**Listening in Interpersonal Communication**

There can be little doubt that you listen a great deal. On waking, you listen to the radio or television. On the way to school, you listen to friends, people around you, screeching cars, singing birds, or falling rain. In school, you listen to the instructors, to other students, and to yourself. You listen to friends at lunch and return to class to listen to more instructors. You arrive home and again listen to family and friends. Perhaps you listen to music on your phone, news on the radio or your computer, or dramas and sitcoms on television. All in all, you listen for a good part of your waking day. And there can be little doubt that listening is significant both professionally and personally. In today’s workplace, listening is regarded as a crucial skill. Whether a temporary intern or a high-level executive, you need to listen if you’re going to function effectively in today’s workplace. If you’re not convinced of this, take a look at the many websites that talk about the skills needed for success in today’s workplace and you will find that listening consistently ranks among the most important skills. Personally, we want partners who listen to us; we seek them out in good times and bad to share our thoughts and feelings. Without someone to listen to us, our lives would be a lot less fulfilling. In this chapter, we look at the nature of the listening process, the barriers to effective listening, the varied styles of listening you might use in different situations, and some cultural and gender differences in listening. Throughout this chapter, we’ll identify ways to avoid the major barriers to listening and provide guidelines for more effective listening.

**The Process of Listening**

6.1 Define listening and describe the five stages of listening. Traditionally, the study of listening has focused on spoken messages (Emmert, 1994; Brownell, 2010, Worthington & Fitch-Hauser, 2012). However, in light of Facebook, Twitter, wikis, and blogs, we need to expand the traditional definition of listening as the receiving and processing of auditory signals. If posting messages on social media sites is part of interpersonal communication (which it surely is), then the reading of these messages must also be part of interpersonal communication and most logically part of listening. Listening, then, may be defined as the process of receiving, understanding, remembering, evaluating, and responding to verbal [spoken or written] and/or nonverbal messages. We can look at listening as a process occurring in five stages: (1) receiving (hearing and attending to the message), (2) understanding (deciphering meaning from the message you hear), (3) remembering (retaining what you hear in memory), (4) evaluating (thinking critically about and judging the message), and (5) responding (answering or giving feedback to the speaker). This five-step process is visualized in Figure 6.1. All five listening stages overlap; when you listen, you’re performing all five processes at essentially the same time. For example, when listening in conversation, you’re not only remaining attentive to what the other person is saying but also critically evaluating what he or she just said and perhaps giving feedback. Listening is never perfect. There are lapses in attention, misunderstandings, lapses in memory, inadequate critical thinking, and inappropriate responding. The goal is to reduce these obstacles as best you can. Note that the listening process is circular. The responses of Person A serve as the stimuli for Person B, whose responses in turn serve as the stimuli for Person A, and so on. As will become clear in the following discussion of the five steps, listening is not a process of transferring an idea from the mind of a speaker to the mind of a listener. Rather, it is a process in which speaker and listener work together to achieve a common understanding. Figure 6.1 emphasizes that listening involves a collection of skills: attention and concentration (receiving), learning (understanding), memory (remembering), critical thinking (evaluation), and competence in giving feedback (responding). Listening can go wrong at any stage—but you can improve your listening ability by strengthening the skills needed at each step of the listening process. Consequently, suggestions for listening improvement are offered with each of the five stages.

**Stage One: Receiving**

Listening begins with hearing, the process of receiving the messages the speaker sends. One of the great myths about listening is that it’s the same as hearing. It isn’t. Hearing is just the first stage of listening; it’s equivalent to receiving. Hearing (and receiving) is a physiological process that occurs when you’re in the vicinity of vibrations in the air and these vibrations impinge on your eardrum. Hearing is basically a passive process that occurs without any attention or effort on your part; hearing is mindless. Listening, as you’ll see, is very different; listening is mindful. At the receiving stage, you note not only what is said (verbally and nonverbally) but also what is omitted. You receive, for example, your boss’s summary of your accomplishments as well as the omission of your shortcomings. To improve your receiving skills: • Focus your attention on the speaker’s verbal and nonverbal messages, on what is said and on what isn’t said. Avoid focusing your attention on what you’ll say next; if you begin to rehearse your responses, you’re going to miss what the speaker says next.

•Avoid distractions in the environment; if necessary, take the ear buds out of your ears or turn off your cell phone.

•Maintain your role as listener and avoid interrupting. Avoid interrupting as much as possible. It will only prevent you from hearing what the speaker is saying.

At times, you may wish to ask your listeners to receive your messages fairly and without prejudice, especially when you anticipate a negative reaction. For this purpose you’re likely to use disclaimers, statements that aim to ensure that your messages will be understood and will not reflect negatively on you. Disclaimers also lessen any impression of what you’re saying being an attack on face. Some of the more popular disclaimers follow (Hewitt & Stokes, 1975; McLaughlin, 1984):

•Hedging helps you to separate yourself from the message so that if your listeners reject your message, they need not reject you (for example, “I may be wrong here, but...”).

•Credentialing helps you establish your special qualifications for saying what you’re about to say (“Don’t get me wrong; I’m not homophobic” or “As someone who telecommutes, I...”).

