

# LISTENING SKILLS

Effective listening is only accomplished through constant effort. Most people aren't willing to put out the effort required to become a truly effective listener. We might spend more energy on this skill if we realize its importance.

According to research, we understand only about one-half of what we hear. After a period of two months we recall only about one-quarter of what we heard. This is particularly discouraging when we realize that we spend 70 percent of every day in verbal communication and, of this, we spend 45 percent listening.

Although there are many reasons for ineffective listening, there's one major reason for it: ***poor listening habits***. We acquire most of these habits through daily casual conversation where habits of critical and comprehensive listening aren't required. If we're constantly critical or if we attempt to retain everything we hear, we're undertaking the impossible. On the other hand, if we understand that effective listening is acquired and not inherited, we may seek to acquire certain specific techniques that offer improvement. There are no quick and easy answers but the following techniques may get you started.

## **DECIDE ON YOUR PURPOSE FOR LISTENING.**

Are you listening for enjoyment, to discriminate between ideas or approaches, to learn information, to act as a sounding-board to a friend, or to critically evaluate and judge? All of these are good reasons to listen but will require different listening attitudes. Your purpose will usually be determined by your priorities at the time.

It is hard to listen critically or to listen for learning when you're rushed or under stress. You may need to control your listening environment when listening effectiveness is critical. For instance, if you need to pass a course you should prepare for the listening experience by bringing note-taking materials and reading assignments, being on time, and arriving with a desire to learn. It's common for students to attend classes with the notion that they will learn by osmosis. They often aren't aware of the energy and attention required.

### **TRY NOT TO ASSUME YOU KNOW WHAT WILL BE SAID BEFORE IT IS SAID.**

We often develop bad habits of not listening because we assume it will be of no interest or use to us. We also make prior judgments about the amount of resistance or approval we will get from someone. With these prior notions we act without hearing or waiting to hear the speaker. We could improve our listening skills significantly by exercising patience and, even if we think we know what will be said, allow the speaker to finish.

### **TRY NOT TO LET YOUR BIASES CONTROL YOUR LISTENING.**

We all have certain prejudices and stereotypes that influence how we receive speakers. You may refuse to listen to someone because they are overdressed, foreign, overweight, too loud, too old, or even because they're opinionated. Attitudes such as this affect our listening habits by making us defensive and argumentative, or cause us to shut them out altogether.

### **TRY TO MONITOR YOUR LISTENING THROUGH FEEDBACK.**

Whenever possible, ask clear and thoughtful questions. If these questions are asked in the right spirit the speaker has an opportunity to repeat, expand, or clarify his or her message. Remember that you're the other half of the communication process and your reactions are critical to producing good communication for both you and the speaker.

### **LEARN TO LISTEN FOR THE SPEAKER'S PURPOSE.**

This purpose may be stated or unstated. It's the basic reason the speaker has for speaking. We often assume early on that some speakers don't know why they're speaking. Often this is true but let's not be too quick to judge. I have often found that a speaker who has some difficulty getting started, or who was a little disorganized, might recover and provide worthwhile information. Concentrate on what the speaker states as a purpose rather than what you have supposed is his or her purpose.

### **DON'T YIELD TO DISTRACTIONS.**

Our lives are noisy and confusing but we shouldn't use this as a convenient excuse for not listening. We can overcome some of the distraction by reducing noise and adjusting the listening environment. If we have no

control over the distractions then we must rely on intense concentration to get as much as possible from the speaker.

#### **WHEN POSSIBLE, TAKE NOTES.**

If it is appropriate and it will not be distracting to the speaker, make a few notes as you listen. This will help you organize and frame the speaker's thoughts. It will also give you a reference to refer to at a later date if the material is technical or complex.

There is no communication skill more important to a leader than listening, yet many persons aspiring to be leaders neglect this skill. It seems to take so little effort to hear a speaker's words, but this isn't listening. The kind of practice we need in the techniques listed above will require that we monitor our habits and actively work to improve them.