

Crossing the Barriers to Understanding

For communication to be successful, it is essential that there be mutual understanding between the sender and the receiver. The vital link for mutual understanding to take place is listening. Listening, unlike hearing, fosters mutual understanding, which is the primary goal of communication. Mutual understanding often facilitates some change – in attitude or action, or in both. When the communication process includes listening to understand, change may be as likely to occur in the attitudes or actions of the initiator as it is to occur in the intended receiver of the message. Both individuals become senders and receivers of messages. That is what communication is all about – taking 100 percent responsibility for being a sender and receiver.

Fortunately, listening is a skill that can be learned. Listening opens the gateway to personal and professional success through the vast dividends it pays. Listening:

- Keeps communication channels open
- Provides opportunities for learning
- Enhances relationships
- Increases productivity by saving time and effort
- Reduces friction, misunderstandings, and conflicts
- Alerts you to opportunities
- Enlists the support and favorable responses of others
- Enables you to reach professional and personal goals you have set
- Develops insight into people's needs and desires so you can communicate better.

Every-body wants to be appreciated, and listening is one of the highest forms of appreciation anyone can show another person. Listening and trying to understand the other person's point of view develops rapport and trust. When people feel appreciated, when they sense an attitude of respect, and when they know that others are trying to understand their situation and how they view it, then they tend to reflect these same attitudes of appreciation and respect. This, in turn, fosters mutual understanding and cooperation, both essential for reaching professional and business goals.

Levels of Communication

Listening is important to success on at least four different levels of communication:

Casual Level – Listening in a casual setting among strangers or acquaintances requires minimum concentration because the subject

matter is usually simple. The purpose of the exchange is to indicate mutual willingness for a friendly and open exchange of ideas and information. Of course, you will listen with enough attention to give reasonable responses. Casual communication keeps the door open for future dealings – if necessary – with the other person.

Personal and Social Level – Mutual interests are often the initial factor in establishing new relationships. Communication supports the development of such relationships.

Communication in personal, social relationships may involve exchanging ideas and information, but the principal purpose is to enhance enjoyment of the relationship through giving and receiving personal acceptance. Listening on this level requires sensitivity to the feelings of others and genuine interest in people.

Information and Idea Level – Listening for ideas may or may not involve important personal relationships. It may take place in a large lecture room or in a small meeting; it may occur casually between people who are engaged in a project together. Listening for information focuses primarily on intellectual processes, but emotional factors as well are often involved.

Disclosure Level – The most rewarding experiences of listening and communicating occur when those communicating have the security and freedom to disclose their underlying needs and agendas. Candid disclosure reveals where there is room for give-and-take, allowing the optimal, win-win results. The listening involved in this communication level involves genuine caring and ethical concern for others. Because of this, disclosure is not easy. It exists only in the presence of mutual confidence and trust.

Listening on a disclosure level also requires the exercise of empathy and a secure self-image. Listening on this level is especially important when you disagree with what is being said. In such situations, put aside your disagreement – or your fear of not getting your needs met – and attempt to understand the other person's point of view. This approach is essential for eliminating some of the more difficult, intangible barriers to progress. Listening is the catalyst that makes it possible to achieve the two-pronged goal of communication – creating mutual understanding and motivating yourself and others to constructive action.

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