

## MANAGING LISTENING

There are many factors that can interfere with listening, so you need to be able to manage a number of mental tasks at the same time in order to be a successful listener. Author Joseph DeVito (2000) has divided the listening process into five stages: receiving, understanding, remembering, evaluating, and responding.

### Receiving/Attending

Receiving is the **intentional focus on hearing a speaker's message**, which happens when we filter out other sources so that we can isolate the message and avoid the confusing mixture of incoming stimuli. At this stage, we are still only hearing the message. Ear is the primary tool involved with this stage of the listening process.

Hearing can require sincere effort, but you must hear the message before you can continue the process of listening.

### Understanding

In the understanding stage, we attempt to learn the meaning of the message, which is not always easy. For one thing, if a speaker does not enunciate clearly, it may be difficult to tell what the message was—did your friend say, “I think she’ll be late for class,” or “my teacher delayed the class”? Brain because is the primary tool involved with these stages of the listening process.

Even when we have understood the words in a message, because of the **differences in our backgrounds and experience**, we sometimes make the mistake of attaching our own meanings to the words of others. For example, say you have made plans with your friends to meet at a certain movie theatre, but you arrive and nobody else shows up. Eventually you find out that your friends are at a different theatre all the way across town where the same movie is playing. Everyone else understood that the meeting place was the “west side” location, but you wrongly understood it as the “east side” location and therefore missed out on part of the fun.

So much of the way we understand others is influenced by our own perceptions and experiences. Therefore, at the understanding stage of listening we should be on the lookout for places where our perceptions might differ from those of the speaker.

## Remembering

Remembering begins with listening; if you can't remember something that was said, you might not have been listening effectively. Wolvin and Coakley (1996) note that the most common reason for not remembering a message afterwards is because it wasn't really learned in the first place.

However, even when you are listening attentively, some messages are more difficult than others to understand and remember. Highly complex messages that are filled with detail call for highly developed listening skills. Moreover, if something distracts your attention even for a moment, you could miss out on information that explains other new concepts you hear when you begin to listen fully again.

It's also important to know that you can improve your memory of a message by processing it meaningfully—that is, by applying it in ways that are meaningful to you (Gluck, Mercado & Myers, 2008). Instead of simply repeating a new acquaintance's name over and over, for example, you might remember it by associating it with something in your own life. "Emily," you might say, "reminds me of the Emily I knew in middle school,"

Finally, if understanding has been inaccurate, recollection of the message will be inaccurate too.

## Evaluating

The fourth stage in the listening process is evaluating, or judging the value of the message. We might be thinking, "This makes sense" or, conversely, "This is very odd." Because everyone embodies biases and perspectives learned from widely diverse sets of life experiences, **evaluations of the same message can vary widely from one listener to another**. Even the most open-minded listeners will have opinions of a speaker, and those opinions will influence how the message is evaluated. People are more likely to

evaluate a message positively if the speaker speaks clearly, presents ideas logically, and gives reasons to support the points made.

Unfortunately, personal opinions sometimes result in prejudiced evaluations. Imagine you're listening to a speech given by someone from another country and this person has an accent that is hard to understand. You may have a hard time simply making out the speaker's message. Some people find a foreign accent to be interesting, while others find it annoying or even take it as a sign of ignorance. If a listener has a strong bias against foreign accents, the listener may not even attempt to attend to the message. If you mistrust a speaker because of an accent, you could be rejecting important or personally enriching information. Good listeners have learned to refrain from making these judgments and instead to focus on the speaker's meanings.

## **Responding**

Responding—sometimes referred to as feedback—is the fifth and final stage of the listening process. It is the stage at which you indicate your involvement. Almost anything you do at this stage can be interpreted as feedback. For example, you are giving positive feedback to your instructor if at the end of class you stay behind to finish a sentence in your notes or approach the instructor to ask for clarification. The opposite kind of feedback is given by students who gather their belongings and rush out the door as soon as class is over.

