Breaking Through Barriers to Effective Listening

How well do you really listen to others? Would other people say they have your full attention during a conversation? Developing the ability to listen effectively will not only allow you to better understand what others are saying, but it will also enable others to feel more understood. Causing others to feel more deeply heard and understood can be an amazing rapport builder that can make current, and future, conversations easier and more enjoyable.

Distractions Get in the Way

Sometimes internal and external distractions make effective listening difficult if not impossible. This problem is often compounded when we ignore the distraction and attempt to carry on the conversation even though the distraction is causing us to not hear the other person’s entire message. Typical distractions may include:

Environmental

Noise, visual and physical distractions within the physical environment
- A noisy cubical neighbor
- Other conversations
- People passing your line of sight
- Lighting glare
- Room is too hot or too cold
- Drafts

Social

Intense or recurring personal emotional reactions to the speaker
- Feeling attracted to the other person
- Feeling dislike for the other person
- Wondering if your encounter with the other person may become difficult

Emotional

Intense or recurring thoughts
- Dreading an upcoming project
- Thinking about a disagreement you experienced that morning
- Reliving past events in which you felt you were treated unfairly

Mental

Inability to focus or concentrate
- Thinking about the weekend
- Daydreaming
- Rambling thoughts
Biological

*Personal internal physical distractions*
- Headache
- Aches and pains
- Sitting too long
- Feeling tired
- Feeling hungry or thirsty
- Feeling the need to use the restroom

Structural

*Not recognizing the speaker’s sentence structure or word order*
- “The job; did you do it?”
- “Tell me the reason…. Who can approve this?”

Vocabulary

*Hearing language that isn’t understood*
- Unrecognized words
- Slang or jargon
- Misused words

Reduce, Eliminate, or Cope

Your strategies for dealing with distractions will vary according to the distractor. Seek ways to reduce, eliminate, or cope with the listening distractors you encounter. Many environmental distractors may be coped with, or eliminated, by moving to a different location if the distraction becomes too great. Biological distractors may need to be coped with, or eliminated, by postponing the conversation until the distractor can be dealt with. Other distractors like social, emotional, mental, and other barriers may need to be coped with, or reduced, by bringing the barrier out into the open and working through the issue.

Your effectiveness as a listener and communicator is dependant not only on the knowledge and skills you possess and use, but also on your awareness of what is happening during the conversation. Your awareness and ability to reduce, eliminate, and cope with listening barriers will cause you to understand better what other people are saying, and to cause others to feel more deeply heard and understood.