

Chapter Two

EFFECTIVE LISTENING: EIGHT BARRIERS AND SOLUTIONS

“Most of the successful people I’ve known are the ones who do more listening than talking.”

- Bernard M. Baruch, American economist
and past adviser to U.S. Presidents

Being an effective listener is being able to put aside your own agenda and *really hear and understand* what another person is saying. You listen actively to understand the ideas and feelings of the speaker. Listening in this manner is different from the way most people listen – it involves learning how to listen in an entirely new way.

When effective listening is taking place, the listener’s mind is open, clear, and quiet. Effective listening occurs when the listener is fully ‘present’ and listening with his or her *complete* attention. Effective listening can be thought of as listening with your entire body, your entire ‘being.’ Listening in this way includes the following:

- Listening to *understand*, even if you disagree
- Being alert and open minded
- Asking questions for clarification when needed
- Becoming actively involved and interested in what is being said
- Giving the speaker and what he or she is saying *all* of your focus and attention
- Quieting your mind in order to be fully ‘there’ for the person speaking

Effective listening is *not*:

- Thinking about what you disagree with
- Letting your mind wander
- Thinking about what you will say next
- Believing that you already know what the speaker is talking about
- Looking for weak points to argue against
- Waiting for the speaker to finish or pause so you can say what you want to say
- Trying to provide answers or advice
- Trying to prove something, such as how your beliefs are more correct or that your point of view is better

With technology and the large amount of multi-tasking we do these days, there are many distractions that keep us from listening effectively. However, the main barrier to effective listening is a busy mind. *Most people's attention is taken up entirely by their own thinking.* The mental noise, or mind chatter, that most of us experience prevents us from being good listeners.

Most people do not realize how much mental noise, or mind chatter, they actually experience at any given moment. Mental noise can 'sound' like this:

Andy, a co-worker, is speaking to you and you start to become bored with what he is saying. Your mind begins to wander. You think about the business dinner you're attending tomorrow evening. Are you prepared for the discussion that will follow the dinner? You make a 'to-do' list in your mind. You tune back in to Andy because he has just said something that you disagree with. You begin to go over, in your mind, the points you will make to correct him. He is always bringing up the same issues, but he never takes any steps towards resolving them. Maybe he just likes to complain. You hope that the business dinner tomorrow night is not a complaint-fest. You happen to notice the hair growing on Andy's ears. He should shave that. This makes you think of a quote. How did that quote go? Something about hair loss as you age being a myth...you don't *lose* the hair, it just relocates – to your ears, your nose, your back. You'll have to look that quote up online when you get back to your desk. You take a moment to interrupt Andy and

correct him. He then interrupts you to defend his points. You begin thinking about how he never listens to reason. You wonder how much longer he'll be with the company.

This amount of mental noise happens in our mind in a matter of seconds, and it is happening almost constantly. Despite all the distractions we deal with everyday – both in this fast-paced world in which we live and in our own heads – we *can* improve our listening and communication skills. Taking the time to develop this skill will result in many positive outcomes, both professionally and personally. In fact, developing your listening skills will improve every area of your life.

In this chapter are eight common barriers to effective listening:

- Rehearsing
- Disagreeing
- Telling Your Story
- Advising
- Assuming
- Placating
- Judging
- Wandering

Also included in this chapter are the solutions to overcoming these eight barriers. As you read, notice how every barrier stems from one thing – a busy, or active, mind. Pay attention to the barriers you observe in yourself most often.