

Hearing versus Listening

The disconnect between what is said and what is heard

DEAR DR. MAZIE,

My boss prides herself on being a good communicator, but there seems to be a disconnect between what I'm saying and what she's hearing. She maintains eye contact, but it seems like her mind is drifting. Is there anything I can do to ensure my point is really being heard?

John from Houston



BY MAZIE LEFTWICH, PSY.D.

All of us have the ability to listen to someone speaking, yet not really hear what they are saying. You know what I mean - we hear the words and we may even look at the person speaking, but we aren't processing what is being said. It's a bad habit and a lot of folks fall victim to it in situations where they are simply not interested, bored or have their mind on something else.

The real problem begins in the way our brain works:

We **SPEAK** between 100 – 350 words per minute (100 – 175 is the norm)

We **THINK** between 800 – 3,000 words per minute

Just consider the problem this creates. Our mind is running at ninety-miles-a-minute as we strive to listen to someone who is speaking at a comparatively slow rate. And what are most of us doing once someone starts talking? Unfortunately, the most natural things we do is to start thinking about how we are going to respond to what the other person is saying – or at least to the first part of what they said.

The reality is, while we are visibly watching the other person speak, we are often pretending to listen. We may in fact not have heard much at all. But we have given a great deal of thought to what we are going to say... as soon as the opportunity presents itself!

Throughout the years I counseled couples in therapy sessions, this was one of the biggest complaints I heard. It was like having a

dysfunctional conversation – one spouse was verbally saying one thing while the other was having a different dialogue in their head.

Another problem we have in general conversation is that only between 25 to 35 percent of what the other party has said is accurately remembered. Now think about the problems this can cause. We have such confidence in our ability to remember so clearly what was said in a conversation, and yet research shows otherwise. The belief that we remember so accurately, coupled with the lack of accuracy is the source of more professional and personal conflicts than you can imagine.

Then there is the inconsistency between our words and our body language. Only 30 to 45 percent of communication is based on our words. Regardless of what we are verbalizing, 55 to 70 percent of what's being heard is a result of our body language. We may be communicating something important, but if our body language is reflecting such things as self-doubt, low self-esteem or anxiety, we totally undercut our own message.

When you look at all of these issues, it's a miracle that anything gets accomplished. The lesson for each of us is that, while speaking comes naturally, listening and hearing require skill and practice. So if you are the speaker, watch for the signs. If you feel as if the other person is not really processing what you are trying to convey, take action. Reach out and engage the hearer by asking questions. Let them know you value their feedback. And remember that your body language speaks volumes. ☺



With a clinical background in applied psychology, Mazie is Senior Vice President of Contract Land Staff, LLC, where she oversees training and development.