Listening and Hearing; They Aren't the Same Thing

Hearing is the act of perceiving sound by the ear. Assuming an individual is not hearing-impaired, hearing simply happens. Listening, however, is something that one consciously chooses to do. Listening requires concentration so that the brain processes meaning from words and sentences.

Listening leads to learning, but this is not always an easy task. The normal adult rate of speech is 100-150 words per minute, but the brain can think at a rate of 400-500 words per minute, leaving extra time for daydreaming, or anticipating the speaker's or the recipient's next words.

As opposed to hearing, listening skills can be learned and refined. The art of active listening allows you to fully receive a message from another person. Especially in a situation involving anger or a tense interchange, active listening allows you to be sensitive to the multiple dimensions of communication that make up an entire message. These dimensions include:

- The occasion for the message: What is the reason why the person is communicating with me now?
- The length of the message: What can the length of the message tell me about its importance?
- The words chosen: Is the message being made formally? Is it with aloofness or slang?
- The volume and pace: What clues do the loudness and speed give me?
- The Pauses and Hesitations: How do these enhance or detract from the message?
- Non-verbal clues: What does eye contact, posture, or facial expressions tell me about the message?

Empathy is the capability to share and understand another's emotions and feelings. Empathetic listening is the art of seeking a truer understanding of how others are feeling. This requires excellent discrimination and close attention to the nuances of emotional signals. According to Stephen Covey in The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, empathetic listening involves five basic tasks:
1. Repeat verbatim the content of the communication; the words, not the feelings.

2. Rephrase content; summarize the meaning of the words in your own words.

3. Reflect feelings; look more deeply and begin to capture feelings in your own words. Look beyond words for body language and tone to indicate feelings.

4. Rephrase contents and reflect feelings; express both their words and feelings in your own words.

5. Discern when empathy is not necessary or appropriate.

Asking Questions

Active listeners use specific questioning techniques to elicit more information from speakers. Below are three types of questions to use when practicing active listening.

Open Questions

Open questions stimulate thinking and discussion or responses including opinions or feelings. They pass control of the conversation to the respondent. Leading words in open questions include: Why, what, or how, as in the following examples:

- Tell me about the current employee orientation process.
- How do you open the emergency exit door on an A320 aircraft?

Clarifying Questions

A clarifying question helps to remove ambiguity, elicits additional detail, and guides the answer to a question. When you ask a clarifying question, you ask for expansion or detail, while withholding your judgment and own opinions. When asking for clarification, you will have to listen carefully to what the other person says. Frame your question as someone trying to understand in more detail. Often asking for a specific example is useful. This also helps the speaker evaluate his or her own opinions and perspective. Below are some examples:

- I can tell you are really concerned about this. Let me see if I can repeat to you your main concerns so we can start to think about what to do in this situation.
- What sort of savings are you looking to achieve?

Closed Questions
Closed questions usually require a one-word answer, and effectively shut off discussion. Closed questions provide facts, allow the questioner to maintain control of the conversation, and are easy to answer. Typical leading words are: Is, can, how many, or does. While closed questions are not the optimum choice for active listening, at times they may be necessary to elicit facts. Below are several examples of closed questions:

* Who will lead the meeting?

* Do you know how to open the emergency exit door on this aircraft?

The following exercise provides practice with questioning techniques to support communications skills.

Body Language

Body language is a form of non-verbal communication involving the use of stylized gestures, postures, and physiologic signs which act as cues to other people. Humans unconsciously send and receive non-verbal signals through body language all the time.

Non-verbal communication is the process of communication through sending and receiving wordless messages. It is the single most powerful form of communication. Nonverbal communication cues others about what is in your mind, even more than your voice or words can do.

According to studies at UCLA, as much as 93 percent of communication effectiveness is determined by nonverbal cues, and the impact of performance was determined 7 percent by the words used, 38 percent by voice quality, and 55 percent by non-verbal communication.

In communication, if a conflict arises between your words and your body language, your body language rules every time.