WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR LISTENING?

Up to this point, we have talked about listening primarily as something that receivers do. This is not the whole picture. Even though receivers carry most of the burden for listening, effective communica- tion requires that both senders and receivers adapt and respond to one another. Both parties share the responsibility for good listening.

Successful adaptation to each other in a com- munication encounter involves sender–receiver reciprocity.19 Feedback tells senders how the receiver is interpreting the transmitted mes- sage (Chapter 1). When both communicators simultaneously send and receive messages and constantly adapt to each other’s feedback, they are engaging in sender–receiver reciprocity.

To illustrate, let’s assume that you begin to explain to your assistant how to upgrade his word-processing software. He perks up and listens, causing you to become more systematic in your explanation. You make a joke about Internet search engines, and he grins, which makes you smile. If he says something you like, you nod in agreement, which motivates him to provide more of the same kinds of comments. Or the interaction may go another way, with your assistant mentally formulating a rebuttal to your reasons for upgrading his software again. Anticipating his rebuttal, you may work at incorporating counterarguments into your message.

Senders Are Responsible

As the sender of a message, you have several responsibilities:

● Know what content you want to communicate before you actually say it. Have you ever noticed how some people seem to leave no thought unuttered? They talk and talk with little thought to what they are saying, how they say it, and most important, whether they should say it. Poorly designed messages can be confusing and unwelcome. We cannot be expected to listen carefully to senders (or managers) who give no thought to the messages they transmit. For example, some bosses require employees to do things that they have never done themselves, so they fail to fully understand all that is involved in the assignment.

● Carefully consider the way the message should be communicated. The way a message is communicated affects the way the message is received. The sender needs to select the way to send the message that will best help the receiver interpret its full and nuanced meanings. This consideration is particularly important when e-mail or text messaging is one of the possibilities. E-mails are limited to only the words on the page; text messages are likely to be brief and employ nonstandard spelling and punctuation. A phone conversation or an office visit may be more appropriate for more formal,

complex, or sensitive messages that might require feedback, repetition, and nonverbal cues.

● Ensure that the message is appropriate for the context or occasion. The context can control both how a message is interpreted and whether it will be listened to at all. Whereas a discussion about the merits of the generation-skipping transfer tax may be appropriate for a lawyer’s or accountant’s office, it would not be for a wedding toast or a parent–teacher association (PTA) meeting. Similarly, disclosing a message about your wild weekend in Vegas could be interpreted negatively at the office.

● Design the message with the particular receivers in mind. Senders who give no thought to the receivers of their message may use words that their receivers cannot understand, phrasings that are inappropriate, or even words that arouse suspicion or hostility. Using company acronyms and technical jargon when conversing with a prospective client makes little sense. Relating a dirty joke to a casual coworker may incite disdain and undermine the sender’s reputation. In short, insensitive and offensive language significantly reduces listening effectiveness.

● Design your message with your receiver’s listening style in mind. Another way to be strategic in how you design messages is to consider your receiver’s listening style. As you get to know a coworker, you will become observant of values that he or she espouses by paying careful attention to communication cues: the questions he asks, the topics she focuses on, and the things that are important to him or her. These are good indicators of listening style. Listening research20 has revealed four primary styles: relational, analytical, critical, and task-oriented listening. Relational listeners tend to focus on the emotions being communicated. The relationship between receiver and sender is of utmost importance to this type of listener. Thus, you should focus your message on feelings, emotions, and your relationship with the receiver when communicating with this type of listener. Analytical listeners prioritize hearing all sides of an issue before making a decision. They expect detail in your message and will look for your analysis to inform their own. They also appreciate messages that acknowledge multiple perspectives and speakers that allow them to decide for themselves. Critical listeners value the evidence. They will want to know “What’s your proof ?” They appreciate facts and data, and if they believe the support you provide, they are likely to take action or make a decision quickly (rather than analyze the issue for themselves as an analytical listener would). Finally, task-oriented listeners value efficiency. They don’t want a lot of detail; they are typically focused on what they need to do based on what they hear. In the workplace, task-oriented listeners will appreciate action steps and to-do lists. As an illustration of why it is so important to look for cues about a coworker’s listening style and adjust your message accordingly, imagine a relational listener’s reaction to a task-oriented approach. They would probably find it to be too rushed and feel that it might be insensitive to relational concerns. Analytical and critical listeners will also object to a task-oriented message and want you to back up and offer the evidence and rationale for what you want them to do.

