

HELPFUL HINTS FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

LISTENING*

Katherine Riley, Ed.D.,

Listening is one of the most common modes of communication (40% of the time compared to 9% writing, 16% reading, and 35% speaking). We are often taught that speaking represents action and power, whereas listening connotes weakness and apathy. Consider how you feel when listeners are not paying attention to you by looking at their watches, doing some activity, or not acknowledging what you have said. Effective communication is heavily dependent on effective listening. The following tips are guidelines when you are in the listening mode.

We usually listen through many filters we have acquired through our lives:

They affect our perception, reception, and attention.

It is helpful to examine your own listening patterns. We all use three levels of listening during the day and 75% of the time is spent at Level 2 or 3:

Level 1 - Empathetic listening - placing yourself in the other's position

Level 2 - Hearing words but not really listening - not understanding the deeper meanings.

Level 3 - Listening in spurts - tuning in and out

Barriers to listening can include fatigue, focusing on your own reactions, becoming impatient to speak, being distracted by other activity or the person's physical characteristics or mannerisms. The "time-lag" factor does not help; the average talker speaks at about 200 words per minute but a listener processes information at approximately 300-500 words per minute.

You can improve your listening by remembering to:

- Create a positive atmosphere by being alert, attentive, nondistracted, and using nonverbal behavior effectively.
- Be interested in the other person.
- Avoid phrases that discount the person's feelings such as "Oh, it's not that bad." "You'll feel better tomorrow."
- Have a spirit of cooperation.
- Be a sounding board--allowing the sender to bounce ideas and feelings off you nonjudgmentally and noncritically.
- Keep your anger and other emotions out of the interaction. Don't get hooked into jumping to conclusions or passing judgment.
- Facilitate the other person in problem solving.

*adapted from Burley-Allen, M., *Listening--the forgotten skill: a self-teaching guide*, 2nd Ed., New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1995

Establish and maintain the atmosphere and flow of the conversation by using these listening techniques:

- Clarify meaning and understanding.
Although we often assume that words have the same meaning and visual images, each of the 500 words that are used most often by the average adult have between 20-25 meanings--a possibility of 12,500 meanings!
- Check assumptions. Avoid labels and absolutes ("always," "never") and "why" questions. Ask "what," "when," "how," "who," and "where" questions.
- Restate the person's basic idea, emphasizing facts.
- Reflect the person's feelings. Use phrases such as "It sounds like..." "I sense that..." "What I've heard you say is..." "My hunch is..."
- Indicate you are listening by using noncommittal and encouraging phrases such as "I see," "right," "interesting," and "oh!"
- Summarize major ideas and concepts.
- Encourage others to talk about problems and share ideas.
Door openers include: "Tell me about it," "Would you like to talk about it?" "Sounds like you've got some ideas or feelings about this." "I'd be interested in what you have to say."
Don't: interrupt, interrogate, change the subject, preach, give advice.

SPEAKING*

When you want to be heard:

- When you are making only one point, people probably only need to hear it once.
- If you make two or three points, listeners probably won't remember them unless they are repeated.
- For four or five points, you need to repeat them plus use another sensory tool like writing it down or summarizing what you said out loud, using pictures or graphs, or walking through what you said.
- Beyond six points, you will need two or more sensory tools.

To reduce resistance:

There is a natural tendency to stay with what is familiar. Tips to help others change their behavior:

- Ask for clarification.
- Find a point of agreement to build on.
- Control your own natural ego-building desire to get the upper hand by showing weaknesses in the other person's argument. Question unsupported points but in a way that does not damage the other person's ego.
- Positively reinforce the other person's behavior, ideas, or actions whenever possible.
- Remember that other's want positive attention and understanding and clarity of expectations.
- Avoid using threatening language or nonverbal behavior. This decreases the need for the listener to be defensive.
- Anticipate things that would influence resistance by being aware of the person's beliefs and patterns of behavior.
- Build your credibility by being competent, knowledgeable, dependable and trustworthy, and showing your energy and drive to see things through.