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# The Importance of Effective Listening Skills: Implications for the Workplace and Dealing with Difficult People

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**THE IMPORTANCE OF EFFECTIVE LISTENING SKILLS:  
IMPLICATIONS FOR THE WORKPLACE AND DEALING WITH DIFFICULT PEOPLE**

**A THESIS**

**SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS**

**UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE  
MASTER'S DEGREE IN LEADERSHIP STUDIES**

**BY**

**AMY OGDONIK SULLIVAN**

**2011**

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## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the late Patrick Sullivan. You will always be my guiding light and inspiration. From you I learned the true meaning of life and leadership: positive attitude, ability to take risks, creativity, effective listening, and teamwork. Like I started my journey in the Leadership Studies program by quoting you in my very first paper, my leadership autobiography, I will also quote you in this very last thesis paper, as I finish this journey:

“Not with that attitude!” and “Never say you can’t!” ~Patrick Sullivan  
along with one of my all-time favorite quotes, which embodies how you lived your too short life:

“And in the end, it’s not the years in your life that count.

It’s the life in your years.” ~Abraham Lincoln

Pat, I am forever grateful of your love, and I will never forget you. You are sadly missed.

## **ABSTRACT**

A survey of University of Southern Maine (USM) employees was conducted to identify the importance of the leadership skill, effective listening, in supervisors and supervisees, and to evaluate its implications in the workplace, specifically when dealing with difficult people in everyday interactions. USM employees were asked their opinions about the importance of effective listening skills, their perceptions of their own effective listening skills as well as those of their coworkers, experiences of dealing with difficult people in the workplace, and the importance of training regarding these skills for leadership and general work performance. Results of the qualitative and quantitative survey data indicated that both supervisors and supervised employees felt effective listening skills in the workplace was important, not specifically for supervisors, but for all employees, and training on such would be beneficial to all. Most perceived themselves and their coworkers to possess effective listening skills, and they all found themselves in difficult situations, at one time or another. Difficult situations ranged from simply involving people with bad attitudes to those more serious involving the police.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Frequently, we encounter people we deem difficult in our workplaces. We consider them difficult for a myriad of reasons: they seem hard to get along with, they step on our toes to get to the top, they interrupt us, or more simply, they just don't appear to listen. These difficult people can be our supervisors, our coworkers, and/or our supervisees. Despite the many factors that may come into play as to exactly why these people seem so difficult to us, the one major reason scholars suggest is lack of communication, specifically, lack of effective listening skills. Research studies show there is a need for effective listening skills and training on such in the workplace for all employees. Determining the importance of this need at USM as a case study, will give a greater understanding into where attention is paid and/or needed in the development of vital communication skills of its employees and leaders.

## **STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

The research case study was conducted to identify the importance of the leadership skill, effective listening, in supervisors and supervised employees at the University of Southern Maine (USM) and to evaluate its implications in the workplace, specifically when dealing with difficult people in everyday interactions.

*(See Appendix A for Statement of the Problem, including Sub-problems, Hypothesis, Delimitations, Definitions of Terms, and Assumptions.)*

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Research on listening skills in the workplace appears to be limited, and what is available on the topic is becoming out of date. Flynn, Valikoski, and Grau (2008) state “much of the relevant academic research in the field is aging even as the call for listening as a workplace skill appears to be gaining momentum” (p. 142). As early as 1952 in the *Harvard Business Review*, business professionals held effective listening as a highly desirable workplace skill (Flynn et al, 2008, p. 142). Since that time, “the *Harvard Business Review* has published forty-three articles with ‘listen’ as a keyword in the abstract; Many of these articles continue to confirm the importance of listening as a key management skill” (Flynn et al, 2008, p. 142). Specifically, Hirsch (1986) and Cooper (1997), in Flynn et al (2008), “present listening as a complex, multidimensional behavioral skill. Listening involves hearing and cognition and assumes the ability to selectively perceive, interpret, understand, assign meaning, react, remember, and analyze what is heard” (p. 143). Further, “effective workplace listening is not simply limited to the skills that employees do or do not possess. It also includes the idea of organizational listening, the environment in which listening occurs that is shaped by the organization and is then one of the characteristics of the organizational image” (Flynn et al, 2008, p. 143). However, even though research articles discuss listening as an important skill, it is still not given sufficient attention. Brownell (1994), in Flynn et al (2008), states “that despite its central role in the success of both the manager and the organization, listening remains one of the most neglected aspects of organizational communication, particularly from a research perspective; listening as an organizational variable continues to be seen

as a soft skill worthy of little attention in the scholarly business literature, in the business classroom, and in organizations” (p. 143).

### The Importance of Listening Skills

Despite the limited research in listening in the workplace, studies do show the importance of listening as a work skill. Brownell (1994) and Fracaro (2001), in Flynn et al (2008) state “listening is considered by some to be the single most important element in the communication process, even more highly valued than speaking as a communication skill necessary in the business world” (p. 143-144). The importance of listening skills was examined by review of seven research studies. In an early study done in 1974, Weinrauch and Swanda Jr. (1975) researched the significance of listening by businessmen to determine the amount of time spent on listening and how that time was classified (p. 27). In 1980, Hunt and Cusella (1983) performed an exploratory study to assess the significance of listening in the organizational setting and what behavioral skills should be included in future studies (p. 394). Lewis and Reinsch, Jr. (1988) studied the research question: “What does listening mean in organizational environments?” (p. 49). Sypher, Bostrom, and Seibert (1989) performed a study to examine listening as it relates to other social cognitive and communicative abilities as well as the relationship between listening and workers’ level in the organization and moving upward (p. 296). Brownell (1990) examined the way managers are perceived by their subordinates as effective or ineffective listeners and the implications of those perceptions (p. 401). Haas and Arnold (1995) investigated the role of listening in organization members’ judgments of communication competence (p. 124). Finally, Cooper (1997) performed a study to test listening competency in the workplace and its implications for future study and training.

*Weinrauch & Swanda Jr. (1975)* suggest listening is the most important form of communication, yet it is still frequently ignored; “probably more attention should be directed to the subject of listening. Both students and the businessmen may need to further recognize the importance of this communicative function” (p. 27). *Weinrauch & Swanda Jr. (1975)* performed a study to analyze listening activities compared to other forms of business communication, specifically: “1. The amount of total time that is spent on listening and the other communicative functions as reported by businessmen, 2. A classification of time spent on the various communicative functions by days in the week and by morning versus afternoon, and 3. The educational implications of the findings” (p. 27). Their study included a sample of businessmen from South Bend, Indiana who had significant managerial responsibilities (*Weinrauch & Swanda Jr., 1975, p. 27*). The method they used was a two-part questionnaire. The first part included information such as “sex, position title, type of industry employed, position description, type of business function, level of management, number of subordinators reporting;” and for the second part, “participants were asked to record amount of time spent in direct communication according to the following four types: reading, writing, speaking, and listening” (*Weinrauch & Swanda Jr., 1975, p. 27-28*).

Results from the study by *Weinrauch & Swanda (1975)* included responses from 46 participants, mostly male; they recorded a total of approximately 2280 actual working hours in communication during 209 working days (p. 28). Further, an average of 10.9 hours per day was spent in direct communication by respondents who were managers (*Weinrauch & Swanda Jr., 1975, p. 28*). *Weinrauch & Swanda (1975)* explain this data “in terms of direct communication, listening was the largest time consuming activity with

speaking second; Writing and reading followed third and fourth respectively” (p. 30). As far as time of day and day of week, it was reported “listening represents the primary direct communication activity for both the morning and afternoon periods” and “listening remained the primary direct communication activity during the five specific days analyzed” (Weinrauch & Swanda Jr., 1975, p. 30). Weinrauch & Swanda Jr. (1975) concluded “the findings of this study strongly suggest that listening is the primary activity among direct types of business communication” (p. 30). Further, they suggest managers spend more time focusing on developing listening skills in the workplace “given the results of the study, it is essential for the professional ranks within business communication to spend more time on developing effective listening skills” (Weinrauch & Swanda Jr., 1975, p. 31). Implications for this study include an emphasis on training and development of listening skills among business students and businessmen, along with using the most effective teaching methods (Weinrauch & Swanda Jr., 1975, p. 31).

*Hunt & Cusella (1983)* also suggest the importance of listening skills in the workplace; “listening behavior is one of the most important interactive skills for members of organizations” (p. 393). However, they also state there is very little about listening skills in the research; “Apart from the ‘how to do it’ approach, there is relatively little published research dealing specifically with listening; This lack of material is somewhat troublesome in light of the virtual unanimity of opinion on the importance of this activity as a communication skill” (Hunt & Cusella, 1983, p. 393). Because of this, Hunt & Cusella (1983) performed a study to explore “the extent to which listening ability or the lack of it is perceived as a major communication problem in contemporary organizations” (p. 394). For their sample, 250 organizations were selected from the *Fortune 500* list of

large industrial firms in the U.S. To these 250 organizations, “a questionnaire on listening needs and training programs was mailed to the ‘Manager of Training and Education’ at the corporate headquarters” (Hunt & Cusella, 1983, p. 395). The questionnaire involved many items on the aspect of listening in general, however the focus included conditions within the organization that prevented employees from being able to listen effectively and also on areas that needed education and training on listening (Hunt & Cusella, 1983, p. 395).

Results from the Hunt & Cusella (1983) study included responses from 106 respondents which concluded listening skills were inadequate and there was a lack of listening training in the typical organization (p. 395, 399). “Training managers felt that poor listening was ‘*one of the most important*’ problems facing them and that ineffective listening leads to ineffective performance or low productivity” (Hunt & Cusella, 1983, p. 399). Further, it was concluded basic communication skills, such as giving feedback and asking questions, are not being practiced effectively by employees; training is needed, but first employees need to be motivated to do so; and finally, “the findings here related to the lack of individual motivation to practice good listening and a lack of openness would suggest that ineffective listening practices are associated with a dysfunctional communication climate” (Hunt & Cusella, 1983, p. 399). Implications for this study also include an emphasis on effective communication skills and training, including a concentration on effective listening skills in organizations.

*Lewis & Reinsch, Jr. (1988)* stress the importance of listening skills in organizations, as these listening skills differ from those used in the classroom for training (p. 49). They approach the topic of more research being needed in this field by presenting

the question: “Can one be certain that business men and women mean the same thing by listening as do the authors and readers of these academic studies?” (Lewis & Reinsch, Jr., 1988, p. 50). Lewis & Reinsch, Jr. (1988) agree with Hunt & Cusella (1983) that employee listening skills are underdeveloped and suggest “no one, apparently, has thought to start with specific organizations and to attempt to determine the conceptualization of listening used by organization members” (p. 50). Lewis & Reinsch, Jr. (1988) designed their study using a critical-incident technique developed by Flanagan (1954) which “gathers participant descriptions of an event while minimizing the influences of prior definitions” (p. 52). The use of the critical-incident technique would thus hopefully focus on newer definitions of listening as it specifically pertains to the workplace environment, as opposed to definitions already presented by researchers in light of classroom training. The critical-incident questionnaire went out to two organizations in Stillwater, Oklahoma: a bank and a medical center, of which 106 employees completed the questionnaires; 195 critical incidents were presented (Lewis & Reinsch, Jr., 1988, p. 52).

Results from the Lewis & Reinsch, Jr. (1988) study suggested five conclusions: listening in the workplace is complex; perceptions of listening are affected by message sending and receiving; assessments of listening behaviors by other employees are merely perceptions; listening in organizations by men and women do not necessarily have the same meaning as it does to teachers or professors; and there are implications for consultants and trainers who teach listening in organizations (p. 63-64). Thus, descriptions of listening in the workplace environment differ considerably from those taught in the classroom environment as there are many variables that come into play in

different organizations. Lewis & Reinsch, Jr. (1988) suggest “training can be effective, but the particular type of training needed may depend on the makeup of the workforce, the type of work or culture of the organization, or other situational variables” (p. 65). Regardless of how listening is defined, taught, or learned, there is no question of its importance for workplace communications.

