

## BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE LISTENING

- One of the most fundamental barriers is ***the misassumption that hearing is listening***. However, hearing is the physical act of receiving and processing sound waves that strike the eardrums, and thereby is a passive process. Listening, on the other hand, is an active process that interprets and assigns meaning to those sound waves (Ober, 2001)
- The fact that ***a listener can think much more quickly than the other person can talk***, also acts as a barrier to effective listening. It is estimated that we think at 1,000-3,000 words per minute but listen at 125-400 words per minute (HighGain, 2000). Thus, boredom and impatience can set in quickly.
- The ***listener's internal voice*** that keeps up a simultaneous dialog of critiquing, analyzing, and judging what is being heard, is yet another barrier to listening (Krisco, 1997).
- Very often, we are ***reactive listeners***. We use a variety of ***filters*** that focus on what we already know, latching on to the familiar and missing much of the new information. These filters create mental barriers to receiving information and gaining an understanding of the content. As a result, a lot of time may be spent on planning rebuttals rather than listening (Krisco, 1997)
- ***Physical distractions*** such as noise, activity, and temperature can further hinder a listener's ability to fully grasp what the listener is trying to convey (Ober, 2001)

## TIPS FOR LISTENING EFFECTIVELY

Here are ten valuable tips to follow if you want to be a better listener:

1. **Want to listen.** And use nonverbal behavior to show the speaker that you are interested.
2. **Be ready to listen, Be Present.** When the speaker's mouth opens, open your ears. This is not the time to be hunting for a pen, reading a letter, or thinking about some unrelated subject.
3. **Establish eye contact with the speaker.** Resist the temptation to look away. In groups, try to place yourself where you can see the speaker and the speaker can see you.
4. **Be physically involved.** Use good posture both to keep alert and to communicate to the speaker that you are listening. Participate when audience involvement is encouraged.
5. **Avoid negative mannerisms.** Fidgeting, tapping a pencil, playing with an object, or attempting to do another task while listening is a hindrance both to you and to the speaker.
6. **Exercise your listening muscles.** Challenge yourself by listening to difficult material and by learning the meaning to new words. A steady diet of easy listening will not prepare you for difficult listening situations.
7. **Delay judgment.** Don't decide beforehand that you don't like the speaker or the subject. Give the speaker a fair hearing.
8. **Focus on main points and key ideas.** The best listeners focus on ideas rather than just the facts and details.
9. **Capitalize on the "speed differential."** Listeners can listen "faster" than speakers can talk. Rather than letting your mind wander, use the speed differential to focus on the key points and ideas.
10. **Follow the "Golden Rule."** Treat others the way you want to be treated. Ask, "How would I want others to listen to me?" That's the way to be an effective listener.

It has been said that during communication human beings tend to operate in one of two modes: speaking or getting ready to speak. That leaves little time to digest and understand what the other person has to say and often leads to miscommunication, misunderstanding, and mistrust.

## ACCORDING TO STEPHEN COVEY, WE GENERALLY LISTEN AT ONE OF FOUR LEVELS:

1. We *ignore* what's being said and don't even make an effort to hear and understand.
2. We *pretend* to listen. We may nod from time to time or even tune in when something interests us, but generally we hear very little.
3. We *listen selectively*, paying attention to only those things that we agree with or that support our positions and beliefs.
4. We *listen attentively*. We focus on the words and compare it to our own experiences, but pay little attention to the meaning.

To listen effectively, Covey tells us to have to move to a fifth level, which he calls *empathic listening*. Empathic listening is listening to understand. It's listening for meaning as well as content. It does not mean agreeing although that is a risk that comes with opening yourself to be influenced by another point of view. It does involve trying to understand what the speaker is saying from his perspective rather than filtering it through our own experiences and paradigms.

## EFFECTIVE LISTENING

Listening skills fuel our social, emotional and professional success, and studies prove that listening is a skill we can learn.

