

BARRIERS TO LISTENING

This handout talks through a number of different barriers to listening. As you're reading through them – identify if any of the barriers apply to you. Do some apply when you are listening to certain people!

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 before the review 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 the review 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 (e.g. poorly child, deadline for research project funding/reporting)

Remember, the review meeting is the opportunity for the reviewee to talk about themselves, their thoughts and feelings.

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? Try to avoid getting emotional particularly in the review situation, remember, the review is about the reviewee not you!

Reactions to speaker

Our reactions to the person speaking rather than 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