*Sypher et al (1989)* agree “even though listening plays an important part in the communication process, it has received comparatively little attention from communication researchers” (p. 293). They suggest a good deal of progress has been made in order to study listening skills, however “few investigations have linked listening to other communication related skills, and almost no studies demonstrate those relationships in perhaps the most obvious and relevant context – the organization” (Sypher et al, 1989, p. 295). Therefore, Sypher et al (1989) performed a study to expand upon the limited knowledge about listening as it pertains specifically to organizations; its relationship to other communication abilities; the relationship between listening and job level, upward mobility; and how it pertains to supervisors and non-supervisors (p. 296). The study included 36 employees of a large insurance company headquarters in the Northeastern U.S., which included those employed from a variety of job levels (Sypher et al, 1989, p. 296). Listening skills were tested based on a variety of measures: The Kentucky Comprehensive Listening Test to measure listening, Crockett’s (1965) Role Category Questionnaire to assess level of cognitive differentiation, Snyder’s (1974) Self-Monitoring Scale to measure self-monitoring, Sypher’s (1981) perspective taking measure, O’Keefe’s and Delia’s (1979) persuasive arguments measure, as well as



questions pertaining to organizational level and upward mobility (Sypher et al, 1989, p. 297-298).

Results from the Sypher et al (1989) study suggest “listening is related to various other communication abilities and to success at work” (p. 299). They found interpretive listening may be more strongly related to general intelligence, mixed findings with regard to listening and job level, and that non-supervisors had better listening skills than supervisors (Sypher et al, 1989, p. 300). Sypher et al (1989) suggest “non-supervisors may be better listeners simply because they have to spend more time listening; supervisors are more used to being listened to, despite the findings which suggest executives spend more of their communication listening than employees” (p. 300-301). Thus, they argue the organizational level is good for studying listening skills, not only because it has been neglected, but because it is especially relevant. Sypher et al (1989) state “developing an understanding of the role of listening in organizations can only serve to increase our knowledge of organizational communication in general and its relation to important individual and organizational outcomes” (p. 301).

*Brownell (1990)* expands on prior research studies to explore the characteristics of managers’ listening skills as they are perceived by their subordinates, and states “effective management requires effective communication” (p. 401). Brownell (1990) suggests “managers are constantly required to listen; yet, researchers know less about listening than speaking, reading, or writing; Further research is needed to establish the exact nature of the listening process and provide direction for those seeking to improve individuals’ listening competence in organizational settings” (p. 402). Further, it is important to know the perception of effective listening in an organizational context.

“When employees say their manager ‘doesn’t listen,’ it is essential to know what this means” (Brownell, 1990, p. 403). In order to determine the characteristics of good and poor listeners, Brownell (1990) developed a 26-item questionnaire, which was administered to middle managers and their subordinates in the hospitality business (p. 404). These managers were asked to identify the degree to which they believed they displayed each of 26 listening-related behaviors in the workplace, while subordinates were asked to fill out the same questionnaire, providing their perceptions of their manager’s listening behaviors (Brownell, 1990, p. 404-405).

Results from the Brownell (1990) study supports earlier research that managers over 45 years old are perceived as poorer listeners than those younger; individuals who have held their current positions less than one year may be more conscious of their listening and are perceived by colleagues as more effective listeners; individuals who have had some listening training are slightly more likely than their colleagues to be given higher ratings by subordinates; and there is a discrepancy between manager’s self-perceptions and the perceptions of their subordinates of their listening behavior (p. 411-412). Specifically, perceptions of managers’ listening by their subordinates, as either high or low, were related to three variables: “(1) their familiarity with their manager, (2) the frequency of manager-subordinate communication, and (3) the subordinate’s satisfaction both with his or her job and with the manager-subordinate relationship” (Brownell, 1990, p. 413). It is unclear if managers’ claims to be effective listeners caused subordinates to feel more familiar or to communicate more frequently, thus causing a positive perception, however, it is clear that managers who listen well would encourage rather than discourage these types of responses (Brownell, 1990, p. 413). As more of these types of

studies are performed and results analyzed, the more information will be available for future training and the development of managers and leaders as effective listeners in the workplace.

*Haas & Arnold (1995)*, like Brownell (1990), Lewis & Reinsch (1988), and Sypher et al (1987), state “a growing body of research suggests that listening ability, or the perception of effective listening, is inextricably linked to effective individual performance in organizations” (p. 124). In order to study the importance of listening in the workplace, they further build on Brownell’s (1990) study by exploring listening attributes in organization members’ judgments of communication competence (Haas & Arnold, 1995, p. 124). The purpose of Haas’ & Arnold’s (1995) study is “to identify the listening-related factors employed in conceptions of communicator competence in the workplace; Second, this study investigates how listening-related factors in judgments of communication competence vary across contexts” (p. 128). In the study, 48 employees, both managers and non-managers, of a daily newspaper located in a Southern city, took part in a card sorting task and questionnaire (Haas & Arnold, 1995, p. 128-129).

Results from Haas’ & Arnold’s (1995) study indicate “listening is one of the most important factors in judgments of communicator competence in coworkers” (p. 134). Further, managers and non-managers did not differ significantly in their number of listening attributes across situations, which seems to disagree with earlier studies, like that of Brownell’s (1990), which reported supervisors report their behaviors differently than their subordinates (Haas & Arnold, 1995, p. 134). However, Haas & Arnold (1995) suggest “whether or not individuals are perceived as acting on the listening attributes that are considered a part of communication competence, the managers and non-managers of

this organization share a common view on the role of listening in competence judgments across contexts” (p. 135). Overall, the study gives researchers, consultants and trainers insight as to how listening practices are actually used by employees and how they can be incorporated to make judgments of others in the workplace.

*Cooper (1997)* agrees with the importance of listening in the workplace and the idea that training can improve productivity, as well as with the lack of research on listening, specifically to understand listening competency in organizations (p. 75-76). Cooley & Roach (1984), in Cooper (1997), define competency as “the successful adaptation to situations and the achievement of intended or desirable results through communication” (p. 78). The goal of Cooper’s (1997) study is to develop a model as the basis for improving workplace listening and formal training programs, as well as how to help individual workers develop their own listening skills. This study spanned 10 years and surveys were distributed to employees who were attending communication training workshops. The Managerial Listening Survey and Organizational Listening Survey were given to managers and employees respectively. Later a follow-up study was performed before participants finished the communication training (Cooper, 1997, p. 78). All participants received feedback in a listening profile in order to compare their own listening behaviors with perceptions of their co-workers (Cooper, 1997, p. 78).

Results from Cooper’s (1997) study helped to create a two-factor model of competency; “the first factor deals with the perception that the worker has accurately received and comprehended messages; the second focuses on other-centered behavior that demonstrates support for the relationship with the worker (p. 78-79). This study implies “The Managerial Listening Survey offers an easy-to-administer, reliable measure

of listening and provides a way to tailor staff training according to the needs of individuals and organizations” (p. 80). It suggests training needs to be specific to the organization and context, similar to findings by Lewis & Reinsch, Jr. (1988).

### Implications for the Workplace and Dealing with Difficult People

All seven of these studies, reviewed for the importance of listening skills, have implications for the workplace. Whether the studies investigated students, businessmen, managers from *Fortune 500* companies, employees from the bank or medical fields, all levels from a large insurance company headquarters, workers from a daily newspaper or managers and subordinates in the hospitality business; time spent on listening, the significance of listening in the organizational setting, listening as it relates to other social cognitive and communicative abilities, the way managers are perceived by their subordinates as effective or ineffective listeners, the role of listening in organization members’ judgments of communication competence, or listening competency in the workplace, all suggested there needed to be more study spent on the topic of listening and more training needed in the workplace. Specifically, training was explored further to determine how leaders and managers within their organizations can improve upon their listening skills and model this behavior for other employees. However, these training techniques can be effective for anyone within an organization or workplace, and may help anyone when dealing with conflict or difficult people.

*Knippen & Green (1994)* propose the technique of *active listening* in order to improve one’s listening skills, which includes four active listening techniques: restating or paraphrasing a message, summarizing the main issues of a conversation, acknowledging and verbalizing non-verbal messages, and responding to feelings that may be expressed (p. 357). In order to do this, the following five-step process must be

followed: “1. Determine when to use active listening, 2. Select the appropriate listening technique, 3. Use the technique selected, 4. Evaluate the communicator’s response, and 5. Take the appropriate action” (p. 359). Similarly, *Hoppe (2007)* suggests active listening, as a six-step process: “Active listening involves six skills: paying attention, holding judgment, reflecting, clarifying, summarizing, and sharing” (p. 11-12). Regardless of the amount of steps or labeling of the skills or techniques needed for active listening, all authors agree on its importance in the workplace: “At its most engaging and effective, active listening is the norm for conversation, and everyone involved is a full participant. At this level it involves bringing about and finding common ground, connecting to each other and being open to new possibilities...Active listening is not an optional component of leadership...it is a critical component of the tasks facing today’s leaders” (*Hoppe, 2007, p. 11, 14*). Likewise, *Eskaros (2004)* suggests the technique of *empathic listening* as a form of active listening: “Active listening is one of the most important tools a leader can apply. It facilitates greater understanding of situations, challenges and, most importantly, of the people who do the work” (p. 85).

*Simonsen & Klisch (2001)* recommend a technique, which involves listening skills, but is specific to dealing with conflict and difficult people; the *CLASS* technique, which includes the steps: communicate, listen, adjust, solve, equals success (p. 77). Similar to the techniques used with active or empathic listening, *CLASS* involves communicating with common terminology, listening carefully to what the communicator is saying, adjusting attitude to focus on the issue and not the person, solving the situation by finding areas of agreement and clarifying differences, and success, which will result from following all of these steps (*Simonsen & Klisch, 2001, p. 78-79*). The concept of

CLASS is that it is an easy technique to remember, since it is so difficult to step back, remain positive and be objective in the face of conflict or dealing with difficult people. Simonsen & Klisch (2001) state “Today’s world is fraught with conflict – in our work and in our personal lives; in our immediate community; and on a global basis; Therefore, it is essential that we learn how to deal with conflict situations so that they will not escalate and become something unmanageable” (p. 77).

*Benoit & Lee (1988)* suggest the *Stop, Slow, and Go* technique, which is for business educators to use “as an innovative method for teaching the required awareness and practice in listening” (p. 231). Compared to a traffic light, the red light indicates stop in order to first indicate any barriers that could interfere with the listening process, the yellow light acts as a warning in order to slow down and take caution for feelings and other hidden meanings, while the green light is for go ahead to actively listen (Benoit & Lee, 1988, p. 231). This technique again includes active listening skills and may also be a great one to remember when in situations with difficult people. Specifically, in the work place “ability to listen well is a basic strength of good employees and employers; inability or failure to listen is a problem for either group” (Benoit & Lee, 1988, p. 230).

Finally, *Shannon & Isenhour (2004)* describe a different kind of technique for improving listening skills and overcoming conflict situations; the *Source Mediation* model of the *Energy Audit* (p. 14). “The Source Mediation model explains that we all manifest our energy in three major areas: 1) our emotions, 2) our actions, and 3) our creativity; for most people, that energy gravitates more to one of these areas than to others, but all three components are always present and available” (Shannon & Isenhour, 2004, p. 14). With this model, one can then determine where their energy is focused and

go from there. The Energy Audit is the tool developed to assess where one is and then learn ways to move the energy around for the desired outcome (Shannon & Isenhour, 2004, p. 14). Shannon & Isenhour (2004) state “In the case of conflict, balance occurs by moving the energy, and when one’s energy is balanced, they can relate from their “source” or higher self; It is from this place that resolutions and understandings occur” (p. 14).

In a recent interview, conductor Roger Nierenberg stated “Organizations work well when people listen to each other. If you have a meeting, you want people to walk out of the meeting with some assurance that everybody has the same idea about what was decided, what went on, and what the organization’s attitude toward it is. The way a leader leads discussions is significant. Not only can she model excellent leading, but she can look after the listening of other people” (Whitehorne, 2010, p. 37). All of the techniques reviewed for enhancing one’s listening skills, active or empathic listening; CLASS; Stop, Slow, and Go; or the Source Mediation Energy Audit, may be used for leaders of large organizations, managers and subordinates in all types of workplaces. Dealing with conflict situations and difficult people is everywhere in the workplace and should be expected. Research has shown there is a strong need for further research and training in this area. If more training were available to employees in their workplaces, it would help them to build the necessary skills to improve their listening and to enhance their communication overall. Perhaps then they would be much better equipped to deal with those bosses, coworkers or subordinates who seem hard to get along with, step on their toes to get to the top, interrupt them, or more simply, just don’t appear to listen.



## RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

A research case study was completed to identify the importance of the leadership skill, effective listening, in supervisors and supervised employees at the University of Southern Maine (USM), and to evaluate its implications in the workplace, specifically when dealing with difficult people and everyday interactions. According to Leedy & Ormrod (2010), a case study is performed when “a particular individual, program, or event is studied in depth for a defined period of time” and “may be especially suitable for learning more about a little known or poorly understood situation” (p. 137). Data was collected using a survey tool to gather both qualitative and quantitative information from supervisors and supervised employees at USM. The details of the survey are described below. Leedy & Ormrod (2010) state “survey research involves acquiring information about one or more groups of people – perhaps about their characteristics, opinions, attitudes, or previous experiences – by asking them questions and tabulating their answers; the ultimate goal is to learn about a large population by surveying a sample of that population” (p. 187). Further, “survey research captures a fleeting moment in time...by drawing conclusions from one transitory collection of data, we may extrapolate about the state of affairs over a longer period of time” (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010, p. 187). The purpose of this research was exploratory and is intended to add to the body of research and literature on the importance of effective listening and dealing with difficult people in the workplace, specifically, at USM.

### Population

Employees at USM were contacted to complete the survey tool. According to the Information Reporting - Human Resources, a department within the Division of

Information and Technology at USM, Public Information & Statistics webpage, there are currently, as of the start of this research, a total of 1870 employees at USM. The breakdown of employees by campus includes: 72 Augusta, 529 Gorham, 92 Lewiston-Auburn, and 1177 Portland. The USM-L email listserv, which was used to contact USM employees, included 852 subscribed users.

### Data Collection and Instrumentation

#### *The Survey.*

Survey questions were fully developed based on the literature review conducted. The general subject matter of the survey tool included listening experiences with perceived difficult people, training regarding communication and effective listening, the importance of training for the leadership skill of effective listening for both supervisors and supervised employees, and if training would affect one's experience in the workplace. The survey tool was developed so it could be taken comfortably in a short period of time, about 15-20 minutes.

The survey tool was sent electronically to USM employees using the USM-L, a self-subscribed email listserv used by both employees and students, requested for internal use by the researcher, in adherence with the guidelines, in conjunction with the "Appropriate/Inappropriate E-mail Request Uses" by USM's Information Reporting – Human Resources department. Employees were provided with information on how to access the survey which was housed on a secure online survey platform. The decision to use a web-based survey tool was for ease of use for the survey respondent as well as the researcher and due to its minimal expense. Because USM employees have access to the

Internet and are adept at using online forms, the web-based survey technology seemed most appropriate for obtaining a favorable response rate from participants.

#### *Survey Consent and Questions.*

A copy of the survey instrument can be seen in Appendix A of this document. Surveys informed study participants of: the nature of the study; the duration of the study; a statement indicating participation in the survey is voluntary; a guarantee that all responses will remain anonymous; name and contact information of researcher; name and contact information of the University of Southern Maine's Office of Research Compliance, should participants have any questions or concerns about the study; and an offer to provide a summary of survey results upon participant request.

Questions for the survey tool were developed to fall under the following general categories:

1. Effective listening skills: definitions, qualities, experiences, perceptions of coworkers, the role of leadership
2. Difficult people: definitions, qualities, experiences, perceptions of coworkers, the role of leadership
3. Formal and/or informal training: attended or not, content, importance and value for leadership and general work performance

#### Data Analysis

The survey tool was developed and accessed through SurveyMonkey, an online survey platform that allows researchers to develop, collect, and analyze surveys. Surveys were coded using IBM SPSS Statistics 19, a statistical analysis and data management software. Responses were summarized and reported in the form of percentages,

frequencies, cross tabulations and other descriptive statistics. Open-ended questions were developed to gain more in-depth and richer understanding of the quantitative information gathered. The responses to those questions were pulled from the text, coded for key effective listening, difficult people and leadership attributes to determine the emergence of themes, and reported.

### Confidentiality

Strict measures were taken to protect anonymity of all study participants and confidentiality of all data. Surveys contained a complete explanation of the purpose of the study and that responses will not be directly linked to the individuals responding to the questions. No identifying information was collected in this survey: names, contact information, or Internet Protocol (IP) addresses. Electronic documentation was secured in a computer with a password protected account. An application was submitted for assessment and approval of all survey procedures by the University of Southern Maine's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Participants were given the contact information of a representative of the IRB in the event they had questions about their rights as human subjects in the study.

## RESEARCH PROJECT TIMELINE

The project was conducted over an eight-month period and is described as follows:

*January-March 2011:* Researcher drafted and finalized the research proposal, accompanying letter of consent and survey tool, and submitted for IRB approval.

*March-April 2011:* Researcher modified research proposal and materials according to IRB instruction, requested permission from USM for use of USM-L (listserv) for survey distribution, and designed the web based survey in SurveyMonkey.

*April-May 2011:* Researcher distributed survey through USM-L and collected data from SurveyMonkey.

*May-July 2011:* Researcher conducted the data analysis of the survey in SPSS and revisited the literature review for any new findings in the field.

*July-August 2011:* Researcher drafted and finalized thesis paper with comments from advisor/readers.

## ANALYSIS

Electronic surveys were sent to 852 USM employees via the USM-L self-subscribed listserv. Of the 852 employees, 244 completed the survey for a response rate of 28.64%. (This is 13% of the total USM population at the time of this survey.) Of the 244 respondents, two answered they were not employees at USM, thus disqualifying them from further participating in the study. It was required that respondents be employees at USM in order to complete the survey and participate in the study. Analysis of the data is based on the 242 employee respondents. It is possible there is a bias in the responses of the employees; those who responded to the survey most likely had a stronger interest in the subject matter of effective listening skills, than those who did not choose to participate. A profile of the employee respondent population is summarized below.

### Profile of Employee Respondent Population

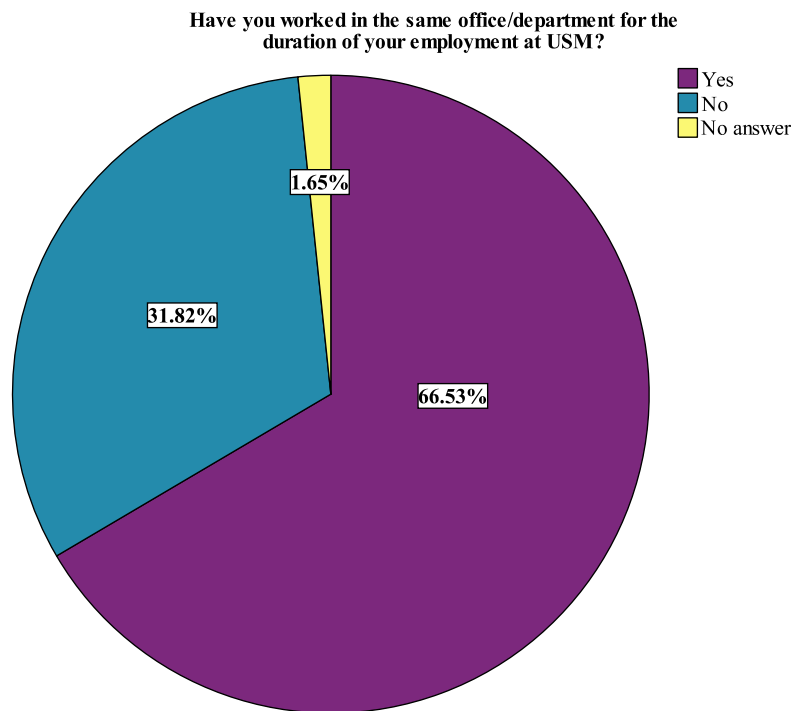
| <b>Role</b>                  | <b>Frequency</b> | <b>Percent</b> |
|------------------------------|------------------|----------------|
| Supervised Employee          | 122              | 50.4           |
| Both Supervisor and Employee | 94               | 38.8           |
| Supervisor                   | 19               | 7.9            |
| No Answer                    | 7                | 2.9            |
| Total                        | 242              | 100            |

Most respondents identified themselves with the role of Supervised Employee. The role of Both Supervisor and Employee was the second most frequently identified role. Only 19 respondents claimed they were in a Supervisor role only. Combining respondent answers of Supervisor and Both Supervisor and Employee role (113 or 47%), or leadership role, versus respondent answers of Supervised Employee role (122 or 50%), or non-leadership role, there appears to be an almost 50/50 split between those in leadership and non-leadership roles, who responded to this survey.

The population of USM employees responding to the survey indicates they are mature professionals. Approximately 24% have 5-10 years of service, while nearly 50% have 10 or more years of service at USM, as seen in Table 2. In addition, approximately 67% have remained working in the same office/department for the duration of their employment at USM, as seen in Figure 1. This further shows acclimation of these professionals to their work environment.

| Table 2: Number of Years Employed by USM |           |         |
|--|-----------|---------|
| Years                                    | Frequency | Percent |
| 10 or more years                         | 119       | 49.2    |
| 5-10 years                               | 57        | 23.6    |
| Less than 5 years                        | 62        | 25.6    |
| No Answer                                | 4         | 1.7     |
| Total                                    | 242       | 100     |

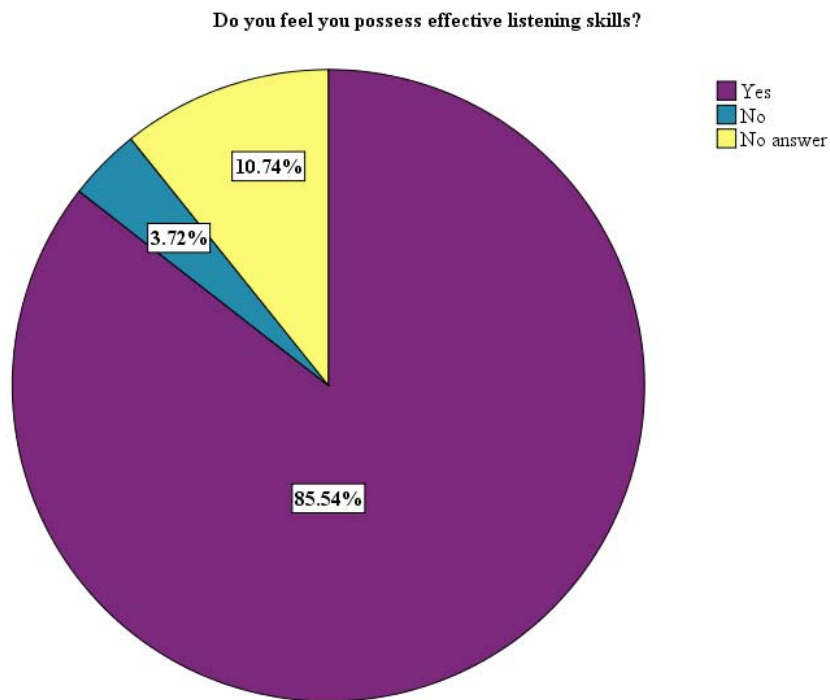
**Figure 1: Duration of Employment in Same Office/Department at USM**



## Effective Listening Skills

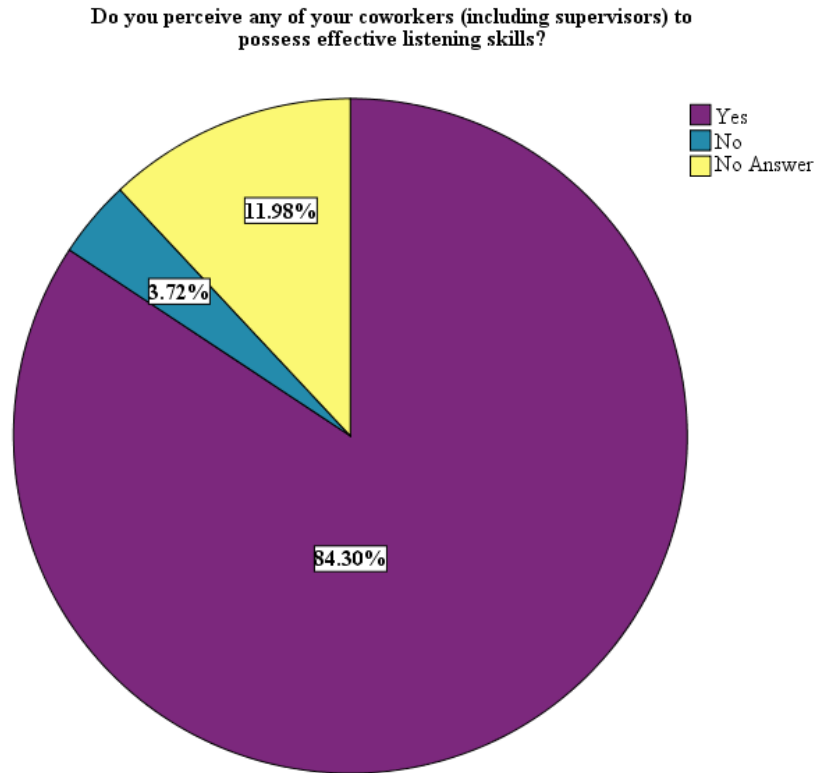
The first series of questions asked of survey respondents dealt with effective listening skills and the qualities attributed to effective listening for both the respondent and coworkers. Not surprisingly, the majority, nearly 86% of respondents, felt they possess effective listening skills. Further, approximately 84% also felt their coworkers possessed effective listening skills. The breakdown of these percentages can be seen in Figures 2 and 3.