•Sin licenses ask listeners for permission to deviate in some way from some normally accepted convention (“I know this may not be the place to discuss business, but. . .”).

•Cognitive disclaimers help you make the case that you’re in full possession of your faculties (“I know you’ll think I’m crazy, but let me explain the logic of the case”).

•Appeals for the suspension of judgment ask listeners to hear you out before making a judgment (“Don’t hang up on me until you hear my side of the story”).

Generally, disclaimers are effective when you think you might offend listeners in telling a joke (“I don’t usually like these types of jokes, but...”). In one study, for example, 11-year-old children were read a story about someone whose actions created negative effects. Some children heard the story with a disclaimer, and others heard the same story without the disclaimer. When the children were asked to indicate how the person should be punished, those who heard the story with the disclaimer recommended significantly lower punishments (Bennett, 1990). Disclaimers, however, can also get you into trouble. For example, to preface remarks with “I’m no liar” may well lead listeners to think that perhaps you are lying. Also, if you use too many disclaimers, you may be perceived as someone who doesn’t have any strong convictions or as someone who wants to avoid responsibility for just about everything. This seems especially true of hedges. In responding to statements containing disclaimers, it’s often necessary to respond to both the disclaimer and to the statement. By doing so, you let the speaker know that you heard the disclaimer and that you aren’t going to view this communication negatively. Appropriate responses might be: “I know you’re no sexist, but I don’t agree that …” or “Well, perhaps we should discuss the money now even if it doesn’t seem right.” In this brief discussion of receiving—and, in fact, throughout this entire chapter on listening—the unstated assumption is that both individuals can receive auditory signals without difficulty. But for the many people who have hearing impairments, listening presents a variety of problems. Table 6.1 provides tips for communication between people who have and people who do not have hearing difficulties.

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**Stage Two: Understanding**

Understanding is the stage at which you learn what the speaker means—the stage at which you grasp both the thoughts and the emotions expressed. Understanding one without the other is likely to result in an unbalanced picture. Understanding is not an automatic process; it takes effort. You can improve your listening understanding in a variety of ways:

1. Avoid assuming you understand what the speaker is going to say before he or she actually says it. Making assumptions can prevent you from accurately listening to what the speaker wants to say.

2. See the speaker’s messages from the speaker’s point of view. Avoid judging the message until you fully understand it as the speaker intended it.

3. Ask questions for clarification if necessary; ask for additional details or examples if they’re needed. This shows not only that you’re listening—which the speaker will appreciate—but also that you want to learn more. Material that is not clearly understood is likely to be easily lost.

4. Rephrase (paraphrase) the speaker’s ideas in your own words. This can be done silently or aloud. If done silently, it will help you rehearse and learn the material; if done aloud, it also helps you confirm your understanding of what the speaker is saying.

Right now, a large part of your listening takes place in the classroom—listening to the instructor and to other students, essentially for understanding. Look at Table 6.2, which offers a few suggestions for listening effectively in the classroom.

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**Stage Three: Remembering**

Effective listening depends on remembering. For example, when Susan says that she is planning to buy a new car, the effective listener remembers this and at a later meeting asks about the car. When Joe says that his mother is ill, the effective listener remembers this and inquires about her health later in the week. In some small-group and public speaking situations, you can augment your memory by taking notes or by recording the messages. In many work situations, taking notes is common and may even be expected. In most interpersonal communication situations, however, note taking is inappropriate—although you often do write down a telephone number, an appointment, or directions. Perhaps the most important point to understand about memory is that what you remember is not what was said but what you remember was said. Memory for speech is not reproductive; you don’t simply reproduce in your memory what the speaker said. Rather, memory is reconstructive; you actually reconstruct the messages you hear into a system that makes sense to you. Although this may seem obvious to you (reading a chapter on listening), in a survey of over 1,800 people, 63 percent thought that memory works like a video and accurately records what they hear and what they see (Simons & Chabris, 2011). If you want to remember what someone says or the names of various people, this information needs to pass from your short-term memory (the memory you use, say, to remember a phone number just long enough to write it down) into long-term memory. Short-term memory is very limited in capacity— you can hold only a small amount of information there. Long-term memory is unlimited. To facilitate the passage of information from short- to long-term memory, here are FOUR suggestions (focus, organize, unite, repeat):

1. Focus your attention on the central ideas. Even in the most casual of conversations, there are central ideas. Fix these in your mind. Repeat these ideas to yourself as you continue to listen. Avoid focusing on minor details that often lead to detours in listening and in conversation.

2. Organize what you hear; summarize the message in a more easily retained form, but take care not to ignore crucial details or qualifications. If you chunk the material into categories, you’ll be able to remember more information. For example, if you want to remember 15 or 20 items to buy in the supermarket, you’ll remember more if you group them into chunks—produce, canned goods, and meats.

3. Unite the new with the old; relate new information to what you already know. Avoid treating new information as totally apart from all else you know. There’s probably some relationship and if you identify it, you’re more likely to remember the new material.