● Be mindful about the possible implications of the message. Senders must consider the consequences of a message before they transmit it. An old saying is that “you can’t unring that bell.” When we say the wrong thing, our message is seriously undermined. For instance, a supervisor who constantly gives an employee critical negative feedback in an effort to get her to change may iinstead cause her to give up and quit. A patient may overhear a young internist complaining that if it weren’t for sick people, she’d love her job. Too many times employees wish they could unsend an e-mail or text.

Receivers Are Responsible

As the receiver of a message, you have several responsibilities:

● Make an effort to listen. Not all messages are created equal. For example, office gossip, although interesting, is much less important to attend to than discussions about the agenda for an upcoming staff meeting. Once you decide which messages are worth listening to, you can focus your attention on them.

Choosing what messages to attend to is an ever-increasing challenge. More and more office workers rely on online media players to blot out unwanted noise (and messages) while they work. They claim it helps them to focus and increases their productivity. However, the music may interfere with their ability to listen actively on the phone or during face-to-face encounters. Similarly, workers are often distracted by messages that are delivered via smartphones like the iPhone. Checking text messages during a meeting while supposedly listening to coworkers is not only annoying to others but also decreases the potential for understanding decisions made during the meeting.

● Consider the physical and social context of the message. Context affects how a message is transmitted and received. Hearing about a possible promotion at a social gathering warrants a different interpretation and response than hearing about it in your supervisor’s office. How seriously should you listen to a coworker’s praise of your accomplishments at a party in front of friends, as opposed to that same praise at a formal staff meeting? To be an effective listener, you need to be able to recognize the effect of the communication context to understand the meaning of a message.

● Give the sender a fair hearing. Messages sent by highly credible senders are almost universally listened to, but other senders may have a harder time. For example, you may be more inclined to listen to someone who has 15 years’ experience on a work project than to someone who just started. Even so, as a receiver you are obligated to give all senders a fair hearing. Someone can contribute meaningfully to a conversation even when she is new to the issue. You also need to make an effort to listen to senders who are difficult to listen to. In short, it’s good idea to evaluate the content of the message before dismissing the sender out of hand.

 Provide the sender with feedback. Senders need to know whether they are communicating their intended message. As a receiver, you can provide nonverbal feedback with nods, smiles or frowns, gestures, and eye movements to signal what you understand or fail to understand. Verbal feedback— such as asking a question, expressing agreement or disagreement, or repeating in your own words what you understood the sender to say—helps the sender achieve greater accuracy.

● Manage your response to the message being communicated. Make every attempt not to overreact to what someone says or how she says it. Think about what she is saying before reacting to it. Inappropriate or preemptive responses can decrease listening effectiveness. If someone at work disagrees with your point of view, you might too quickly assume that he has it in for you, when in truth, he may simply disagree. Jumping in before he is finished talking, becoming defensive or adversarial, yielding to your emotions, or hearing only what you want to hear are all barriers to your ability to listen and truly understand his message. If you can suspend judgment until you fully appreciate what he is saying, you will be a more responsible listener.

Senders and receivers together, then, jointly assume responsibility for effective listening. Like any good relationship, it takes two to make it work. Senders can do a great deal to help listeners understand, but they can’t do it alone. Receivers must be active participants in the exchange, but they can’t do it alone either. Senders and receivers have the responsibility to help each other make sense of their encounter.