**Figure 2: Effective Listening Skills of Respondents**





**Figure 3: Effective Listening Skills of Coworkers/Supervisors**



When asked to comment on these skills and what qualities respondents attributed to their effective listening, several themes emerged: *having patience, focusing attention on the speaker, making eye contact/noting body language, not interrupting, paraphrasing, asking questions to clarify, and being supportive/empathizing*. Most respondents noted many, if not all of these qualities in their individual responses. A selection of these themes from respondent answers is as follows.

- “Listen to the whole request or comment before responding. Try not to interrupt as soon as I think I understand. Repeat back to requestor my understanding of their request. Basically, patience and confirmation. Focus attention on the speaker, using eye contact when possible.”
- “Good eye contact, focus and concentration, asking for clarification, checking info by rewording it back to them, repeating info so I know I have it right, attention to the person, holding back personal info that isn’t necessary, not acting on personal reactions to person.”

- *“Active listening skills that provide validation and let the speaker know they are being heard. Eye contact, head nodding, relaxed posture, facial expression, and occasional positive word.”*
- *“Effective listening is achieved by being an active listener. I try to do this by being attentive, making eye contact, acknowledging what the person is saying (by either nodding, repeating some things that the person has said, or making supportive comments throughout the discussion). I also try not to interrupt the other person at all. Additionally, reflecting on what the person has said helps me to be an effective listener since this allows me to really absorb and process what they’re saying rather than simply reacting without fully understanding.”*
- *“I use the ACTIVE Listening Model: A-Ask questions, C-Concentrate on what is being said, T-Total up information, I-Identify nonverbal of the speaker, V-Verify what you hear, E-Empathize.”*

However, a few respondents stated they could improve on their effective listening skills and qualities:

- *“I pick up on a lot of what is spoken, and what is not; however I can still be too fast sometimes to form an impression and jump in before [the] other person finishes.”*
- *“I would like to improve my skills by not interrupting people.”*
- *“I tend to talk too much and listen too little. I find myself finishing people’s sentences in my head and having to restrain myself from finishing them out loud. I work really hard at listening to people but it does not come naturally. I am someone who works on communication, both effective listening and speaking. Many of my coworkers and supervisors do not communicate verbally at all, only through email. I find a lot of misunderstandings are caused by the lack of effective listening and communicating.”*

Similarly, when asked “what specific qualities do you attribute to your coworkers’ (including supervisors) effective listening,” respondents frequently stated “same as for response to question 6” or “same as above,” indicating coworkers and supervisors also employ the same qualities of effective listening as the respondents themselves. A selection of these same themes (*having patience, focusing attention on the speaker, making eye contact/noting body language, not interrupting, paraphrasing, asking*

questions to clarify, and being supportive/empathizing) from respondent answers is as follows.

- *“My employee is a very good listener, always attentive and focuses on the person speaking.”*
- *“Attention to me, good eye contact, asking questions for clarity, rewording things to get clarity, etc. like the above question.”*
- *“Eye contact, full attention, not interrupting, restating.”*
- *“My [supervisor] has excellent listening skills: she does not interrupt, she maintains eye contact, she may ask for examples, or give an example that supports what I’m saying; I feel heard and understood.”*
- *“Makes eye contact, isn’t working while I am speaking, reviews (out loud) what I said before responding, respond appropriately.”*

However, some respondents also stated their coworkers and/or supervisors had some work to do with regard to listening effectively and are lacking in these qualities:

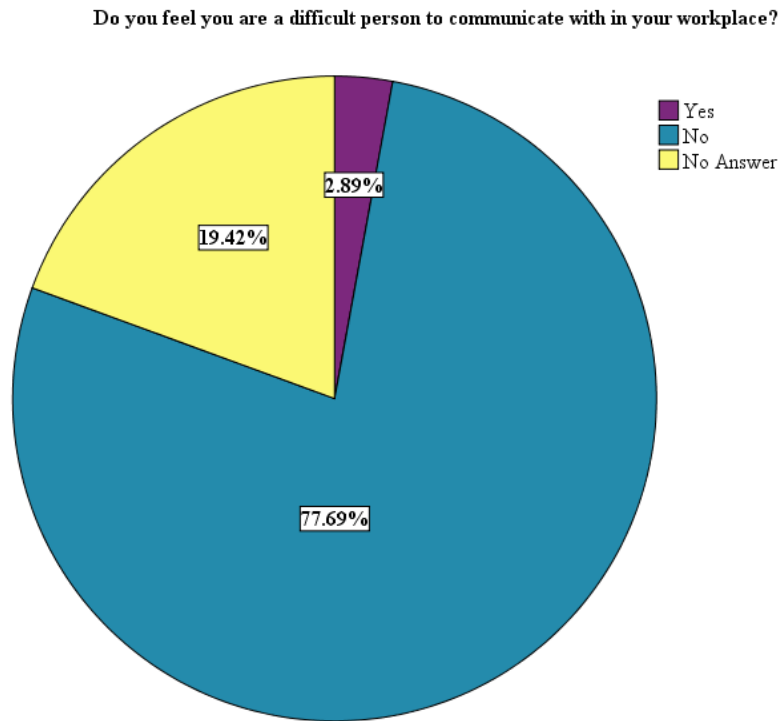
- *“I think the degree to which people have and employ effective listening skills varies widely. I have noticed a tendency among coworkers (even higher level managers) to fail at acknowledging e-mails and voicemails, perhaps not recognizing that these forms of communication require ‘listening skills’ that are similar to live verbal encounters. There are also some colleagues who infuse their own messages into the reflection part of listening and tend to use their opinions to deflect feedback from others about this habit. Lines of authority, actual and perceived, distort listening behaviors too, as sometimes it seems that the desired outcome of ‘being a good listener’ amounts to ‘seeing it my way’ ...”*
- *“My coworker doesn’t listen carefully or read emails all the way through. This sometimes results in giving wrong information to the customer.”*
- *“Most of my coworkers will hear what is requested but not follow through on the assignment. It’s very frustrating. I see LOTS of lack of communication/listening throughout the system.”*
- *“Some do while others don’t. Quite often the subject is all about them and not others. When someone is speaking, they’re quick to jump in and share what their experience was.”*

- *“Peers often are ready to give their input before you even finish what you are saying.”*

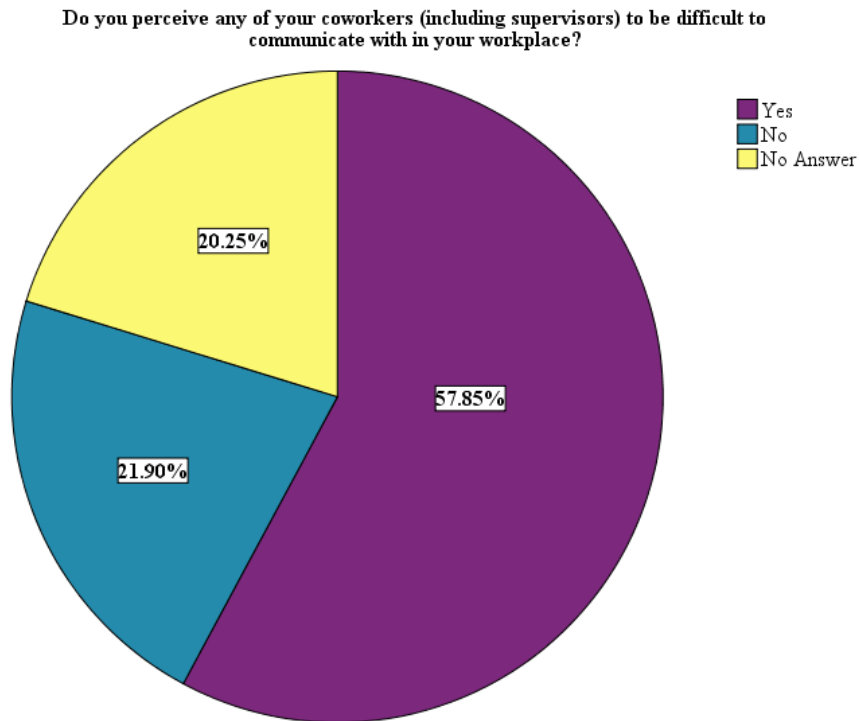
### Dealing with Difficult People

The next series of questions asked of survey respondents dealt with the notion of “being difficult” for both the respondent and coworkers with regard to communication, and what those qualities are that are associated with “being difficult.” As expected, the majority, nearly 78% of respondents, felt they are not a difficult person to communicate with in the workplace; however, approximately 57% did perceive their coworkers (including supervisors) to be difficult to communicate with. The breakdown of these percentages can be seen in Figures 4 and 5.

**Figure 4: Difficult to Communicate With Respondents**



**Figure 5: Difficult to Communicate With Coworkers/Supervisors**



Respondents were asked “Why or Why Not?” in response to both of these questions. Of the nearly 78% of respondents who felt they are not a difficult person to communicate with in the workplace, responses of why not included themes of: *willingness to listen, having an open-door policy/being available, and being approachable/easygoing*. A selection of responses for these themes is as follows:

**Willingness to Listen**

- “*I try to listen and ask questions when I do not understand something.*”
- “*I speak up when appropriate and listen to constructive criticism.*”
- “*I listen without interrupting or trying to guess what the person is going to say next.*”
- “*Because I make a conscious effort to actively listen I find I am more effective in communication than I would be otherwise...*”

- *“I will listen to anybody that comes along; this is how you find out what is going on around you and the USM community. It helps me be an effective employee when questions come up.”*

### **Having an Open-Door Policy/Being Available**

- *“Open door, generally positive, willing to assist others, caring and will get up and help if needed.”*
- *“I have an open-door policy and promote conversation to understand.”*
- *“I maintain an ‘open door’ policy and everyone knows they can come to me with any problem or situation.”*
- *“I try to make myself available and open to conversation as [much as] possible. Offering the opportunity to talk if the other person wants to, but not requiring them to.”*
- *“I try to make myself available to people, be open to conversations and feedback.”*

### **Being Approachable/Easygoing**

- *“I’m approachable and open to listening to what my coworkers have to say.”*
- *“I try to be open and as approachable as possible!”*
- *“I am open to being approached by others who want to speak, and people do ask, so I think I’m perceived as OK in that department.”*
- *“I am friendly and approachable, and extremely willing to help, pitch in and function as a productive team member.”*
- *“Easygoing attitude. Like to interact with people, both supervisors and supervisees, and coworkers.”*

Of the approximately 57% of respondents who did perceive their coworkers (including supervisors) to be difficult to communicate with, responses of why included themes of: *having hidden agendas/power struggles, having only one point of view, interrupting/distracted behavior, and not listening or communicating well.* A selection of responses for these themes is as follows:

### **Having Hidden Agendas/Power Struggles**

- *“Some people tend to have an agenda that precludes they’re really hearing what I’m saying. An inflexible agenda means they’re listening just enough to hear how they can combat what I’m saying, rather than hear it regardless.”*
- *“Work in a large unit, various types of individuals with different agendas.”*
- *“Oftentimes coworkers CAN come into a conversation with an agenda and a desire to make themselves heard, rather than listen.”*
- *“One person is defensive and ‘all knowing’ and is on a power trip which makes other colleagues not want to work with this person.”*