4. Repeat names and key concepts to yourself or, if appropriate, aloud. By repeating the names or key concepts, you in effect rehearse these names and concepts, and as a result they’ll be easier to learn and remember. If you’re introduced to Alice, you’ll stand a better chance of remembering her name if you say, “Hi, Alice” than if you say just “Hi.” Be especially careful that you don’t rehearse your own anticipated responses; if you do, you’re sure to lose track of what the speaker is saying.

**Stage Four: Evaluating**

Evaluating consists of judging the messages in some way. At times you may try to evaluate the speaker’s underlying intentions or motives. Often this evaluation process goes on without much conscious awareness. For example, Elaine tells you that she is up for a promotion and is really excited about it. You may then try to judge her intention: perhaps she wants you to use your influence with the company president, or maybe she’s preoccupied with the promotion and so she tells everyone, or possibly she’s looking for a compliment. In other situations, your evaluation is more in the nature of critical analysis. For example, in listening to proposals advanced in a business meeting, you may ask: Are the proposals practical? Will they increase productivity? What’s the evidence? Is there contradictory evidence? In evaluating, consider these suggestions:

1. Resist evaluation until you fully understand the speaker’s point of view. This is not always easy, but it’s almost always essential. If you put a label on what the speaker is saying (ultraconservative, bleeding-heart liberal), you’ll hear the remainder of the messages through these labels.

2. Distinguish facts from opinions and personal interpretations by the speaker. And, most important, fix these labels in mind with the information; for example, try to remember that Jesse thinks Pat did XYZ, not just that Pat did XYZ.

3. Identify any biases, self-interests, or prejudices that may lead the speaker to slant unfairly what is said. It’s often wise to ask if the material is being presented fairly or if this person is slanting it in some way.

4. Recognize fallacious forms of “reasoning” that speakers may employ, such as:

• Name-calling: applying a favorable or unfavorable label to color your perception—“democracy” and “soft on terrorism” are two currently popular examples.

• Testimonial: using positively or negatively viewed spokespersons to encourage your acceptance or rejection of something—such as a white-coated actor to sell toothpaste or a disgraced political figure associated with an idea the speaker wants rejected.

• Bandwagon: arguing that you should believe or do something because “everyone else does.”

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**Stage Five: Responding**

Responding occurs in two phases: responses you make while the speaker is talking (immediate feedback) and responses you make after the speaker has stopped talking (delayed feedback). These feedback messages send information back to the speaker and tell the speaker how you feel and what you think about his or her messages. When you nod or smile in response to someone you’re interacting with face-to-face, you’re responding with immediate feedback. When you comment on a blog post, poke a person on Facebook who has poked you, or say you like a photo or post on Facebook, you’re responding with delayed feedback. The ease with which feedback can be given on social media (and e-mail and mobile communication) seems to have created an expectation for feedback. When you don’t respond (or don’t respond quickly enough), it may be interpreted as negative feedback, for example, that you don’t like the new post or that you want to create more distance between you. This ease of responding and the expectation (and desire) for feedback may also be one of the reasons motivating the frequent status updates and the adding of new photos, at least for some social media users. In face-to-face communication, supportive responses made while the speaker is talking are particularly effective; they acknowledge that you’re listening and that you’re understanding the speaker. These responses include what nonverbal researchers call back-channeling cues—comments such as “I see,” “yes,” “uh-huh,” and similar signals. Responses made after the speaker has stopped talking or after you read a post on a blog or on Facebook are generally more elaborate and might include expressing empathy (“I know how you must feel”), asking for clarification (“Do you mean that this new health plan is going to replace the old one?”), challenging (“I think your evidence is weak here”), agreeing (“You’re absolutely right on this; I’ll support your proposal”), or giving support (“Good luck”). Social networks make this type of feedback especially easy with comment buttons and the thumbs up icon. Improving listening responding involves avoiding some of the destructive patterns and practicing more constructive patterns, such as the following five:

1. Support the speaker throughout the speaker’s conversation by using and varying your listening cues, such as head nods and minimal responses, for example, “I see” or “uh-huh.” Using the “like” icon, poking back on Facebook, and commenting on another’s photos or posts on social networking sites also prove supportive.

2. Own your responses. Take responsibility for what you say. Instead of saying, “Nobody will want to do that” say something like “I don’t think I’ll do that.” Use the anonymity that most social networks allow with discretion.

3. Resist “responding to another’s feelings” with “solving the person’s problems” (as men are often accused of doing), unless, of course, you’re asked for advice (Tannen, 1990).

4. Focus on the other person. Avoid multitasking when you’re listening. Show the speaker that he or she is your primary focus. Take off headphones; shut down the iPhone and the television; turn away from the computer screen. Instead of looking around the room, look at the speaker; the speaker’s eyes should be your main focus.

5. Avoid being a thought-completing listener who listens a little and then finishes the speaker’s thought. Instead, express respect by allowing the speaker to complete his or her thoughts. Completing someone’s thoughts often communicates the message that nothing important is going to be said (“I already know it”).

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**Listening Barriers**

6.2 Explain the major barriers to effective listening. In addition to practicing the various skills for each stage of listening, consider some of the common general barriers to listening. Here are five such barriers and some suggestions for dealing with them as both listener and speaker—because both speaker and listener are responsible for effective listening.

