

Causes of Poor Listening

Brief: Listening is negatively affected by low concentration, trying too hard, jumping ahead, and/or focusing on style instead of substance.

Learning Objective: Identify the four main barriers to effective listening.

Key Terms:

- Confirmation bias: The tendency to pick out aspects of a conversation that support preexisting beliefs and values.
- Decoding: Retrieving meaning and understanding from verbal and nonverbal symbols.
- Vividness effect: The manner in which vivid or highly graphic and dramatic events affect an individual's perception of a situation.

Barriers that Impede Listening



The act of listening is affected by any barrier that impedes the flow of information. For this reason, it's nearly impossible to listen well all the time. As a result, poor listening is commonplace.

These barriers include distractions, an inability to prioritize information, a tendency to assume or judge based on little or no information (i.e., “jumping to conclusions”), and general confusion about the topic being discussed. Listening barriers may be psychological (e.g., the listener's emotions) or physical (e.g., noise and visual distraction).

Some of the most common barriers to effective listening include low concentration, lack of prioritization, poor judgement, and focusing on style rather than substance.

Low Concentration

When a listener is not paying attention to a speaker's dialogue, effective communication is significantly diminished. Low concentration, or not paying close attention to speakers, can result from various psychological or physical situations including visual or auditory distractions, physical discomfort, inadequate volume, lack of interest in the subject material, stress, or personal bias. Both listeners and speakers should be aware of these kinds of impediments and work to eliminate or mitigate them.

When listening to a speech, there is a time delay between when a speaker utters a sentence to the moment the listener comprehends, or “decodes,” the speaker's meaning. Normally, this

process happens within the span of a few seconds. If this decoding process takes longer, the listener has to catch up to the speaker's words if he or she continues to speak at a pace faster than the listener can comprehend. Often when they stop understanding, listeners simply give up and stop listening. To help listeners better understand what they are saying, speakers need to know which parts of their speech may be more difficult to understand than others, and adjust the speed, vocabulary, and sentence structure accordingly.

Lack of Prioritization

Just as lack of attention to detail in a conversation can lead to ineffective listening, so can focusing too much attention on the least important information. Listeners need to be able to pick up on social cues and prioritize the information they hear to identify the most important points within the context of the conversation.

Often, the information the audience needs to know is delivered along with less pertinent or irrelevant information. When listeners give equal weight to everything they hear, it makes it difficult to organize and retain the information they need. For instance, students who take notes in class must know which information to write down within the context of an entire lecture. Writing down the lecture word for word is impossible as well as inefficient.

Jumping to Judgement

When listening to a speaker's message, it is common to overlook aspects of the conversation or make judgments before all of the information is presented. Listeners often engage in confirmation bias, which is the tendency to isolate aspects of a conversation to support one's own preexisting beliefs and values. This psychological process has a detrimental effect because listeners tend to form opinions without first obtaining all pertinent information.

Focusing on Style, Not Substance

The vividness effect explains how vivid or highly graphic and dramatic events affect an individual's perception of a situation. When observing an event in person, an observer is automatically drawn toward the sensational, vivid, or memorable aspects of a conversation or speech. In the case of listening, distracting or larger-than-life elements in a speech can deflect attention away from the most important information in the presentation.

Cultural differences (including the speaker's accent and vocabulary) and differences in physical appearance can also obstruct the listening process. Listeners should focus on the substance of the message, rather than the speaker's style of delivery or appearance.

From Concept to Action

Have you ever discounted a message you've received from someone based on their accent, appearance, or other differences? Be honest. At one time or another most of us have rejected

the validity of a communication because the sender seemed too young, too old, of the wrong religion or political affiliation, had a strong accent, or was otherwise outside of our everyday experience. How can you build on this awareness to become more effective at focusing on the substance of the message, rather than the speaker's style of delivery or appearance?

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