### **Having Only One Point of View**

- *“There is one coworker (who I do not have to work with directly) who ALWAYS thinks she is right. She won’t even hear others ideas or cuts them off before they finish to tell them why their idea is stupid.”*
- *“My coworker at times is stubborn about ways to do things and doesn’t really listen to what the other person is trying to explain.”*
- *“They are too self-absorbed, and cannot hear any voice but their own...”*
- *“Some are so trapped in their narrow views of the world that they have a hard time hearing anything that might shake those realities.”*
- *“They tend to look for confirmation of their own views. Therefore, if what I say comes close to their own view, they immediately assume it is the same thing. If it is very different from their own opinion, they immediately argue with my point, sometimes getting defensive. This is true of supervisors and subordinates in some cases.”*

### **Interrupting/Distracted Behavior**

- *“Some people interrupt and do not listen. It’s like their mind is a train on a track and you cannot derail it.”*
- *“Many times they interrupt, it can feel more like interrogation than a conversation and they seem to be thinking of other things rather than listening to the person they are talking with.”*
- *“Obsessed with their technology while trying to communicate either phone or computer. Seem to be distracted. Interrupt while trying to talk.”*

- *“One of my biggest challenges is when anyone, especially supervisors or managers, are more interested in their cell phones, SmartPhone devices, etc. even when they are having a conversation with someone. When a manager or supervisor spends time checking email, texts (during a staff meeting), it seems to be pretty obvious that they are not interesting in what is happening in the meeting or even listening to whomever is speaking.”*
- *“I feel that many administrators are so distracted that they truly do not process what is being said.”*

### **Not Listening or Communicating Well**

- *“Because they do not actually listen to what you are saying, they assume they know what you are going to say.”*
- *“I think some people just don’t communicate clearly. They either say too much or not enough!”*
- *“I have two coworkers that have horrible communication skills.”*
- *“They do not possess good communication skills, no matter how I try to emulate good communication skills and good behaviors; they do not pick up on it.”*
- *“Sometimes communication with supervisors or coworkers seems limited to finding out who to blame rather than finding an effective solution. When that is the only type of communication that is engaged in, people tend to communicate less if it is only going to be another confrontation.”*

When respondents were asked what qualities they associate in general with “being difficult,” similar themes emerged: *not having an open-door policy/not being available, not being easygoing/not approachable, having own agendas, interrupting/distracted behavior, and not listening or communicating well.* A selection of responses for these themes is as follows:

### **Not Having an Open-Door Policy/Not Being Available**

- *“Close-minded, closed door, doesn’t initiate communication, avoids confrontation or difficult subjects.”*
- *“Closed doors, not present, do not reply to questions/emails, provides reason why what you are suggesting can’t be done or can’t happen instead of simply*



*listening to thoughts and suggestions.”*

- *“Difficult to contact, not responsive (especially to email)...”*
- *“Not returning calls or emails. Incomplete or vague answers to questions.”*
- *“Not available, doesn’t genuinely listen to me or my input...”*

### **Not Being Easygoing/Not Approachable**

- *“Bad attitude, not listening, not doing your job or what you are asked to do.”*
- *“Unpleasantness, gloominess, micro managerial.”*
- *“Unpleasant attitude, negative responses, abrasive personality, unwilling to entertain other points of view.”*
- *“Cranky, uncommunicative, brusque and unsympathetic.”*
- *“Combativeness, pettiness, passive aggressive behavior, making unreasonable requests.”*

### **Having Own Agendas**

- *“Someone who seems to have their own agenda, their needs are their only concern. They are typically poor to listen unless they can find something to use against you.”*
- *“I think anytime someone has an agenda of their own and they aren’t really interested in listening to you anyway or when someone feels so far above you that they really don’t want to have anything to do with you unless they are asking you to do something.”*
- *“Inability to determine unit priorities as opposed to individual agendas.”*
- *“Not listening carefully, having an ‘agenda,’ being close-minded.”*
- *“Always in a hurry, has their own agenda, misunderstands what I am saying.”*

### **Interrupting/Distracting Behavior**

- *“I find those who interrupt or are closed off to having a conversation are very difficult to handle when striving for effective communication.”*

- *“Letting one’s mind wander, interrupting, not letting the other person finish their thought.”*
- *“Interrupting when someone is speaking; making a comment that has nothing to do with what is being discussed.”*
- *“Being rude. Interrupting conversation. Not making eye contact when speaking with someone. Doing another task and not paying attention to the conversation.”*
- *“Interrupting, being distracted by other people or electronic devices, and not giving full attention and eye contact to the person with whom they are speaking.”*

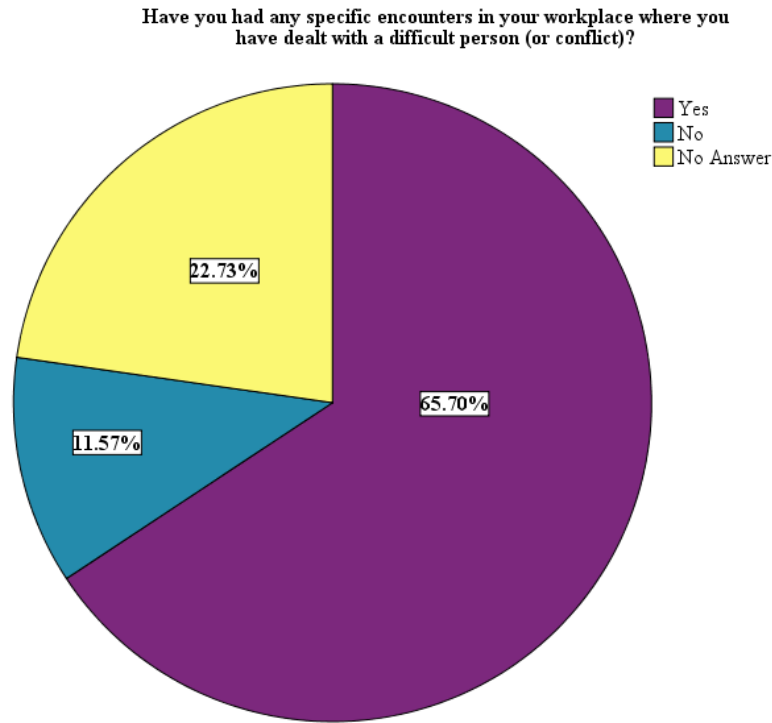
### **Not Listening or Communicating Well**

- *“Not listening, having a stern expression, responding inappropriately to what is being said.”*
- *“Not truly listening or ignoring you when speaking. Not paying attention to what you have to say.”*
- *“Not listening, talking when you’re talking, dismissing whatever one says that doesn’t agree with them.”*
- *“Tone of voice, type of words used when communicating – hostile, not willing to listen to any other opinion other than their own.”*
- *“Putting one’s opinion out there first as a way to communicate. Or not adjusting one’s perception to new information. Also just being upset by the whole process of communicating.”*

### Specific Encounters of Dealing with Difficult People in the Workplace

The next few questions asked of respondents dealt with specific encounters in the workplace where they had to deal with a difficult person (or conflict). Approximately 66% stated they had indeed experienced specific encounters with those they deemed “difficult.” The breakdown of the percentages to this question can be seen in Figure 6.

**Figure 6: Specific Encounters of Dealing with Difficult People**



Respondents were given the option for additional comments to this question. For the small percentage of respondents who answered no, they had not had any specific encounters with a difficult person (or conflict), only three comments were given:

- *“No conflict just the feeling of not really being heard.”*
- *“Not so much here at USM (thankfully).”*
- *“Not in workplace here on USM campus. Have had such encounters with external clients and colleagues.”*

For the larger percent of respondents who answered yes, they did have specific encounters with a difficult person (or conflict), several additional comments were given. A selection of those comments is as follows and range from simply involving people with bad attitudes and those who ignore bad behaviors to those more serious involving one’s health being at risk and the police:

- *“Yes, people with bad attitude.”*
- *“From time to time people flare up....we have a system for managing these situations. Generally I try to be calm and reasonable in working with people who are mad, angry, etc.”*
- *“I experienced a supervisor who (I now know, but didn't understand then) was threatened by the high level of my leadership skills and knowledge level of the job...I was not only NOT listened to, I was bullied, and put down until the situation became untenable. I learned much from that situation.”*
- *“It was most difficult for me as I kept the difficulty to myself although it was health threatening.”*
- *“Our department has had difficulties to the point of involving the police.”*

When respondents were asked to describe their listening experience in their encounters with a difficult person (supervisor, coworker, or supervised employee), two different types of responses emerged: *dealing with the situation positively, or with success* and *having difficulty dealing with the situation, or without success*. A selection of responses for these two themes is as follows:

### **Dealing with the Situation Positively, or With Success**

- *“Focused on coming to a common place of understanding of what we both needed from the situation.”*
- *“I did my best to hear what the person was saying, repeated back to them what I believe I hear and asked if I was correct. They said yes, and I proceed to try to solve their problem.”*
- *“As a supervisor, I am conscious of my body language and the level and inflection of my voice, same with my own supervisor, I ask open questions and allow time for others to answer.”*
- *“I needed to actively listen and reflect what I heard to help unpack the multiple issues and perspectives at play in the situation and work the parties towards [a] common goal.”*
- *“One of my colleagues taught me to say ‘what would you like to see happen?’ when I feel especially afraid and then engage in listening to the answer. Sometimes this actually shuts the conflict conversation down, as the other*

*person has not even thought about what could happen next and they wonder to themselves why. Another technique this same person taught me is to name and own my feelings, which is very hard for me to do but sometimes easier in writing. Finally, I was taught to explicitly state what I will do as a result and what the others are expected to do, in simple, clean language. These tools help in those situations.”*

### **Having Difficulty Dealing with the Situation, or Without Success**

- *“I made every attempt, as the person was my superior, to listen to each admonition to learn what the person’s discontent was about. It was coming from that person directly; however I could not understand the hatred that was evident.”*
- *“Feeling undermined and ‘run over.’ Also feeling that there was little support from that person’s supervisor to ameliorate the situation.”*
- *“In the first circumstance, listening didn’t help. In the second, it was not my place to be listening. In the third, I tried to empathize, and then offer alternate views, but eventually learned to extricate myself because the complaining never ended and had no positive resolution.”*
- *“Sometimes it’s difficult to hear the other person’s perspective if you feel like that person is attacking you.”*
- *“I felt like I was being attacked and backed into a corner, so I don’t think I handled the situation very well. I try not to take things personally, but this particular situation felt very personal so it made me feel defensive and vulnerable.”*

When respondents were asked to describe the listening of the difficult person (supervisor, coworker, or supervised employee), mostly the theme of *having difficulty dealing with the situation, or without success* emerged, most likely because the respondent is already deeming this person to be difficult to deal with. A selection of responses is as follows:

### **Having Difficulty Dealing with the Situation, or Without Success**

- *“They did not listen, did not want to listen. Had an angry message to deliver. Of course they had incomplete information so message being delivered was somewhat inaccurate and off the target because of lack of complete*

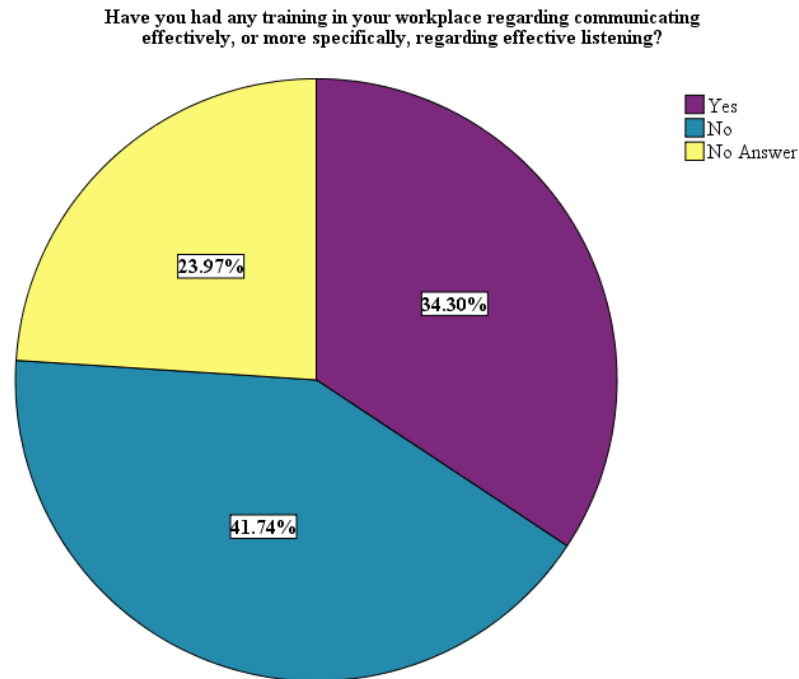
information.”

