of the following questions concerning your perceptions of your listening behavior.

Use the following key: 5 (always); 4 (usually); 3 (sometimes); 2 (infrequently); 1 (never).

When you respond, keep one specific situation in mind. It might be useful to use your team as a context for your listening behavior.

___ I weigh all evidence before making a decision.
___ I am sensitive to the speaker's feelings in communication situations.
___ I approach tasks creatively.
___ I concentrate on what the speaker is saying.
___ I use clear and appropriate words to express my ideas.
___ I encourage others to express their opinion.
___ I am able to see how different pieces of information or ideas relate to one another.
___ I listen to the entire message when someone speaks, whether I agree with what they have to say or not.
___ I let the speaker know immediately that he or she has been understood.
___ I remember what I am told even in stressful situations.

___ I recognize the main points in a presentation and am not distracted by supporting details.
___ I am sensitive to a speaker's vocal cues in communication situations.
___ I provide sufficient feedback on the job.
___ I consider the speaker's mood in understanding the message being presented.
___ I hear what is said when someone speaks to me.
___ I give an individual my complete attention when he is speaking to me.
___ I take into account situational factors that influence interactions when someone is speaking to me.
___ I can recall the specific information someone gives me several days later.
___ I respond in an appropriate and timely manner to information and requests.
___ I am ready to listen when approached by a speaker.
___ I notice the speaker's facial expressions, body posture, and other nonverbal behaviors.
___ I wait until all the information is presented before drawing any conclusions.
___ I allow for the fact that people and circumstances change over time.
___ I overcome distractions such as the conversations of others, background noises and telephones when someone is speaking to me.
___ I accurately understand what is said to me.
___ I seek information for better understanding of a situation.
___ I communicate clearly and directly.
___ I focus on the main point of a message rather than reacting to details.
___ I am receptive to points of view which differ from my own.
___ I time my communications appropriately.
___ I remember the details of things that happened weeks or months ago.
___ I let the speaker complete his or her message without interrupting.

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