

## HOW DO YOU RATE AS A LISTENER?

by Dr. Anthony J. Alessandra

Many people assume they are good listeners; few actually are. The average employee spends about three-quarters of each working day in verbal communications. Nearly half of that is spent on listening. Incredibly, on the average these employees are only about 25 percent effective as listeners. This means that if you receive a salary of \$15,000. per year, over \$3,500. of it is paid for time you spend being ineffective as a listener. These depressing facts emerged from intensive research by Dr. Ralph C. Nichols. In his book Are You Listening? he emphasizes that most people are more concerned with developing their speaking skills than their listening skills. Today, more and more companies are discovering that one bad listener within their ranks can cause much more damage than a number of good listeners can correct.

We have identified four general categories of listeners. Whenever people listen they are typically at one of these four basic levels of attentiveness. Each category requires a particular depth of concentration and sensitivity on the part of the listener. These levels are not distinct lines of difference, but general categories into which people fall. Depending on the situation or circumstance in which listeners find themselves, these categories may even overlap or interchange. As you move from the first, to the second, to the third, to the fourth level, your potential for understanding, trust and effective communication increases.

### THE NON-LISTENER

At this first level you do not hear others at all. In fact, you do not even make an effort to hear what the other person is saying. The non listener manifests blank stares as well as nervous mannerisms and gestures. He fakes attention while thinking about unrelated matters. He is too busy with preparing what he wants to say next to listen to what is being said to him now. The non-listener is primarily concerned with doing most of the speaking. He is constantly interrupting the speaker's sentences, rarely interested in what anyone else has to say, and must always have the last word. He is usually perceived as a social bore and a

know-it-all, insensitive and non understanding; he is typically disliked or "tolerated" by most people.

## **THE MARGINAL LISTENER**

At this second level you are hearing the sounds and words but not really listening. The message is toyed with but not really heard. The marginal listener is a superficial listener. They stay on the surface of the argument or problem, never risking going any deeper. They postpone problems into the future rather than dealing with them in the present. This behavior only tends to make the problems get bigger, which in turn scares the marginal listener into putting them off even more. Eventually these problems explode. The marginal listener is easily distracted by their own thinking and by outside occurrences. In fact, many marginal listeners selectively look for outside distractions so that they have an excuse to draw them away from the conversation. They prefer to evade difficult or technical presentations or discussions, and when they do listen, they tend to listen only for the facts - the bottom line - rather than the main ideas. Marginal listening is extremely dangerous because there is enormous room for misunderstanding when the listener is only superficially concentrating on what is being said to them. At least at level one non-listening - the speaker receives many noticeable clues that the non-listener is indeed not listening. However, at the marginal listening level, the speaker may be lulled into a false sense of security that he or she is in fact being listened to and understood; this is not the case. Marginal listening may be funny in situation comedies where family members continually respond to each other with, "Yes, dear." However, it is not funny in real life. It's downright devastating.

## **EVALUATE LISTENING**

This third level takes somewhat more concentration and attention by the listener than the first two levels. At this level the listener is actively trying to hear what the speaker is saying but isn't making an effort to understand the speaker's intent. He tends to be a more logical listener who is more concerned about content than feelings. The evaluative listener tends to remain emotionally detached from the conversation. He does well in "parroting back" the words others have just delivered, but totally ignores that part of the message that is carried in the speaker's vocal intonation, body language and facial expressions. He is great in semantics, facts, and statistics, but poor in sensitivity, empathy, and true understanding. The evaluative listener believes that he understands others, but they do not feel understood by him. Evaluative listening greatly speeds up conversation because the listener anticipates the speaker's words and is ready with a retort almost as soon as the speaker finishes, whether in agreement or rebuttal. The concentration of the evaluative listener, however, is misplaced, and the results are potentially dangerous to the relationship. The evaluative listener forms opinions about the speaker's words even before the message is complete and thus risks not understanding the true meaning of the message accurately. This promotes the opportunity for highly provocative words to arouse emotion or distraction in the evaluative listener, who may then concentrate entirely on an examination and possible rebuttal of the speaker's remarks. This obviously leads to tense behavior and deterioration of trust and credibility.

## **THE ACTIVE LISTENER**

This is by far the highest and most effective level of listening. If you can refrain from evaluating the speaker's words and place yourself in his position - attempting to see things from his point of view - you are using the fourth and most effective level of listening - active listening. This is the level where real communication takes place. You are not only attentive to the words being spoken; you're also trying to project your mind into that of the speaker so that you can align your own thoughts and feelings more closely with his. In doing so, you must actively try to suspend your own thoughts and feelings and give your attention solely to listening. It figuratively means "putting yourself in the other

person's shoes." Active listening requires that you listen not only for the content of the message but, more importantly, for the intent and feeling of the message as well. It also requires you to show both verbally and nonverbally that you are truly listening. The active listener does not interrupt. In fact, active listeners are extremely perceptive. They are always looking for verbal and/or visual cues that might signify that the other person would like to say something. When one appears, the active listener promptly gives the floor to the other person. The active listener continually tries to get a deeper understanding of the other person. The active listener continually tries to get a deeper understanding of the other person. They listen for feelings and emotions, as well as words from the speaker. They listen not only to what is said and how it is said, but also is perceptive to what is not being said. The active listener is a skillful questioner. They use questions to encourage the speaker to extend the conversation and clarify the message; then they probe into areas that need to be developed further in order to get a better total picture of what the speaker is trying to communicate.

### **THREE SKILLS**

The active listener also has three very important skills that none of the other levels of listeners have. The active listener is good at sensing, attending, and responding.

Sensing is the ability of the active listener to recognize and appreciate the silent message that the speaker is sending--that is, vocal intonation, body language, facial expressions, and so forth.

Attending refers to the verbal, vocal and visual messages that the active listener sends to the speaker indicating attentiveness, receptiveness, and acknowledgment of the speaker and the message. This includes eye contact, body language, appropriate facial expressions and verbal expressions such as "yes," "go on," "I see."

Attending also includes the establishment of a receptive listening setting, such as an atmosphere of privacy that is away from phone calls, people talking, or people within earshot. It includes not violating the speaker's "personal space," as well as eliminating such communication barriers as a desk between the two people.

Responding is when the active listener tries to get feedback on the accuracy of the speaker's content and feeling, tries to keep the speaker talking, tries to gather more information, tries to make the speaker feel understood, and tries to get the speaker to understand his or her problems or concerns better.

The first three levels are ineffective listening. They cause errors in work, failures in communications, lost sales and client dissatisfaction. It would not be wrong to suggest that ineffective listening contributes to the majority of the problems we all face in business and personal relationships.

For the sake of our business and personal success, each of us must make a concerted effort to become the best listener of all--an active listener.