**Distractions: Physical and Mental**

Physical barriers to listening may include, for example, hearing impairment, a noisy environment, or loud music. Multitasking (watching TV while listening to someone with the aim of being supportive, say) simply doesn’t work. As both listener and speaker, try to remove whatever physical barriers can be removed; for those that you can’t remove, adjust your listening and speaking to lessen the effects as much as possible. As a listener, focus on the speaker; you can attend to the room and the other people later. Mental distractions are in many ways similar to physical distractions; they get in the way of focused listening. Typical mental distractions, for example, are thinking about your upcoming Saturday night date or becoming too emotional to think (and listen) clearly. In listening, recognize that you can think about your date later. In speaking, make what you say compelling and relevant to the listener.

**Biases and Prejudices**

Biases and prejudices against groups, or against individuals who are members of such groups, will invariably distort listening. For example, a gender bias that assumes that only one sex has anything useful to say about certain topics will likely distort incoming messages that contradict this bias. As a listener, be willing to subject your biases and prejudices to contradictory information; after all, if they’re worth having, they should stand up to differences of opinion. When you as a speaker feel that you may be facing bias, ask your listeners to suspend their attitude for the moment—I know you don’t like the Martins, and I can understand why. But, just listen to . . .

Another type of bias is closed-mindedness, which is seen, for example, in the person who refuses to hear any feminist argument or anything about gay marriage. As a listener, assume that what the speaker is saying will be useful in some way. As a speaker, anticipate that many people will be closed-minded on a variety of issues, and remember that it often helps to simply ask for openness—I know this is contrary to what many people think, but let’s look at this logically.

**Racist, Heterosexist, Ageist, and Sexist Listening**

Just as racist, heterosexist, ageist, and sexist attitudes influence your language, they can also influence your listening if you hear what speakers are saying through the stereotypes you hold. Prejudiced listening occurs when you listen differently to a person because of his or her gender, race, affectional orientation, or age, even though these characteristics are irrelevant to the message. As you can appreciate, this type of listening can present a major barrier to accurate listening. Racist, heterosexist, ageist, and sexist listening occur in lots of situations. For example, when you dismiss a valid argument—or attribute validity to an invalid argument—because the speaker is of a particular race, affectional orientation, age group, or gender, you’re listening with prejudice. Of course, there are many instances when these characteristics are relevant and pertinent to your evaluation of a message. For example, the sex of a person who is talking about pregnancy, fathering a child, birth control, or surrogate motherhood is, most would agree, probably relevant to the message. So in these cases it is not sexist listening to take the sex of the speaker into consideration. It is sexist listening, however, to assume that only one sex can

be an authority on a particular topic or that one sex’s opinions are without value. The same is true in relation to listening through a person’s race or affectional orientation.

**Lack of Appropriate Focus**

Focusing on what a person is saying is obviously necessary for effective listening. And yet there are many influences that can lead you astray. For example, listeners often get lost because they focus on irrelevancies, say, on an especially vivid example that conjures up old memories. As a listener, try not to get detoured from the main idea; don’t get hung up on unimportant details. Try to repeat the idea to yourself and see the details in relation to this main concept. As a speaker, try to avoid language or examples that may divert attention from your main idea. People sometimes listen only for information with an obvious relevance to them. But this type of listening only prevents you from expanding your horizons. After all, it’s quite possible that information that you originally thought irrelevant will eventually prove helpful. Avoid interpreting everything in terms of what it means to you; see other perspectives. As a speaker, be sure to make what you say relevant to your specific listener. Another mistake is for the listener to focus on the responses he or she is going to make while the speaker is still speaking. Anticipating how you’re going to respond or what you’re going to say (and perhaps even interrupting the speaker) just prevents you from hearing the message in full. Instead, make a mental note of something and then get back to listening. As a speaker, when you feel someone is preparing to argue with you, ask them to hear you out—I know you disagree with this, but let me finish and we’ll get back to that. One of the things that makes maintaining an appropriate focus difficult is the enormous amount of information that surrounds you. Consider the Facebook pages of some of your friends. They are often so cluttered with posts and photos and album covers and advertisements and much more that it’s difficult to focus on what is important.

**Premature Judgment**

Perhaps the most obvious form of premature judgment is assuming you know what the speaker is going to say—so there’s no need to really listen. Let the speaker say what he or she is going to say before you decide that you already know it. As a speaker, of course, it’s often wise to assume that listeners will do exactly this, so it may be helpful to make clear that what you’re saying will be unexpected. A common listener reaction is to draw conclusions or judgments on incomplete evidence. Sometimes listeners stop listening after hearing a speaker, for example, express an attitude they disagree with or make some sexist or culturally insensitive remark. Instead, this is a situation that calls for especially concentrated listening so that you don’t rush to judgment. Instead, wait for the evidence or argument; avoid making judgments before you gather all the information. Listen first; judge second. As a speaker, be aware of this tendency and when you feel this is happening, ask for a suspension of judgment. A simple “Hear me out” is often sufficient to prevent a too-early judgment on the part of listeners.