- *“The superior did not listen, did not hear one word no matter what – talked over me, talked around me, talked down to me at public meetings – it was all very embarrassing and difficult.”*
- *“There was a wall built by the supervisor...and I was not listened to in any meaningful way...I was ‘told’ but not listened to. But in a situation where a subordinate is not able to communicate with a superior, there is an unequal power and control dynamic, and the subordinate will usually be shut out and shut down because the superior has all the power.”*
- *“They took it seriously when they had to go to mediation and the problem was solved. No more issues since then. My point is that I had to push for this to happen because many supervisors are super workers and while they did great work on projects, and were promoted for that – they lack leadership and supervisory skills and time also.”*
- *“In one ear and out the other, but I have seen this USM-wide and this concerns me.”*

### Training in the Workplace

The last set of questions asked respondents if they had any training in the workplace regarding communicating effectively, or more specifically, regarding effective listening; if they thought training on this topic is important specifically for supervisors and also for supervised employees; as well as if more training on this topic would be helpful to them deal with difficult people in their workplace. Approximately 34% stated they had indeed had training in the workplace, while 42 % stated they had not. The breakdown of the percentages to this question can be seen in Figure 7.

**Figure 7: Training in the Workplace**



Respondents were given the opportunity for additional comments to this question, as well as to indicate any specific techniques they may have learned through their training. For the 42% who stated no, they did not have any training in the workplace regarding effective communication, there were five respondents who added they've had training through their formal education in social work/counseling or previous employer:

- *"I am a trained counselor, so have had training."*
- *"No training at USM. Formal education as a social worker."*
- *"None at USM. Took a graduate school class in counseling."*
- *"Not in this workplace, although previous employers spent extensive time on leadership, teambuilding, communication and other workplace skills."*
- *"Not at USM."*

Of the 34% who said yes, they did have training in the workplace regarding effective communication, additional comments included themes of: *specific techniques,*

*specific workshops /programs, and training through previous employers (not USM). A selection of responses for these themes is as follows:*

### **Specific Techniques**

- *“To listen carefully to the full rationale being described.”*
- *“Active listening; asking questions; giving positive feedback when appropriate, begin with positive comments.”*
- *“Learning about the Ladder of Influence and how people can jump to conclusions and make assumptions that end up working against them.”*

### **Specific Workshops/Programs**

- *“I attended the Supervisor Training Institute at USM...much information about listening and effective communication. However, previous to that, I paid out of my own pocket for an institute about communicating with difficult people.”*
- *“I have taken CCE’s [Center for Continuing Education’s] non-credit certificate program in Communication. Throughout this program we have covered how to build effective and active listening skills.”*
- *“My favorite has to be the QTIP (Quit Taking it Personal.)”*
- *“Workshop on Rankism.”*
- *“Crucial Conversations, effective communication trainings.”*
- *“At a classified staff breakfast, there was a workshop on dealing with difficult people.”*
- *“We used the Action Learning Center for team building.”*
- *“‘The Essentials of Managing the Front Desk’ class taken several years ago with my co-workers in my department.”*
- *“I like the book Difficult Conversations – How to Discuss What Matters Most.”*

### **Training Through Previous Employers (Not USM)**

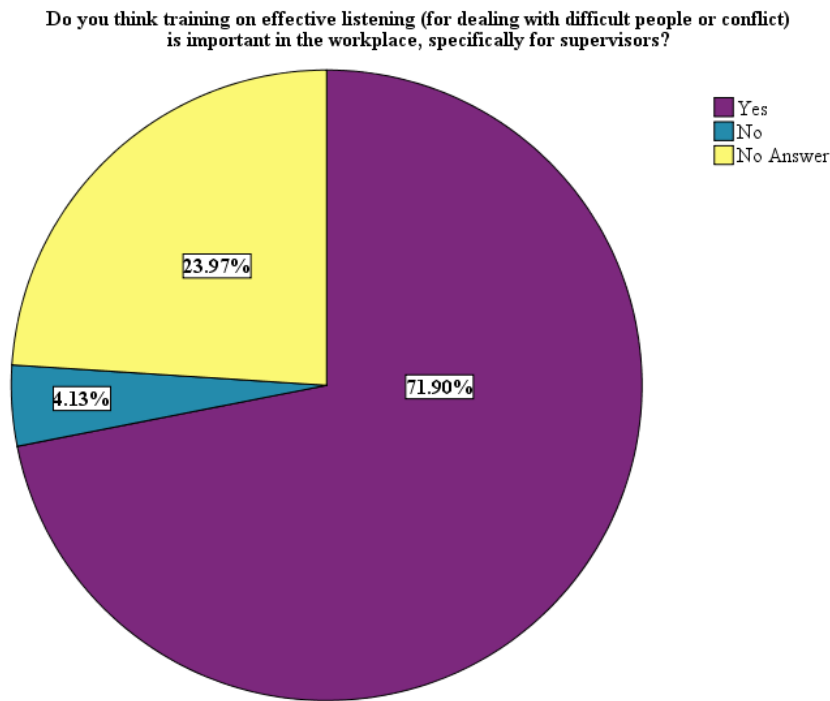
- *“Not here, but in previous workplaces.”*



- “Years ago, worked as a crisis hotline attendant.”
- “I received training at other academic institutions. I have not received any professional development training at USM.”

When asked if respondents thought training on effective listening (for dealing with difficult people or conflict) is important in the workplace, specifically for supervisors, approximately 72% agreed training on this topic was specifically important for supervisors, while only 4% disagreed. The breakdown of the percentages to this question can be seen in Figure 8.

**Figure 8: Importance of Training for Supervisors**



Respondents were given the option for additional comments to this question. For the approximately 72% of respondents who answered yes, they do think training on effective listening (for dealing with difficult people or conflict) is important in the workplace, specifically for supervisors, most suggested it was *important for communication and leadership for supervisors*, while others suggested it was *important*

*for communication for ALL employees. A selection of comments for these themes is as follows:*

### **Important for Communication/Leadership for Supervisors**

- *“In order to be effective, a supervisor must first listen, hear, and understand.”*
- *“One cause of discontent in the workplace is poor communication. If supervisors do not have good listening skills, communication with employees is impaired, and the relationship between supervisors and employees suffers.”*
- *“It should be a requirement of those who supervise or are in leadership positions in any organization.”*
- *“Supervisors cannot effectively lead people if communication lines are not open.”*
- *“An effective listener is an effective leader. An informed supervisor becomes a better leader, and supervised employees will be more effective in the performance of their day to day activities; Thus helping the USM community [to] run smoothly.”*

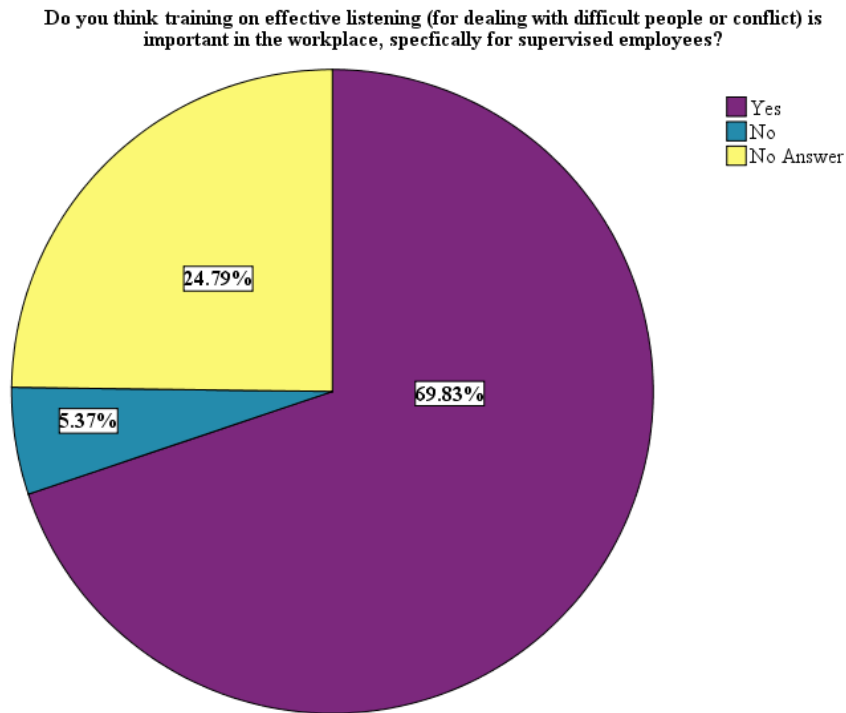
### **Important for Communication for ALL Employees**

- *“HIGHLY recommended that every office person should attend a listening tech session and feel it should be MANDATORY for each Supervisor/Director. It could help with communication between co-workers; advisors and throughout the system of each department. It could open up workers’ eyes to solve conflict or issues.”*
- *“We do not prepare our employees for being supervisors – they may not even possess the skills needed. That impacts on employees being reviewed on performance.”*
- *“I believe this training is important for everyone to take – communication is an ongoing give and take process. We all can improve or review ways to listen better.”*
- *“I think it is crucial for everyone at every level. Lack of communication or poor communication is linked to lack of effective listening and is what leads to challenges, low morale, decreased productivity, all of which could be avoided if people had better communication skills.”*
- *“People are not always conscious of their strengths and weaknesses in communication. In a community of higher education it is imperative that*

*faculty, staff and administrators be trained in effective communication techniques as we are all required to interact with students, parents, colleagues, the general public, interest groups and others. Communication must be a strength and not a weakness in an academic environment.”*

When asked if respondents thought training on effective listening (for dealing with difficult people or conflict) is important in the workplace, specifically for supervised employees, results were similar to the previous question. Nearly 70% agreed training on this topic was specifically important for supervised employees, while approximately 5% disagreed. The breakdown of the percentages to this question can be seen in Figure 9.

**Figure 9: Importance of Training for Supervised Employees**



Respondents were also given the option for additional comments to this question. For the nearly 70% of respondents who answered yes, they do think training on effective listening (for dealing with difficult people or conflict) is important in the workplace, specifically for supervised employees, most suggested it was *important for communication specifically for supervised employees*, while others suggested it was

*important for communication for ALL employees. A selection of comments for these themes is as follows:*

### **Important for Communication Specifically for Supervised Employees**

- *“Yes, more so than supervisors – supervisors typically have at least some training or experience to be a supervisor.”*
- *“Yes, it is critical for employees to learn these skills before they ever become supervisors. It will also help reduce conflicts between coworkers and better equip employees to work with their supervisors.”*
- *“Absolutely...many employees are on the front line and trying to deal with difficult individuals on a regular basis. They need as much training as anyone on how to turn a potentially difficult situation around...being aware of some different cues that might either escalate or subdue the situation.”*
- *“A supervised employee that listens well is like a machine that is well maintained, you never have to worry about the performance when you need to call upon their services.”*
- *“Supervised employees should be aware of the importance of listening effectively in a difficult situation or conflict, in order to respond appropriately.”*

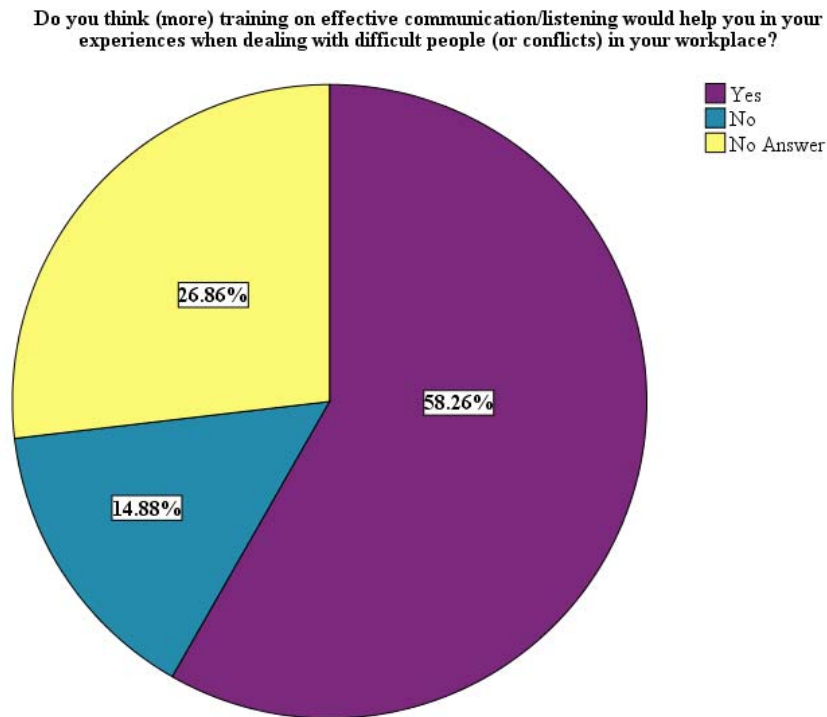
### **Important for Communication for ALL Employees**

- *“Good communication between supervisors and employees requires effective listening skills on the part of both.”*
- *“I think listening skills are important for everyone no matter what their job and whether they are supervisor or supervisee.”*
- *“Everyone, regardless of their position in a company, could benefit from learning better communication and listening skills...”*
- *“I think listening training is important for EVERYONE, not just one specific level or group.”*
- *“Listening is everyone’s job!”*

The last question asked if respondents thought (more) training on effective communication/listening would help them in their experiences when dealing with

difficult people (or conflicts) in the workplace. Approximately 58% agreed (more) training on this topic would help them in the workplace, while nearly 15% disagreed. The breakdown of the percentages to this question can be seen in Figure 10.

