THE IMPORTANCE OF LISTENING
Barbara Daniel, Ph.D.

Do you believe that listening does not require much concentration or that listening is not a skill that must be learned? If you believe that just being an audience member qualifies as being a listener, then you should consider the following - listening requires you to remember, to evaluate, and to understand. Listening is not a passive activity – you must be involved.

Listening is a skill that must be learned, yet according to Pearson et al (2008), “Listening is our most frequently used and least studied communication skill” (p. 109). Verdeber, Verdeber & Sellnow (2009) believe that not even 2% of the population take classes in listening. Communication researchers have found that “business personnel, including those with and without managerial responsibilities, spend nearly 33% of their time listening” (Pearson et al, p. 114).

Listening and hearing are often confused. In fact, many people do not differentiate between hearing and listening. They use the words interchangeably. However, while we are conscious of sounds around us – that is, we hear everything within ear range – we only listen to some of those sounds (Lucas, 2007). It is common knowledge in several disciplines, and especially in the field of communication, that people speak at approximately 120 to 175 words per minute while the brain can process between 400 to 800 words per minute. One can easily jump to the conclusion that listening would be an easy task. But listening means that you have to focus on what you are hearing, remember the incoming data, analyze it, give it meaning, and store it in memory. Amazingly, we can go through that process very quickly. If it is so easy, why then do we consider it a skill?

The ability to listen requires some effort. Over the years, communication researchers have agreed that we usually understand only 50 percent of incoming data and that, after 24 hours, only 10 percent of that data is remembered (Barker & Watson, 2000). Constant practice helps us develop this skill. Whether you are at home or at work, you should pay close attention to what is said. Listen carefully and reflect on what is said.

Listen to and reflect on nonverbal messages also. According to Birdwhistell (1970), “spoken words only account for 30 -35% of the meaning. The rest is transmitted through nonverbal communication that only can be detected through visual and auditory listening” (para. 4).

When we listen, we have to do so from several perspectives - from the cultural perspective, from the educational perspective, from the work perspective, and so on. The United States is generally regarded as a multicultural country. People from multiple cultures interact with each other daily. Within each culture, people have attitudes, beliefs, and values that may differ from other cultures - they also listen differently. In some cultures, the sender is as important as the message and it is important to engage in detail during an interaction, to provide evidence that what is being said is true. In other cultures, the message is less important than the sender. The relationship between the sender and receiver(s) of the message is more important. As a result, how messages are remembered, evaluated, and understood (listening) are different.

Faculty, staff, and students must remember, evaluate, and understand messages continuously. Faculty create lesson plans based on what they remember from previous classes including student expressions on various sections of the syllabus. Staff have to remember student predispositions so that they can advise and help them have a positive experience in the educational environment. Students must remember messages which surround them in the classroom, online, or in other environments so that they can graduate.

Listening is especially important at work. Employees have to take direction from others in order to complete their jobs. Supervisors have to listen to problems and provide solutions. Managers have to listen to all stakeholders in the business in order to provide good service or products. As you climb the
career ladder to the highest position in an organization, you listen more than you speak. As Lucas (2007) states, one must be adept at “separating fact from opinion, spotting weaknesses in reasoning, judging the soundness of evidence” (p. 58).

In all these situations, it is not advantageous to listen too hard. Trying to remember too much information will not help at all. It is better to write down some information for recall later. Note taking is recommended whether or not you are a student on campus or online, if you are at work, or if you are tending to your family. One basic reason is that you may not be able to retain all the information that is provided in face-to-face interactions, on television, at lectures, when you read, when you study online, or when you interact in groups.

One of the consequences of not listening is that we jump to conclusions (Lucas 2007). Disputes may arise that could have been avoided. Sometimes we create stereotypes and act in discriminatory ways – we do not listen carefully or we may not listen at all. For example, you may decide that a certain political party does not espouse your values. Even if that political party has a cost saving idea, you will deliberately tune out any messages sent by that party.

Taking listening seriously will benefit us in many ways. You will not be distracted easily from whatever you are focusing on thus becoming a better professor, student, or employee. You will make intelligent decisions and your opinion would be sought after. You will be better prepared to handle situations because of your critical analysis based on critical listening techniques.
REFERENCES