Styles of Effective Listening 6.3 Summarize the several styles of listening. Before reading about styles of effective listening in interpersonal communication, examine your listening habits and tendencies by responding to each statement using the following scale: 1 = always, 2 = frequently, 3 = sometimes, 4 = seldom, and 5 = never. \_\_\_\_ 1. I listen actively, communicate acceptance of the speaker, and prompt the speaker to explore his or her thoughts further. \_\_\_\_ 2. I listen to what the speaker is saying and feeling; I try to feel what the speaker feels.

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\_\_\_\_ 3. I listen without judging the speaker. \_\_\_\_ 4. I listen to the literal meanings that a speaker communicates; I don’t look too deeply into hidden meanings. \_\_\_\_ 5. I listen without active involvement; I generally remain silent and take in what the other person is saying. \_\_\_\_ 6. I listen objectively; I focus on the logic of the ideas rather than on the emotional meaning of the message. \_\_\_\_ 7. I listen politely even to messages that contradict my attitudes and beliefs. \_\_\_\_ 8. I interrupt a speaker when I have something really relevant to say. \_\_\_\_ 9. I listen critically, evaluating the speaker and what the speaker is saying. \_\_\_\_ 10. I look for the hidden meanings, the meanings that are revealed by subtle verbal or nonverbal cues. These statements focus on the styles of listening to be discussed in this section, each of which is appropriate at some times but not at others. The only responses that are inappropriate, therefore, are “always” and “never.” Effective listening is listening that is tailored to the specific communication situation. Listening is situational; your style of listening should vary with the situation, and each situation calls for a somewhat different combination of listening styles. You do (and should) listen differently depending on your purpose, your conversational partners, and the type of message; in some situations, you’ll need to be especially critical and in others especially supportive. Visualize each listening situation as one in which you have to make choices among the five dimensions of listening discussed in this section. Each listening situation should call for a somewhat different configuration of listening responses. The art of effective listening is largely one of making appropriate choices along the following five dimensions:

(1) empathic versus objective listening, (2) nonjudgmental versus critical listening, (3) surface versus depth listening, (4) polite versus impolite listening, and (5) active versus inactive listening. Let’s take a look at each of these dimensions.

**Empathic and Objective Listening**

If you’re to understand what a person means and what a person is feeling, you need to listen with some degree of empathy, the feeling of another’s feelings (Rogers, 1970; Rogers & Farson, 1981). To empathize with others is to feel with them, to see the world as they see it, to feel what they feel. Only when you achieve this can you fully understand another person’s meaning. Empathic listening also helps you to enhance your relationships (Barrett & Godfrey, 1988; Snyder, 1992). Although for most communication situations, empathic listening is the preferred mode of responding, you sometimes need to engage in objective listening—to go beyond empathy and measure meanings and feelings against some objective reality. It’s important to listen as Peter tells you how the entire world hates him, and to understand how Peter feels and why he feels this way. But then you need to look a bit more objectively at Peter and perhaps see the paranoia or the self-hatred. Sometimes you have to put your empathic responses aside and listen with objectivity and detachment. In adjusting your empathic and objective listening: • Punctuate the message from the speaker’s point of view; see the sequence of events (which events are causes and which are effects) as the speaker does. And try to figure out how this punctuation can influence what the speaker says and does. • Engage in equal, two-way conversation. To encourage openness and empathy, try to eliminate any physical or psychological barriers to equality (for example, step from behind the large desk separating you from your employees). Avoid interrupting the speaker—which sends the signal that what you have to say is more important.

•Seek to understand both thoughts and feelings. Don’t consider your listening task finished until you’ve understood what the speaker is feeling as well as thinking. •Avoid “offensive listening,” the tendency to listen to bits and pieces of information that will enable you to attack the speaker or find fault with something the speaker has said (Floyd, 1985). •Strive to be objective when listening to friends and foes alike. Your attitudes may lead you to distort messages—to block out positive messages about a foe and negative messages about a friend. Guard against “expectancy hearing,” when you fail to hear what the speaker is really saying and hear what you expect to hear instead.

**Nonjudgmental and Critical Listening**

Effective listening includes both nonjudgmental and critical responses. You need to listen nonjudgmentally—with an open mind toward understanding. But you also need to listen critically—with a view toward making some kind of evaluation or judgment. Clearly, engage in nonjudgmental listening first; listen for understanding while suspending judgment. Only after you’ve fully understood the relevant messages should you evaluate or judge. Supplement open-minded listening with critical listening. Listening with an open mind helps you understand messages better; listening with a critical mind helps you analyze and evaluate the messages. In adjusting your nonjudgmental and critical listening: •Keep an open mind and avoid prejudging. Delay your judgments until you fully understand the intention and the content the speaker is communicating. Avoid both positive and negative evaluation until you have a reasonably complete understanding. •Avoid filtering out or oversimplifying complex messages. Similarly, avoid filtering out undesirable messages. You don’t want to hear that something you believe in is untrue, that people you care for are unkind, or that ideals you hold are self destructive. Yet it’s important that you reexamine your beliefs by listening to these messages. •Recognize your own biases. These may interfere with accurate listening and cause you to distort message reception through the process of assimilation—the tendency to integrate and interpret what you hear (or think you hear) to fit your own biases, prejudices, and expectations. For example, are your ethnic, national, or religious biases preventing you from appreciating a speaker’s point of view? •Avoid sharpening. Recognize and combat the natural human tendency toward sharpening—a process in which one or two aspects of the message become highlighted, emphasized, and perhaps embellished. Often the concepts that are sharpened are incidental remarks that somehow stand out from the rest of the message. Be sure to listen critically to the entire message when you need to make evaluations and judgments. • Recognize the fallacies of language. Table 6.4 identifies four common fallacies that challenge critical listening.