**Figure 10: (More) Training on Effective Listening in the Workplace**



For the nearly 15% of respondents who said they did not think (more) training on effective listening would help them in the workplace, most suggested they had enough training on the topic and know how to handle difficult situations. A selection of comments is as follows:

- *“I have had this training previously in several situations in the course of my career.”*
- *“I am confident with my skills and getting to the relevant information I need to move projects forward.”*
- *“I’ve attended several workshops/seminars on the matter and even if there is always something new to learn, I find them quite repetitious at this point.”*

- *“I know how to handle these situations.”*

For the approximately 58% who agreed (more) training on effective listening would help them in the workplace, they suggested everyone could benefit from more training and it makes for a more productive workplace. A selection of comments for this question is as follows:

- *“It’s always good to be reminded of ways to listen and would help to eliminate unnecessary conflicts.”*
- *“I think you need refreshers on listening skills periodically. It is like any skill; you can start slipping in areas and not be aware of it until you have a refresh of the entire subject.”*
- *“Although I have many years of experience in dealing with the public, I would welcome some formal training in the area, specifically if I could learn more effective ways to deal with ‘difficult people.’”*
- *“Although I feel I listen and communicate well, I’m sure others may not feel the same. There is always room for improvement.”*
- *“Communication is KEY, and communication runs both directions, so any additional training for both employees and employers would be great!”*

## DISCUSSION

Several of the responses provided by USM employees led to further analysis.

Crosstabulations were conducted to examine more detail surrounding the responses given and to compare with the hypotheses created for this research project. For instance, the first hypothesis stated both supervisors and supervised employees will think they practice “effective listening skills” in the workplace, at USM, regardless if they actually do or do not. It can be determined from the data analysis that both supervisors and supervised employees do think they practice effective listening skills. Further, both supervisors and supervised employees stated they think their coworkers possess these skills as well.

Tables 3 and 4 below show the breakdown of frequencies for these crosstabulations. (For this crosstabulation and those following, “supervisors” equal the combined frequency of the roles: Supervisor and Both Supervisor and Employee.)

**Table 3: Effective Listening Skills of Respondents by Role**

| Role                         | Do you feel you possess effective listening skills? |    |           | Total |
|------------------------------|---|----|-----------|-------|
|                              | Yes   | No | No Answer |       |
| Supervisor                   | 19  | 0  | 0         | 19    |
| Both Supervisor and Employee | 84  | 3  | 7         | 94    |
| Supervised Employee          | 102   | 5  | 15        | 122   |
| No Answer                    | 4   | 1  | 2         | 7     |
| Total                        | 209   | 9  | 24        | 242   |

**Table 4: Effective Listening Skills of Coworkers (including Supervisors) by Role**

| Role                         | Do you perceive any of your coworkers (including supervisors to possess effective listening skills? |    |           | Total |
|------------------------------|---|----|-----------|-------|
|                              | Yes   | No | No Answer |       |
| Supervisor                   | 18  | 0  | 1         | 19    |
| Both Supervisor and Employee | 84  | 2  | 8         | 94    |
| Supervised Employee          | 99  | 7  | 16        | 122   |
| No Answer                    | 3   | 0  | 4         | 7     |
| Total                        | 204   | 9  | 29        | 242   |

The second hypothesis stated both supervisors and supervised employees will recognize “effective listening skills” as an important skill to possess in the workplace, at USM, specifically for those in leadership roles. While this question was not asked directly of participants in this study, the answer can be derived from the open-ended responses to the survey question regarding the importance of training on effective listening (for dealing with difficult people or conflict) in the workplace, specifically for supervisors. For this question, respondents stated effective listening skills and training on such was highly important for communication and leadership for supervisors. An additional selection of comments to this question is as follows:

- *“Listening is a skill a good supervisor will need. If they do not have the skills then they should be provided with training.”*
- *“Especially project managers whose job it is to facilitate a relationship between many different people with various agendas and expertise.”*
- *“I believe good listening (and general communication) skills are essential to being an effective supervisor. However, the person needs to be open to recognizing and possibly changing their behavior, or else any training is pointless.”*
- *“Supervisors should be a model of correct behavior.”*
- *“It is an important skill for supervisors to have, and people are usually selected for supervisory positions for reasons having little to do with their listening skills.”*

Interestingly and also related to this second hypothesis, the majority of respondents felt not only are “effective listening skills” an important skill to possess in the workplace, at USM, specifically for those in leadership roles, but for ALL employees. An additional selection of comments is as follows:

- *“Not specifically for supervisors – it’s important for everyone.”*



- “*Not specifically for employees – it’s important for everyone.*”
- “*I think it’s important for everyone. People need to understand that different people see and hear things differently and that they approach problem solving and issues differently.*”
- “*It’s equally important for everyone. In my case it’s really one of the primary skills of my job function because I deal with people’s needs and I can’t address them adequately without understanding them and I can’t understand them without listening.*”
- “*Effective listening is extremely important in all communications with all people.*”

The third hypothesis stated both supervisors and supervised employees will recognize the qualities of “effective listening skills,” in the workplace, at USM, and will do so in a similar manner, thus reaching consensus about a definition. Both supervisors and supervised employees recognized the qualities of effective listening skills in the workplace and did so in a similar manner. When asked to elaborate on these qualities regarding their own effective listening as well as that of their coworkers (including supervisors) a consensus was reached. Their definition of “effective listening skills,” include those qualities of: *having patience, focusing attention on the speaker, making eye contact/noting body language, not interrupting, paraphrasing, asking questions to clarify, and being supportive/empathizing.*

The fourth hypothesis stated both supervisors and supervised employees will be able to describe the characteristics of “difficult people,” in the workplace, at USM, and will do so in a similar manner, thus reaching consensus about a definition. Both supervisors and supervised employees were able to describe the characteristics of “difficult people” in the workplace and did so in a similar manner. When asked to elaborate on these characteristics regarding “being difficult,” a consensus was reached.

Their definition of “difficult people,” includes those characteristics of people: *not having an open-door policy/not being available, not being easygoing/approachable, and having hidden agendas/power struggles, having only one point of view, interrupting/having distracted behavior, and not listening or communicating well.*

Interestingly and also related to this fourth hypothesis, the majority of respondents felt they were not difficult to communicate with in the workplace, however, their coworkers (including supervisors) were. According to the compiled definition of characteristics of being difficult, this means most respondents see themselves as being available, approachable, not having any hidden agendas, listening and communicating well, etc, and their coworkers (including supervisors) are not seen the same way. However, looking back to earlier data analysis, respondents stated they felt both they and their coworkers (including supervisors) possessed effective listening skills as having patience, focusing attention on the speaker, not interrupting, asking questions to clarify, and being supportive/empathizing, etc. Why, then, are coworkers perceived so difficult in the workplace but not respondents themselves, when they claim they both possess effective listening skills?

The fifth hypothesis stated only supervisors have had any formal training in the workplace, at USM, regarding “effective listening skills” and/or “dealing with difficult people.” According to respondent answers to the question related to this hypothesis: Have you had any training in your workplace regarding communicating effectively, or more specifically, regarding effective listening, slightly more respondents answered they had not had any training and there was little difference between supervisor and supervised employee answers. In order to determine who answered this question, frequency of role

was crossed with whether respondents had training on this topic. Table 5 below shows the breakdown of frequencies for this crosstabulation.

| <b>Table 5: Training on Effective Listening Skills of Respondents by Role</b> |  |            |                  |              |
|---|--|------------|------------------|--------------|
|   | <b>Have you had any training in your workplace regarding communicating effectively, or more specifically, regarding effective listening?</b> |            |                  |              |
| <b>Role</b>   | <b>Yes</b>   | <b>No</b>  | <b>No Answer</b> | <b>Total</b> |
| Supervisor  | 9  | 4          | 6                | 19           |
| Both Supervisor and Employee  | 36   | 46         | 12               | 94           |
| Supervised Employee   | 37   | 50         | 35               | 122          |
| No Answer   | 1  | 1          | 5                | 7            |
| <b>Total</b>  | <b>83</b>  | <b>101</b> | <b>58</b>        | <b>242</b>   |

In addition, when asked of respondents if they would like (more) training on this topic, there was little difference between supervisor and supervised employee answers. Table 6 shows the breakdown of frequencies for this crosstabulation.

| <b>Table 6: (More) Training on Effective Listening Skills of Respondents by Role</b> |  |           |                  |              |
|--|--|-----------|------------------|--------------|
|  | <b>Do you think (more) training on effective communication/listening would help you in your experiences when dealing with difficult people (or conflicts) in your workplace?</b> |           |                  |              |
| <b>Role</b>  | <b>Yes</b>   | <b>No</b> | <b>No Answer</b> | <b>Total</b> |
| Supervisor   | 11   | 2         | 6                | 19           |
| Both Supervisor and Employee   | 62   | 16        | 16               | 94           |
| Supervised Employee  | 66   | 18        | 38               | 122          |
| No Answer  | 2  | 0         | 5                | 7            |
| <b>Total</b>   | <b>131</b>   | <b>36</b> | <b>65</b>        | <b>242</b>   |

Further, when asked for additional comments to these questions and for specific techniques respondents may have learned through training, comments included themes such as *formal education in social work, graduate school, Supervisor Training Institute at USM*, which might indicate training for those in higher level leadership or supervisory

roles, as well as *[USM] CCE's non-credit certificate program in communication, Crucial conversations workshop, and workshop on dealing with difficult people at a classified staff breakfast*, which could indicate training offered for employees at all levels.

## CONCLUSIONS

Based on the results of this study, effective listening skills and training on such is very important for employee relations and the smooth functioning of the workplace, such as USM. Not surprisingly, most survey respondents, who were seasoned USM employees, stated they had effective communication skills, as did their coworkers, and had some training on this topic, as well as the topic of dealing with difficult people, whether from formal education or workshops at USM. However, most of these respondents also stated they had interactions with difficult people in the workplace at USM, and agree more training on effective listening and dealing with difficult people would be beneficial. Why, then, if most employees at USM claim to have effective listening skills and can so easily explain the qualities of effective listening and point out the characteristics of difficult people, are they still finding themselves in difficult situations where effective listening is lacking? One survey respondent summed it up nicely: *“Although I feel I listen and communicate well, I’m sure others may not feel the same. There is always room for improvement.”* How one person might perceive their own communication, specifically, their effective listening, in a situation really may not be the same as how others perceive them in that same situation. Weak listening may result in the perception of being difficult and therefore, more training on this skill would be beneficial.