**The Technique:** Active listening is really an extension of the Golden Rule. To know how to listen to someone else, think about how you would want to be listened to.

While the ideas are largely intuitive, it might take some practice to develop (or re-develop) the skills. Here's what good listeners know — and you should, too:

1. **Face the speaker.** Sit up straight or lean forward slightly to show your attentiveness through body language.
2. **Maintain eye contact**, to the degree that you all remain comfortable.
3. **Minimize external distractions.** Turn off the TV. Put down your book or magazine, and ask the speaker and other listeners to do the same.
4. **Respond appropriately** to show that you understand. Murmur (“uh-huh” and “um-hmm”) and nod. Raise your eyebrows. Say words such as “Really,” “Interesting,” as well as more direct prompts: “What did you do then?” and “What did she say?”
5. **Focus solely on what the speaker is saying.** Try not to think about what you are going to say next. The conversation will follow a logical flow after the speaker makes her point.
6. **Minimize internal distractions.** If your own thoughts keep horning in, simply let them go and continuously re-focus your attention on the speaker, much as you would during meditation.
7. **Keep an open mind.** Wait until the speaker is finished before deciding that you disagree. Try not to make assumptions about what the speaker is thinking.
8. **Avoid letting the speaker know how you handled a similar situation.** Unless they specifically ask for advice, assume they just need to talk it out.
9. **Even if the speaker is launching a complaint against you, wait until they finish to defend yourself.** The speaker will feel as though their point had been made. They won't feel the need to repeat it, and you'll know the whole argument before you respond. Research shows that, on average, we can hear four times faster than we can talk, so we have the ability to sort ideas as they come in...and be ready for more.

10. **Engage yourself.** Ask questions for clarification, but, once again, wait until the speaker has finished. That way, you won't interrupt their train of thought. After you ask questions, paraphrase their point to make sure you didn't misunderstand. Start with: "So you're saying..."

## **RULES IN LISTENING**

### **Rule #1: Stop Talking!**

You can't multi-task speaking and listening. If you're talking, you're not listening. This rule also applies to the talking inside your head. If you're thinking intently about what you want to say, you're not listening to what is being said.

### **Rule #2: Create a Space**

Create a physical space. Focus on reacting and responding to the speaker. Create, too, a space between your thoughts. Think of listening as a form of meditation.

### **Rule #3: Hold Your Judgments**

Allow for a thoughtful pause between reacting, a space in which to ask yourself, "Do I have the whole story?"

### **Rule #4: Don't Be a Label Reader**

People are unique. We tend to create labels, and think we know what's inside. Suddenly, we believe we know everything about someone, but they are not all alike.

### **Rule #5: Open Your Mind**

While we may not consciously feel the need to be right, we tend to have certain ideas about reality and feel groundless when they're threatened.

### **Rule #6: Focus**

When someone is speaking, focus. If you're paying attention, you'll likely be showing signs of focus without thinking about it at all. Below are some of the ways we show we're listening:

- Maintain eye contact
- Give non-verbal clues: Nod, lean toward the speaker, etc
- Encourage the speaker to go on
- Don't be a verbal trespasser interrupting or finishes the speaker's sentences
- Ask open ended questions
- Summarize

### **Rule #7: Visualize**

Visualization is a technique that can enhance listening: a picture is worth a thousand words. One way to use visualization is to visualize what you are being told.

### **Rule #8: Remember Names**

The first step in remembering names is deciding that they are important to remember. Repeat the names when you are introduced.

### **Rule #9: Question**

Going into a listening situation with questions in your mind will help you remember and, often, put information into the framework of your existing knowledge. Listen to body language and be quick to clarify assumptions if you are unsure or are getting a negative message. Observe. Listen. Ask.

### **Rule #10: Be Aware**

We must be aware of the speaker, aware of verbal and non-verbal cues, and aware of our own listening strengths and challenges.