**Surface and Depth Listening**

In Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar, Marc Antony, in giving the funeral oration for Caesar, says: “I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him. / The evil that men do lives after them; / The good is oft interred with their bones.” And later: “For Brutus is an honourable man; / So are they all, all honourable men.” If we listen beyond the surface of Marc Antony’s words, we can see that he really comes to praise Caesar, and to convince the crowd that Brutus was dishonorable—despite the fact that at first glance his words seem to say quite the opposite. In most messages, there’s an obvious meaning that you can derive from surface listening—a literal reading of the words and sentences. But there’s often another level of meaning. Sometimes, as in Julius Caesar, it’s the opposite of the literal meaning; at other times, it seems totally unrelated. Consider some frequently heard types of messages. For example, Claire asks you how you like her new haircut. On one level the meaning is clear: Do you like the haircut? But depth listening can reveal another, perhaps more important, level: Claire is asking you to say something positive about her appearance. In the same way, the parent who complains about working hard at the office or in the home may, on a deeper level, be asking for an expression of appreciation. The child who talks about the unfairness of the other children in the playground may be asking for comfort and love. To appreciate these other meanings, listen in depth. If you listen only to the surfacelevel communication (the literal meaning), you’ll miss the underlying message and will surely miss the opportunity to make meaningful contact with the other person’s feelings and needs. If you say to your parent, “You’re always complaining. I bet you really love working so hard,” you fail to respond to the call for understanding and appreciation. In regulating your surface and depth listening: •Focus on both verbal and nonverbal messages. Recognize both consistent and inconsistent “packages” of messages, and use these as guides for drawing inferences about the speaker’s meaning. Ask questions when in doubt. Listen also to what is omitted. Remember that speakers communicate by what they leave out as well as by what they include. •Listen for both content and relational messages. The student who constantly challenges the teacher is, on one level, communicating disagreement over content. However, on another level—the relationship level—the student may be voicing objections to the instructor’s authority or authoritarianism. The instructor needs to listen and respond to both types of messages. •Make special note of self-reflexive statements—statements that refer back to the speaker. People inevitably talk about themselves. Whatever a person says is, in part, a function of who that person is. Attending carefully to those personal, self-referential messages will give you great insight into the person and the person’s messages. •At the same time, don’t disregard the literal meaning in trying to uncover the message’s hidden meaning. Balance your listening between the surface and the underlying meaning. Respond to the different levels of meaning in the messages of others as you would like others to respond to yours—be sensitive but not obsessive, attentive but not overly eager to uncover hidden messages.

**Polite and Impolite Listening**

Politeness is often thought of as the exclusive function of the speaker, as solely an encoding or sending function. But politeness (or impoliteness) may also be signaled through listening (Fukushima, 2000). Sometimes, of course, you do not want to listen politely, for example, if someone is being verbally abusive or condescending or using racist or sexist language. In these cases, you might want to show your disapproval by showing that you’re not even listening. But most often you’ll want to listen politely and you’ll want to express this politeness through your listening behavior. Here are a few suggestions for demonstrating that you are in fact listening politely. As you read, notice that these are strategies designed to be supportive of the speaker’s positive and negative face needs: • Avoid interrupting the speaker. Avoid trying to take over the speaker’s turn. Avoid changing the topic. If you must say something in response to something the speaker said and can’t wait until he or she finishes, then say it as briefly as possible and pass the speaker’s turn back to the speaker. •Give supportive listening cues. These might include nodding your head, giving minimal verbal responses such as “I see” or “yes, it’s true,” or moving closer to the speaker. Listen in a way that demonstrates that what the speaker is saying is important. In some cultures, polite listening cues must be cues of agreement (Japanese culture is often used as an example); in other cultures, polite listening cues are attentiveness and support rather than cues of agreement (much of U.S. culture is an example). • Show empathy with the speaker. Demonstrate that you understand and feel the speaker’s thoughts and feelings by giving responses that show this level of understanding—smiling or cringing or otherwise echoing the feelings of the speaker. If you echo the speaker’s nonverbal expressions, your behavior is likely to be seen as empathic. • Maintain eye contact. In much of the United States, this is perhaps the single most important rule. If you don’t maintain eye contact when someone is talking to you, then you’ll appear to be not listening and definitely not listening politely. This rule, however, does not hold in all cultures. In some Latin and Asian cultures, polite listening consists of looking down and avoiding direct eye contact when, for example, listening to a superior or much older person. •Give positive feedback. Throughout the listening encounter and perhaps especially after the speaker’s turn (when you continue the conversation as you respond to what the speaker has said), positive feedback will be seen as polite and negative feedback as impolite. If you must give negative feedback, then do so in a way that does not attack the person’s negative face. For example, first mention areas of agreement or what you liked about what the person said and stress your good intentions. And, most important, do it in private. Public criticism is especially threatening and will surely be seen as a personal attack. A somewhat different slant on politeness and listening can be seen in “forcing” people to listen when they don’t want to. Generally, the polite advice is to be sensitive