As a leadership skill for those USM employees who supervise, more training on effective listening would be highly beneficial for them in their regular communications with their supervised employees as well as being able to respond appropriately in difficult situations, and modeling the overall behavior. One survey respondent stated this idea

well: *“An effective listener is an effective leader. An informed supervisor becomes a better leader, and supervised employees will be more effective in the performance of their day to day activities; Thus helping the USM community [to] run smoothly.”* It is particularly interesting that while survey respondents did think effective listening was important, specifically for supervisors, the majority of respondents stressed its importance for ALL employees in an organization, like USM. There seemed to be more emphasis on training for everyone and not just supervisors, or those in leadership roles. One reason stated for this was many respondents thought most supervisors have already had training in this area. Another reason noted was respondents thought employees should have training on this before entering into any kind of supervisory role. One respondent even went so far as to say supervisors are not hired based on this skill and they should be. Thus, effective listening is important in the workplace for everyone, regardless of role in the organization. As one survey respondent simply stated: *“Listening is everyone’s job!”*

Overall, more training on effective listening would be beneficial to all USM employees. Several training programs and workshops at USM and also outside of USM were suggested as those which have been previously offered. Whether these programs are still being offered is another question and was not confirmed in this study. If they are not, there could be many reasons why. Staffing and funding could be major issues, due to current economic hardships. Regardless, there is a definite need for training on this topic at USM, or in any organization. Focusing available resources on employee development would be a wise investment. Unfortunately, like research on effective listening, attention

and resources paid to effective listening as an important communication skill is very limited. So, why aren't people listening and what might this be costing our organizations?

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## APPENDIX A - STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The research case study was conducted to identify the importance of the *leadership skill* of effective *listening* in *supervisors* and *supervised employees* at the University of Southern Maine (USM) and to evaluate its implications in the workplace, specifically when dealing with *difficult people* in everyday interactions.

### Sub-problems

1. The first sub-problem was to determine whether supervisors and supervised employees perceive themselves as practicing “effective listening skills” in the workplace, at USM.
2. The second sub-problem was to determine whether supervisors and supervised employees recognize “effective listening skills” as an important leadership skill to possess in the workplace, at USM.
3. The third sub-problem was to determine what supervisors and supervised employees recognize as the qualities of “effective listening skills” in the workplace, at USM, and if there are any distinct differences or consensus about the definition.
4. The fourth sub-problem was to determine what supervisors and supervised employees describe as the characteristics of “difficult people” in the workplace, at USM, and if there are any distinct differences or consensus about the definition.
5. The fifth sub-problem was to determine if either supervisors and/or supervised employees have had any formal or informal training in the workplace, at USM, regarding “effective listening skills” and/or “dealing with difficult people.”
6. The sixth sub-problem was to analyze and interpret the data so as to evaluate the implications of the importance of effective listening skills and dealing with difficult

people in the workplace, at USM, in terms of training for supervisors and supervised employees and their everyday interactions with each other.

### Hypotheses

1. The first hypothesis was that both supervisors and supervised employees will think they practice “effective listening skills” in the workplace, at USM, regardless if they actually do or do not.

2. The second hypothesis was that both supervisors and supervised employees will recognize “effective listening skills” as an important skill to possess in the workplace, at USM, specifically for those in leadership roles.

3. The third hypothesis was that both supervisors and supervised employees will recognize the qualities of “effective listening skills,” in the workplace, at USM, and will do so in a similar manner, thus reaching consensus about a definition.

4. The fourth hypothesis was that both supervisors and supervised employees will be able to describe the characteristics of “difficult people,” in the workplace, at USM, and will do so in a similar manner, thus reaching consensus about a definition.

5. The fifth hypothesis was that only supervisors have had any formal training in the workplace, at USM, regarding “effective listening skills” and/or “dealing with difficult people.”

### Delimitations

The study conducted was limited USM, and not other local colleges or universities, nor the whole of the University of Maine System.

The study was also limited to those USM employees subscribed to the USM-L email listserv and not to all employees of USM.

The study was limited to those employees in the workplace, throughout USM, in self-identified supervisor and/or supervisee roles only, who have some direct or face-to-face contact with each other.

The study did not examine formal or informal training curricula or programs offered at USM.

### Definitions of Terms

*Difficult people.* This study defines difficult people as those people we come in contact with in everyday situations who communicate in different ways from us and cause us to enter into uncomfortable or conflict situations due to those communication and personality style differences.

*Effective listening.* This study defines effective listening as a leadership skill that includes having the qualities of being able to: pay attention to others, withhold judgments, reflect, clarify, summarize, and share in either verbal conversation or through other forms of written communication, such as email.

*Leadership skill.* This study defines a leadership skill as one that aids an individual in the ability to encourage others to assist in achieving common goals. Examples include, but are not limited to: effective listening, motivating others, and encouraging collaboration and participation in group goals.

*Supervised employees.* This study defines supervised employees as those employees whose work is overseen by and reports to one or more employees on a regular basis within the same workplace organization.

*Supervisors.* This study defines supervisors as those employees who oversee the work of one or more employees on a regular basis within the same workplace organization.

### Assumptions

1. The first assumption is effective listening is an important leadership skill in the workplace.
2. The second assumption is effective listening is important for dealing with difficult people.
3. The third assumption is most employees will encounter difficult people in the workplace.

APPENDIX B - SURVEY CONSENT AND INSTRUMENT

**Effective Listening Skills Survey for USM Employees**

**Greetings**

Greetings USM Employee,  
You are receiving this survey because you are currently employed as faculty and/or staff at the University of Southern Maine Augusta, Gorham, Lewiston-Auburn, or Portland campus. As an employee at USM, your role is very important to the campus culture and workplace environment. By filling out this survey, you will be part of a study to determine the way effective listening, as an important leadership skill, is conducted when dealing with people in your everyday interactions on campus. This survey is being conducted as part of my Master's Thesis project for the Leadership Studies program at USM, and is not being conducted in collaboration with any department at USM, for example Human Resources. Your participation in this project will have no effect on your employee standing at USM.

This survey was sent to you via the USM-L email listserv, a self-subscribed email delivery system at USM which is accessible to all employees and students. Only I, Amy O. Sullivan, as the researcher, will have access to the data generated from this survey, which will be used solely for the purpose of my Master's Thesis. This research study presents no greater risk to you as a participant than what you may encounter in daily life. Completion of this survey is voluntary, completely anonymous, and data will be kept confidential. Both data collected and reports from this survey will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you or other participants; your email will not be shared with any person, agency, or organization. Internet Protocol (IP) addresses will not be collected through this survey. (IP addresses are unique numbers assigned to each computer or device connected to the public Internet and can often be used to identify a user's general location.) By not collecting IP addresses through this survey, there will be no way to identify who participated in this study or in any way connect participants to their data, ensuring the survey is completely anonymous.

If you are interested in the results from this study, I would be happy to send you a summary of the survey results upon request.

If you have any questions or would like more information about this research, please don't hesitate to contact me at [REDACTED]. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Human Protections Administrator at [REDACTED].

This survey consists of 18 questions and should take you no more than 10-15 minutes to complete. Please note, you may choose not to answer any question for any reason and you may discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you in advance for your participation in my research study!

Sincerely,  
Amy O. Sullivan

\*\*\* I understand the above description of this research study and the risks and benefits associated with my participation as a research subject. If I choose to proceed with the survey I agree to take part in the research and do so voluntarily. \*\*\*

## Effective Listening Skills Survey for USM Employees

Page 1

\* 1. Are you an employee at the University of Southern Maine?

\*If your answer to this question is No, you will be disqualified from this study. You must be an employee at the University of Southern Maine in order to complete this survey and participate in my Master's Thesis project.

Yes

No

## Effective Listening Skills Survey for USM Employees

2. Are you a:

- Supervisor
- Supervised Employee
- Both Supervisor and Employee

3. How long have you been employed by USM?

- Less than 5 years
- 5-10 years
- 10 or more years

4. Have you worked in the same office/department for the duration of your employment at USM?

- Yes
- No



## Effective Listening Skills Survey for USM Employees

### Page 2

5. Do you feel you possess effective listening skills?

- Yes  
 No

6. Please comment on these skills. What specific qualities do you attribute to your effective listening?

(Please do not use names of people, or other identifying information such as job title, USM department, or campus location. Generic terms such as "my supervisor/my coworker" and "the office/the department" are ok to use.)

7. Do you perceive any of your coworkers (including supervisors) to possess effective listening skills?

- Yes  
 No

8. Please comment on these skills. What specific qualities do you attribute to your coworkers' (including supervisors') effective listening?

(Please do not use names of people, or other identifying information such as job title, USM department, or campus location. Generic terms such as "my supervisor/my coworker" and "the office/the department" are ok to use.)

## Effective Listening Skills Survey for USM Employees

### Page 3

9. Do you feel you are a difficult person to communicate with in your workplace?

(Please do not use names of people, or other identifying information such as job title, USM department, or campus location. Generic terms such as "my supervisor/my coworker" and "the office/the department" are ok to use.)

Yes

No

Why or Why not?

10. Do you perceive any of your coworkers (including supervisors) to be difficult to communicate with in your workplace?

(Please do not use names of people, or other identifying information such as job title, USM department, or campus location. Generic terms such as "my supervisor/my coworker" and "the office/the department" are ok to use.)

Yes

No

Why or Why not?

11. What qualities do you associate with "being difficult?"

(Please do not use names of people, or other identifying information such as job title, USM department, or campus location. Generic terms such as "my supervisor/my coworker" and "the office/the department" are ok to use.)

## Effective Listening Skills Survey for USM Employees

Page 4

12. Have you had any specific encounters in your workplace where you have dealt with a difficult person (or conflict)?

(Please do not use names of people, or other identifying information such as job title, USM department, or campus location. Generic terms such as "my supervisor/my coworker" and "the office/the department" are ok to use.)

Yes

No

(Optional) Additional Comments:

13. How would you describe your listening experience in this encounter as a supervisor, supervised employee, or both?

(Please do not use names of people, or other identifying information such as job title, USM department, or campus location. Generic terms such as "my supervisor/my coworker" and "the office/the department" are ok to use.)

14. How would you describe the listening of the difficult person (supervisor, coworker, or supervised employee)?

(Please do not use names of people, or other identifying information such as job title, USM department, or campus location. Generic terms such as "my supervisor/my coworker" and "the office/the department" are ok to use.)

## Effective Listening Skills Survey for USM Employees

### Page 5

15. Have you had any training in your workplace regarding communicating effectively, or more specifically, regarding effective listening?

(Please do not use names of people, or other identifying information such as job title, USM department, or campus location. Generic terms such as "my supervisor/my coworker" and "the office/the department" are ok to use.)

Yes

No

If so, please explain. Were there any specific techniques you learned?

16. Do you think training on effective listening (for dealing with difficult people (or conflict) is important in the workplace, specifically for supervisors?

(Please do not use names of people, or other identifying information such as job title, USM department, or campus location. Generic terms such as "my supervisor/my coworker" and "the office/the department" are ok to use.)

Yes

No

Why or Why not?

## Effective Listening Skills Survey for USM Employees

17. Do you think training on effective listening (for dealing with difficult people (or conflict) is important in the workplace, specifically for supervised employees?

(Please do not use names of people, or other identifying information such as job title, USM department, or campus location. Generic terms such as "my supervisor/my coworker" and "the office/the department" are ok to use.)

Yes

No

Why or Why not?

18. Do you think (more) training on effective communication/listening would help you in your experiences when dealing with difficult people (or conflicts) in your workplace?

(Please do not use names of people, or other identifying information such as job title, USM department, or campus location. Generic terms such as "my supervisor/my coworker" and "the office/the department" are ok to use.)

Yes

No

Why or Why not?

## Effective Listening Skills Survey for USM Employees

### Thank you for your participation!

Thank you for participating in this survey as part of my Master's Thesis project at USM. Again, if you are interested in the results from this study, I would be happy to send you a summary of the survey results upon request.

If you have any questions or would like more information about this research, please don't hesitate to contact me at [REDACTED]. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Human Protections Administrator at [REDACTED].

Thank you,  
Amy O. Sullivan

**APPENDIX C - FINAL APPROVAL FORM**

**UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE**

**MASTER OF ARTS DEGREE IN LEADERSHIP STUDIES**

August 4, 2011

We hereby recommend that the thesis of Amy Ogrodnik Sullivan entitled “The Importance of Effective Listening Skills: Implications for the Workplace and Dealing with Difficult People” be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts.

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Dr. Sharon Timberlake, Advisor/First Reader (signature)

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Dr. Betty Robinson, Second Reader (signature)

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Dr. Tara G. Coste, Program Coordinator (signature)

Accepted

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Dr. Joyce T. Gibson, Dean, Lewiston-Auburn College (signature)