Chapter 6: Effective Listening

Chapter Summary

Listening is called a twenty-first century skill because it is essential in all arenas, including home, school, and work. Indeed, employers rank listening as the most important skill on the job, and listening is important in our friendships and other personal relationships. When we listen effectively we are communicating to senders that their messages are important to us.

Whereas hearing is the process of letting in, but not attending to, audible stimuli, listening is the dynamic, transactional process of the four Rs: receiving, responding to, recalling, and rating stimuli and/or messages. When we receive messages, we are being mindful and acknowledging the speaker verbally and nonverbally. When we respond, we provide nonverbal and verbal feedback to the speaker. When we recall the message, we understand it and store it for later retrieval using the following strategies: repetition, use of mnemonic devices, and chunking. When we rate messages, we have to be sure we don't confuse facts with inferences and opinions. There are many barriers to listening. Physical distractions such as semantic, psychological, or physiological noise interfere. Modern phenomena such as multitasking, telecommuting, and being bombarded by many messages from numerous media can lead to message overload. Messages that are too complex--such as those filled with unfamiliar jargon or challenging arguments--can be difficult to listen to and to understand. Businesses and schools seldom offer listening training or courses. Preoccupation with personal issues, including extreme self-focusing (conversational narcissism), can inhibit the processing of messages. Lastly, the time difference between the mental ability to interpret words and the speed at which they arrive at the brain (the listening gap) can cause the mind to wander.

Our poor listening habits also interfere with listening. When we selectively listen, we don't attend to those parts of the message that are uninteresting to us. Talkaholics hog the conversational stage, resulting in one-sided conversations. We may or may not fool others when we pseudolisten, or pretend to listen, to a message. Gap fillers interrupt because they believe they know the rest of the message. When we defensively listen, we perceive innocent comments as hostile in intent. Ambushers retrieve information so they can later use it to discredit or manipulate another person.

Researchers have identified four listening styles. Your listening style may vary depending on the situation and the purpose of the personal encounter. People-centered listeners are concerned with other people's feelings or emotions. Action-centered listeners are listeners who want messages to be highly organized and who sometimes second-guess, or question, the assumptions underlying the message. Content-centered listeners focus on the facts and details of a message and are likely to play devil's advocate. Time-centered listeners discourage wordy explanations from speakers and set time guidelines for conversations. In addition to noting a communicator's listening style, keep in mind that people from different cultures give different types of feedback (direct or indirect), which may affect message meaning.
To improve your listening skills, you need to evaluate your current skills, prepare to listen, provide empathic responses, use nonjudgmental feedback, and practice active listening. When we actively listen, we communicate reinforcing messages to the speaker through paraphrasing (restatements), dialogue enhancers (supporting expressions), questioning, and the use of silence. When you work on your listening skills, you are striving to become a more engaged and competent communicator.