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**Active and Inactive Listening**

One of the most important communication skills you can learn is that of active listening (Gordon, 1975). Consider the following interaction. You’re disappointed that you have to redo your entire report, and you say: “I can’t believe I have to rewrite this entire budget report. I really worked hard on this project and now I have to do it all over again.” To this, you get three different responses: Danny That’s not so bad; most people find they have to redo their first reports. That’s the norm here. Kelly You should be pleased that all you have to do is a simple rewrite. Sylar and Nathan both had to redo their entire projects. Suzanne You have to rewrite that report you’ve worked on for the last three weeks? You sound really angry and frustrated. All three listeners are probably trying to make you feel better. But they go about it in very different ways and, you can be sure, with very different results. Danny tries to lessen the significance of the rewrite. This well-intended response is extremely common but does little to promote meaningful communication and understanding. Kelly tries to give the situation a positive spin. With these responses, however, both these listeners are also suggesting that you should not be feeling the way that you do. They’re implying that your feelings are not legitimate and should be replaced with more logical feelings. Suzanne’s response, however, is different from the others. Suzanne uses active listening. Active listening owes its development to Thomas Gordon (1975), who made it a cornerstone of his Parent Effectiveness Training (PET) technique; it is a process of sending back to the speaker what you as a listener think the speaker meant—both in content and in feelings. Active listening, then, is not merely repeating the speaker’s exact words but rather putting together your understanding of the speaker’s total message into a meaningful whole. THE FUNCTIONS OF ACTIvE LISTENINg Active listening serves several important functions. First, it helps you as a listener to check your understanding of what the speaker said and, more important, of what he or she meant. Reflecting back perceived meanings to the speaker gives the speaker an opportunity to offer clarification and correct any misunderstandings. Second, through active listening you let the speaker know that you acknowledge and accept his or her feelings. In the sample responses given, the first two listeners challenged your feelings. Suzanne, the active listener, accepted what you were feeling. In addition, she also explicitly identified your feelings: “You sound angry and frustrated,” allowing you an opportunity to correct her interpretation if necessary. Third, active listening stimulates the speaker to explore feelings and thoughts. Suzanne’s response encourages you to elaborate on your feelings and helps you deal with them by talking them through. A word of caution: In communicating your understanding back to the person, be especially careful to avoid sending what Gordon (1975) calls “solution messages”—messages that tell the person how he or she should feel or what he or she should do. Four types of messages send solutions, and you’ll want to avoid them in your active listening: •Ordering messages: “Do this. ...” “Don’t touch that.…” •Warning and threatening messages: “If you don’t do this, you’ll. . . .” “If you do that, you’ll. ...” •Preaching and moralizing messages: “People should all.. . .” “We all have responsibilities.. . .” •Advising messages: “Why don’t you. . .?” “I think you should… .” THE TECHNIqUES OF ACTIvE LISTENINg Three simple techniques will prove useful as you learn to practice active listening: Paraphrase the speaker’s meaning, express understanding of the speaker’s feelings, and ask questions. 1. Paraphrase the speaker’s meaning. Stating in your own words what you think the speaker means and feels helps ensure understanding and also shows interest in the speaker. This is especially important in online communication, where you don’t generally have visual cues that help explain the nuances of meaning. Paraphrasing gives the speaker a chance to extend what was originally said. Thus, when Suzanne echoes your thoughts, you’re given the opportunity to elaborate on why rewriting the budget report means so much to you. In paraphrasing, be objective; be especially careful not to lead the speaker in the direction you think he or she should go. Also, be careful that you don’t overdo paraphrase; only a very small percentage of statements need paraphrasing. Paraphrase when you feel there’s a chance for misunderstanding or when you want to express support for the other person and keep the conversation going. 2. Express understanding of the speaker’s feelings. Echo the feelings the speaker expressed or implied (“You must have felt horrible.”). This expression of empathy will help you further check your perception of the speaker’s feelings. This will also allow the speaker to see his or her feelings more objectively (especially helpful when they’re feelings of anger, hurt, or depression) and to elaborate on them. 3. Ask questions. Asking questions ensures your own understanding of the speaker’s thoughts and feelings and secures additional information (“How did you feel when you read your job appraisal report?”). Ask questions to provide just enough stimulation and support for the speaker to feel he or she can elaborate on these thoughts and feelings. These questions should further confirm your interest and concern for the speaker but not pry into unrelated areas or challenge the speaker in any way. Active listening, then, is not merely repeating the speaker’s exact words but rather putting together into some meaningful whole your understanding of the speaker’s total message. And incidentally, when combined with empathic listening, it proves the most effective mode for success as a salesperson (Comer & Drollinger, 1999). As noted earlier, listening styles need to be adjusted to the specific situation. Understanding the nature and skills of these styles should help you make more reasoned and more effective listening choices.

