Barriers to Listening Effectiveness
By L. Douglas Mault

Many months ago we reviewed the need for good, open and clear communications within an organization. One of the key items listed in that article was “Listen actively and effectively.” This article will expand on that topic. Bear in mind that listening, for many of us, is difficult, with some of that difficulty arising from many aspects.

When you listen actively, the conversation is complete and whole. In other words, if someone is talking and no one is listening, there is no conversation. One way to engender respect and better performance is to learn to listen. Here are eight barriers to effective listening. Keep them in mind the next time one of your colleagues or customers is trying to tell you something you should know.

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Thinking Versus Talking Speed. While most people talk at about 125 to 150 words per minute, they can listen at about 500 to 700 words per minute. That leaves a lot of time for your brain to be “idle” and for you to seem inattentive. Be aware of this potential to be distracted or your mind may well wander.

Time. This is one of the good listener’s most important assets. Sometimes, time can be an inhibitor. It is important to remember that listening to others is one of the most important uses of your time. If the topic is important make a value judgment and commit the necessary time. This activity can payoff in large dividends.

Premature Judgment. This is a major barrier to listening. It is easy to make a judgment upon hearing something and to accept or reject without much depth of understanding. The key is to try to keep listening with an open mind and reserve judgment until all the facts are in.

Excessive Emotional Involvement. This is a constant danger. It is important to build this out whether it is anger, fear, guilt, etc. This is especially important if you are emotionally invested in an opinion contrary to the one being discussed.

Apathy Effective listening is an active process. It requires a great deal of energy and concentration. Be careful not to view listening as a passive activity. People are extremely sensitive to, and aware of, those who feign listening.

Hidden Agendas. Hidden motives can affect the information that is gathered as well as distort the meaning of this information. We all have hidden agendas, but we need to be sure that they do not get in the way of our listening. Of course, we have to be sure any hidden agenda is accounted for and eventually dealt with.

Facts Versus Empathy. There are times when we need to stop listening to facts and concentrate on meanings and feelings. When we ignore feelings, we give others the impression that we don’t care about them.

Reducing Other’s Self-Worth. Poor listening tends to reduce the self-worth of those with whom we are interacting. Be sure to avoid such major ‘worth-reducers’ as ignoring or interrupting another or using impersonal or irrelevant responses. ☐

About the Author
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