Poor Listening Habits

Most people spend more time listening than they spend on any other communication activity, yet a large percentage of people never learn to listen well. One reason is that they develop poor listening habits that continue with them throughout life. The following list contains some of the most common poor listening habits:

1. Not Paying Attention. Listeners may allow themselves to be distracted or to think of something else. Also, not wanting to listen often contributes to lack of attention.

2. “Pseudo-listening”. Often, people who are thinking about something else deliberately try to look as though they are listening. Such pretense may leave the speaker with the impression that the listener has heard some important information or instructions offered by the speaker when this is not really true.

3. Listening But Not Hearing. Sometimes a person listens only to facts or details or to the way in which they are presented and misses the real meaning of the communication.

4. Rehearsing. Some people listen until they want to say something; then they stop listening, start rehearsing what they will say and wait for an opportunity to respond.

5. Interrupting. The listener does not wait until the complete meaning can be determined, but interrupts so forcefully that the speaker stops mid-sentence.

6. Hearing What is Expected. People frequently think that they heard speakers say what they expected them to say. Alternately, they refuse to hear what they don’t want to hear.

7. Feeling Defensive. The listeners assume that they know the speaker’s intention or why something was said, or for various other reasons, they expect to be attacked.

8. Listening for a Point of Disagreement. Some listeners seem to wait for the chance to attack someone. They listen intently for points on which they can disagree.

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Effective Listening

One way in which people can improve their listening is to identify their own poor listening habits and make an effort to change them. If the listeners pay special attention to the circumstances that seem to invite such behavior, they can consciously attempt to change their habits. For example, if a person realizes that he or she is “pseudo-listening” to a friend, the person can ask the friend to repeat his or her last idea. The person can even say, “I’m sorry, my mind was wandering.” The more people become conscious of their listening behaviors, the more likely they are to change their poor listening habits.

Besides ridding themselves of bad listening habits, people can acquire positive listening habits. Listed below are a few descriptions of behaviors that can lead to effective listening.

1. **Paying Attention.** If people really want to be good listeners, they must, on occasion, force themselves to pay attention to the speakers. When speakers don’t have an engaging way of speaking or the topic is uninteresting, a listener must sometimes use extra effort to keep from being distracted by other things. Try acknowledging the challenge to yourself and put forth the extra effort.

2. **Listening for the Whole Message.** This includes looking for meaning and consistency of congruence in both the verbal and nonverbal messages and listening for ideas, feelings and intentions as well as facts. Try to understand the main point of what the speaker is saying using all of these clues.

3. **Hearing Before Evaluating.** Listening to what someone says without drawing premature conclusions is a valuable aid to listening. By questioning the speaker in a non-accusing manner, rather than giving advice or judging, a listener often can discover exactly what the speaker has in mind – which many times is different from what the listener had assumed. Try asking open-ended questions to get the speaker to say more before you respond.

4. **Paraphrasing What Was Heard.** If the listener nonjudgmentally paraphrases the words of the speaker and asks if that is what was meant, many misunderstanding and misinterpretations can be avoided. Try using “What I hear you saying is .... Is that correct?”

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