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**Culture, Gender, and Listening**

6.4 Describe how to listen with culture and gender sensitivity. Listening is difficult in part because of the inevitable differences in communication systems between speaker and listener. Because each person has had a unique set of experiences, each person’s meaning system is different from every other person’s. When speaker and listener come from different cultures or are of different genders, these differences and their effects are naturally much greater. Consider culture first.

**Culture and Listening**

 In a global environment in which people from very different cultures work together, it’s especially important to understand the ways in which cultural differences can influence listening. Three such factors may be singled out: (1) language and speech, (2) nonverbal behaviors, and (3) feedback. Language AND SPEECH Even when speaker and listener speak the same language, they speak it with different meanings and, as noted earlier, with different dialects and accents. No two speakers speak exactly the same language. Speakers of the same language, at the very least, have different meanings for the same terms because they have had different experiences. Speakers and listeners who speak different native languages and who may have learned English as a second language have even greater differences in meaning. Translations never fully capture the meaning in the other language. If your meaning for the word house was learned in a culture in which everyone lived in their own house with lots of land around it, then communicating with someone for whom the meaning of house was learned in a neighborhood of high-rise tenements is going to be difficult. Although you’ll each hear the same word, the meanings you’ll each develop will be drastically different. In adjusting your listening—especially in an intercultural setting—understand that the speaker’s meanings may be very different from yours even though you’re speaking in the same language. In many classrooms throughout the world, there is a wide range of accents. Students whose native language is a tonal one (in which differences in pitch signal important meaning differences), such as Chinese, may speak other languages such as English with variations in pitch that may seem puzzling to others. Those whose native language is Japanese may have trouble distinguishing l from r in English, for example, because the Japanese language does not include this distinction. In these cases, the native language acts as a filter and influences the accent given to the second language. Nonverbal Behaviors Speakers from different cultures have different display rules—cultural rules that govern what nonverbal behaviors are appropriate or inappropriate in a public setting. As you listen to other people, you also “listen” to their nonverbal cues. If nonverbals are drastically different from what you expect on the basis of the verbal message, you may experience them as a kind of noise or interference, or even as contradictory messages. Also, of course, different cultures may give very different meanings to the same nonverbal gesture. For example, the thumb and forefinger forming a circle means “okay” in most of the United States, but it means “money” in Japan, “zero” in some Mediterranean countries, and “I’ll kill you” in Tunisia. FEEDBACk Members of some cultures give very direct and very frank feedback. Speakers from these cultures—the United States is a good example—expect feedback to be an honest reflection of what their listeners are feeling. In other cultures—Japan and Korea are good examples—it’s more important to be positive than to be truthful, so people may respond with positive feedback (say, in commenting on a business colleague’s proposal) even though they don’t agree with what is being said. Listen to feedback, as you would all messages, with a full recognition that various cultures view feedback very differently.

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**Gender and Listening**

Men and women learn different styles of listening, just as they learn different styles for using verbal and nonverbal messages. Not surprisingly, these different styles can create major difficulties in opposite-sex interpersonal communication. RAPPORT AND REPORT TALk According to Deborah Tannen (1990) in her bestselling You Just Don’t Understand: Women and Men in Conversation, women seek to build rapport and establish closer relationships, and they use listening to achieve these ends. Men, on the other hand, emphasize their expertise and use it in dominating the interaction. They talk about things; they report. Women play down their expertise and are more interested in talking about feelings and relationships and in communicating supportiveness. Tannen argues that the goal of a man in conversation is to be given respect, so he seeks to show his knowledge and expertise. A woman, on the other hand, seeks to be liked, so she expresses agreement. LISTENINg CUES Men and women feed back to the speaker different types of listening cues and consequently show that they’re listening in different ways. In conversation, a woman is more apt to give lots of listening cues—interjecting “yeah” or “uh-huh,” nodding in agreement, and smiling. A man is more likely to listen quietly, without giving lots of listening cues as feedback. Women also make more eye contact when listening than do men, who are more apt to look around and often away from the speaker (Brownell, 2006). As a result of these differences, women seem to be more engaged in listening than do men. AMOUNT AND PURPOSES OF LISTENINg Tannen argues that men listen less to women than women listen to men. The reason, says Tannen, is that listening places the person in an inferior position, whereas speaking places the person in a superior position. Men may seem to assume a more argumentative posture while listening, as if getting ready to argue. They also may appear to ask questions that are more argumentative or that seek to puncture holes in your position as a way to play up their own expertise. Women are more likely to ask supportive questions and perhaps offer criticism that is more positive than men. Men and women act this way to both men and women; their customary ways of talking don’t seem to change depending on whether the listener is male or female. It’s important to note that not all researchers agree that there is sufficient evidence to make the claims that Tannen and others make about gender differences (Goldsmith & Fulfs, 1999). Gender differences are changing drastically and quickly; it’s best to take generalizations about gender as starting points for investigation and not as airtight conclusions (Gamble & Gamble, 2014). Further, as you no doubt have observed, gender differences—although significant—are far outnumbered by similarities between males and females. It’s important to be mindful of both differences and similarities.

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