

The Seven Deadly Sins of (Not) Listening

As we learn communication during our school years we experience many speech classes and writing classes. But how many have ever taken a class on listening? I haven't taken time to dig up any official research on the monetary losses due to poor listening skills (if any even exist), but I can tell you I've seen hundreds of thousands of dollars - and even millions - go down the drain simply due to poor listening. Because listening is so vital to workplace success, let's look at seven "sins" that get in the way of good verbal communication. After that, we'll examine a couple of steps for effective listening.

Sin #1: Filtering. This is when a person's mind is sifting through another's words and tuning in only when he or she hears agreement. Commonly, a Filterer replies to someone else's statements with "yeah, but..."

Sin #2: Second Guessing. Someone who is second guessing usually misses important details because they are too busy (a) imagining someone has hidden motives for saying what they're saying, and (b) trying to figure out what those hidden motives might be.

Sin #3: Discounting. This sin occurs when a listener lacks respect for a speaker. What the speaker is saying could be 100% dead on correct, but a Discounter will either internally or publicly scoff at what's being said, for any number of reasons. The sad thing about Discounters is that they often miss the solutions to the problems before them, simply because they don't like the source. A milder form of discounting occurs when content is brushed off just because the person speaking is not a good speaker.

Sin #4: Relating. A Relater is someone who continually finds references from his or her own background and compares them to what the speaker is saying. Relaters often appear self-centered, as everything they hear is publicly compared or contrasted to his or her own experiences.

Sin #5: Rehearsing. This sin blocks much listening as it is simply waiting for the other speaker to finish what he or she is saying so the Rehearser can start talking again. While someone else is talking, the Rehearser is thinking about how to say the next sentence. Different from the Filterer in that the other party may actually be agreeing with the Rehearser, but any words other than the Rehearser's own are just noise.

Sin #6: Forecasting. Someone who takes an idea from the speaker and runs light years ahead of the topic at hand is forecasting. Forecasting can stem from being bored with the subject matter, or simply because one's mind automatically thinks ahead.

Sin #7: Placating. One of the worst of all listening sins, placating agrees with everything anyone else says, just to avoid conflict. Management guru Stephen Covey differentiates listeners as those listening with the intent to reply, and those listening with the intent to understand. ...listeners are those listening with the intent to reply, and those listening with the intent to understand. To truly understand someone requires purpose of heart. It's a mental goal. Understanding must be a target - an objective. Think about it: Without truly understanding another's point of view, differences of understanding cannot be ironed out effectively, and communication clarity gets lost. With this in mind, it's comforting to know that learning a few simple steps takes us miles ahead in terms of effective communication. But beware: These steps alone are only techniques. They will be effective only when based in a sincere desire to understand. This must be born out of a realization that we don't have all the answers, that others' perspectives bring value, and that if we don't consider other points of view, we aren't getting the entire picture.

Step One: Focus on the other person. Totally. Put your own thoughts and feelings aside. If need be, say to yourself, "I want to understand what this person is saying," and then listen with a focus to understand. This can be risky, because you might hear something that counters your own perspective, and that can be uncomfortable. When you truly focus on another person, you'll pick up nuances; the thoughts and feelings surrounding their words. You'll get more of the big picture that's inside their head. This requires we turn off filters; respect another's opinion (out of principle, if nothing else); try to understand a person's words from his or her own experiences, not from our own; trust that our own thoughts will form in enough time after we understand so we don't have to rehearse them; and stay in the moment - the most effective place we can be right now.

Step Two: Restate the other person's ideas using our own words - out loud - if communications have gotten muddled or conflicted. If we can paraphrase another person, we accomplish two things: A) We demonstrate that we truly understand. B) The other party can know that we do, in fact, understand. Note that "agreement" is not part of these steps. Paraphrasing does not mean agreeing. But also note that step two must be done objectively, without mocking or ridicule in anyway if you disagree. It's okay to have conflicting opinions. What's damaging are personal digs that break down teamwork. Purposed listening eliminates second guessing and much misunderstanding. But again - you have to want to understand. With understanding you can move mountains. Without it, you're missing the mark, and not really listening.

About the Author

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