BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE LISTENING

In the initial phase of study of customer service operations, Fleming Communications, Inc. determined that listening is the communication task that our customer representatives spend almost 50 percent of their time doing. This report is the first in a series of reports. The purpose of this report is to explain a major barrier to effective listening and to present poor listening habits.

Issues in Listening

Contrary to common belief, listening is not an easy task. Two issues to consider are the rate that listeners can process words and barriers to listening.

Rate. Studies show that listeners can recognize words at a rate of approximately five times faster than the rate at which speakers can speak. A very important question to consider is at what rate does the mind process these words? With the mind processing information at over 1,000 words per minute, the listener is challenged to listen actively.¹

Listening barriers. Listeners are also confronted with various other barriers to effective listening. These barriers might include assumptions already made about the topic, about the speaker, about what the speaker will say, or about the specific setting. All of these assumptions will lead the listener to tune out what the speaker is actually saying. Another barrier to listening may be simply fatigue—the listener is too tired or perhaps too hungry or too busy to listen.

Distractions often influence the listener’s ability to be an active listener. These annoyances may be loud noises near the speaker or a room that is too cold or too warm.2

**Poor Listening Habits**

The poor listening habits presented below by Williams are quite common among listeners.3 Being aware of the most common poor listening habits will aid in overcoming them.

- Pretending to listen is easy to do. By nodding, saying yes, and looking directly at the speaker, listeners can fake listening.

- On the other hand, not looking at the speaker also results in poor listening as facial expressions and gestures are not communicated to the listener.

- A listener’s commitment to recording detailed notes often results in poor listening or overlistening.

- Judgments by the listener about the speaker or the topic result in poor listening.

- Rushing the speaker causes the speaker to think the listener’s time is being wasted.

- Interrupting the speaker is rude and does not enhance listening.

- Showing interest in something other than the conversation and allowing any distractions to obtain the listener’s attention result in poor listening.

**Summary**

Understanding that listening is not easy is a first step in becoming a better listener. Identifying individual habits that do not enhance effective listening is the next step. The first session of the Listening Skills Training Program will focus on poor listening habits.

---