### **Formative Feedback**

Not all responses occur at the end of the message. Formative feedback is a natural part of the ongoing transaction between a speaker and a listener. As the speaker delivers the message, a listener signals his or her involvement with focused attention, note-taking, nodding, and other behaviors that indicate understanding or failure to understand the message. These signals are important to the speaker, who is interested in whether the message is clear and accepted or whether the content of the message is meeting the resistance of preconceived ideas. Speakers can use this feedback to decide whether additional examples, support materials, or explanation is needed.

### **Summative Feedback**

Summative feedback is given at the end of the communication. When you attend a political rally, a presentation given by a speaker you admire, or even a class, there are verbal and nonverbal ways of indicating your appreciation for or your disagreement with the messages or the speakers at the end of the message. Maybe you'll stand up and applaud a speaker you agreed with or just sit staring in silence after listening to a speaker you didn't like. In other cases, a speaker may be attempting to persuade you to donate to a charity, so if the speaker passes a bucket and you make a donation, you are providing feedback on the speaker's effectiveness. At the same time, we do not always listen most carefully to the messages of speakers we admire. Sometimes we simply enjoy being in their presence, and our summative feedback is not about the message but about our attitudes about the speaker. If your feedback is limited to something like, "I just love your voice," you might be indicating that you did not listen carefully to the content of the message.

## **References**

DeVito, J. A. (2000). *The elements of public speaking* (7th ed.). New York, NY: Longman.

Gluck, M. A., Mercado, E., & Myers, C. E. (2008). *Learning and memory: From brain to behavior*. New York: Worth Publishers, pp. 172–173.

Wolvin, A., & Coakley, C. G. (1996). *Listening* (5th ed.). Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill.

## **BARRIERS TO LISTENING**

### **Selective listening**

We all listen selectively at some time or other. It is a necessary skill in order to survive in often very noisy environments, however, our selectivity can sometimes be based on two things.

- 1) Our preconceptions about the other person
- 2) Our preconceptions about the importance of what's being said

Identifying any preconceptions prior to a meeting will help reduce this barrier.

### **Talking speed vs speed of thought**

There is a considerable difference between the speed at which people talk and the speed at which they think. The average person speaks at about 125 words per minute, whereas thinking speed is in the region of 500 words per minute. We all think a lot faster than we realise! The result is that when listening to someone we are continually jumping ahead of what is actually being said. Try to avoid jumping to conclusions in any meeting. Keep an open mind!

### **Lack of interest**

This could be due to lack of interest in the individual speaking or being distracted by things that are happening to you personally.

### **Beliefs and attitudes**

We all have opinions on a variety of current issues; we feel strongly about certain subjects; we value certain behaviours. How do you react when someone inadvertently challenges your beliefs and attitudes?

### **Reactions to speaker**

Our reactions to the person speaking rather than listening completely to what they are saying can cause us to listen less effectively.

## **Our preconceptions**

Our preconceptions often mean we don't even give another person a chance to speak. We can prejudge what they have to say. The implication of this behaviour is that it implies we don't value what they might have to offer.

## **The words we hear**

Over-repetition of words and phrases is one distraction, the use of unfamiliar (e.g. jargon) words is another. Another important point to remember is that words can mean different things to different people. Good – to one person may mean only just acceptable, to another it might mean 'perfect'.

## **Physical distractions**

This can come in a number of different guises and ranges from the background noises that are going on (i.e. a telephone ringing or a fire engine racing down the road), whether we are physically comfortable (i.e. too warm, too cold, the seat is uncomfortable – too high/too low, thirsty), the lighting in the room, to distracting pictures on the wall. Some distractions are within our control (i.e. telephone calls) and where possible it's important to try and stop them from becoming distractions (e.g. divert all calls).

Adapted from Listening Skills, Ian Mackay, Management Shapers, 2000