

# CONNECTIONS

*Communicating in Culturally Diverse Settings*

## The Art of Listening: Part 1

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Listening is one of the most prominent activities in our daily lives. In fact, with the exception of breathing, there is nothing we do more frequently than listen. Unfortunately, most of us don't listen as well as we could. Research indicates that the average person forgets 50% of what they hear within seconds of a conversation. Within two days, we lose 75% and a week after a conversation, we have lost over 90% of what was discussed. This occurs because of the four barriers to effective listening that we encounter on a regular basis:

1. **A natural tendency to want to speak first and focus on our own agenda.** This gets in the way of our ability to really hear and understand the other person.
2. **Negative perceptions regarding the speaker and/or topic.** If you lack enthusiasm for either your com-

munication partner or the subject matter, your ability to listen can be severely limited.

3. **Our ability to think much faster than someone can speak.** Each of us has the ability to process words 4-5 times faster than a person can speak them. This can lead to impatience on part of the listener if their communication partner is not making his or her points quickly enough.

4. **Emotional, external, internal and cultural noise.** Noise is anything that interferes with the accurate transmission of information between a speaker and listener. Emotional noise consists of words that arouse strong emotions in us and thereby limit our communication effectiveness. External noise involves distractions that take place around us and take our attention away from the speaker. Internal noise consists of distractions tak-

ing place within us, such as having our mind on something else or being in a rush, which take our attention away from the speaker. Finally, cultural noise involves distractions caused by the cultural differences between two people. For example, communication between two individuals whose primary languages are different creates problems and makes it more difficult to accurately transmit messages between the communication partners.

The good news is that listening is not as difficult as we sometimes make it out to be. **The most important thing to keep in mind is that there are two aspects of effective listening.** The first, and most obvious, is that listening involves understanding the message being sent by your communication partner in the way that they intend. The second, and frequently neglected aspect, is that effective listening involves the

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## The Art of Listening: Part 1 (continued)

articulation of your understanding to your communication partner. In other words, you demonstrate to that person that you clearly understand his or her message. There are six steps that you can take to improve your listening in both areas. I will discuss the first 3 steps here and the last 3 in the next issue of the CONNECTIONS newsletter:

1. Make sure the conversation takes place at a time and place where you feel comfortable talking. If you are in a rush, defer the conversation until later. This will minimize external noise.
2. Focus on the speaker by making a conscious effort to listen. Actually say to yourself, "For the next five minutes, I am only going to listen".
3. Use active listening on a regular basis. Active listening consists of the listener's attempt to give back (or *reflect*) what has been stated by the speaker. If you are going to effectively reflect the feelings and content of the speaker's message, then you really have to pay attention. You can apply active listening by using a one sentence reflective state-

### The Art of Listening: Part 1 (continued)

ment that paraphrases what the speaker has said. A good reflective statement includes two parts: an **affective** element and a **content** element. The affective element identifies the feelings of your communication partner. The content element describes why the person feels this way. For example, if you are talking with a colleague who is upset because of a significant policy change at work you might say, "It sounds like you are really frustrated because the new policy is going to make it harder to do your job." Make it easier to use a reflective statement by applying a sentence prefix such as, "What I hear you saying is..." or "Sounds like you..."

### TIPS Booklets

Using a concise, easily scannable format, these affordable 20-page guides offer detailed tips, tools and techniques you can use to immediately improve your performance. The following booklets are available:

- **50 Ways to Reduce Bias and Create a Climate for Diversity.**
- **50 Tips for Improving Communication in Culturally Diverse Settings.**
- **50 Tips for Managing and Resolving Conflict.**
- **50 Ways to Lose Weight Without Dieting.**

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### About the Author

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