Critical Listening: The Key to Effective Communication

Amanda Hiner
Winthrop University

Critical thinking experts Richard Paul and Linda Elder define critical listening as “A mode of monitoring how we are listening so as to maximize our accurate understanding of what another person is saying” (Glossary of Critical Thinking Terms). Listening critically to others involves 1) analyzing and assessing assumptions, claims, and information, and 2) sympathetically entering into the perspectives of others. Many people, including students, find this type of listening to be challenging. Paul and Elder claim that “Much student listening is unskilled – passive, associational, unquestioned, superficial,” and note that “Poor listening leads to incomplete internalization and even to blatant misunderstanding” (169). Despite the fact that listening critically can seem difficult at first, students must learn, practice, and master this skill in order to achieve success in school and in the workplace and to engage in empathic communication and effective collaboration with others.

It’s easy to assume that listening is a natural act that requires no conscious effort, reflection, or monitoring. However, critical listening, the kind of listening that results in deep understanding and effective communication, involves monitoring our own listening; paying attention to the implications, assumptions, and concepts embedded in information; and assessing our own biases, lack of clarity, and deficiencies in our understanding. Critical listening involves analyzing spoken words to determine their purpose and meaning and requires sensitivity to differing points of view and perspectives. It also involves actively taking steps to assure that nothing will distract from a full and complete comprehension of the message, including putting away cell phones, minimizing electronic or visual distractions, taking written notes, and making eye contact with the speaker.

Common Myths about Communication

1. Listening is easy and natural.
2. Listening shouldn't require much work or effort.
3. I am largely objective when I communicate with others.
4. I should not need to ask for clarification – she obviously meant just what she said.
5. I am a naturally good listener – other people are the ones who don't listen well.
6. If I can’t understand them, it’s their fault.

Common “Blocks” to Critical Listening

1. Psychological “Blind Spots”
2. Lack of Awareness of our own Cognitive “Blocks”
3. False Assumptions About the Nature of Communication
4. Egocentrism
5. Laziness or Distraction

David Bohm, a theoretical physicist and author of On Dialogue, notes, “One tends to believe that one already is listening to the other person in a proper way. It seems then that the main trouble is that the other person is the one who is prejudiced and not listening” (5). Not only are we often “blocked” from
understanding our own contradictions when communicating, but we are usually unable to see that these contradictions exist. Social psychologists Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson explain that “The brain is designed with blind spots, optical and psychological, and one of its cleverest tricks is to confer on us the comforting delusion that we, personally, do not have any. . . . We assume that other reasonable people see things the same way we do. If they disagree with us, they obviously aren’t seeing clearly” (42). Bohm advocates a kind of collaborative, intentional communication that 1) recognizes the difference between two points of view and accepts new and different perspectives, and 2) recognizes that “the two people are making something in common, i.e., creating something new together” (3). He further concludes that people engaged in effective communication have to “be interested primarily in truth and coherence,” be willing to discard “old ideas and intentions,” and be “ready to go on to something different, when this is called for” (3). Critical thinkers and critical listeners are truth-seekers. They want to uncover and learn the truth more than they want to be “right,” and their fundamental purpose in communicating is to achieve an empathic understanding of others and to draw logical conclusions based on a comprehensive understanding of information and claims.

Critical Listeners Are

1. **Active, Engaged** – they deliberately seek understanding as they listen.
2. **Fully Attentive** – they resist forming a response before the speaker finishes speaking.
3. **Systematically Analytical** – they apply the Elements of Reasoning to information, claims, and ideas.
4. **Focused on Clarity** – they ask follow-up questions until they achieve understanding.
5. **Responsive** – they paraphrase the speaker’s statements to demonstrate comprehension.
6. **Empathetic** – they try to understand the speaker’s needs, assumptions, values, and opinions.
7. **Collaborative** – they seek ways to find value in the combination of ideas and input.

Tips for Listening Critically:

1) Put away cell phones, close laptop computers, and minimize visual distractions.
2) Make eye contact with the speaker.
3) Take written notes, especially when in a classroom setting. Categorize and prioritize information as you are writing, identifying key concepts and noting any questions or reflections you have.
4) Assess your own understanding as you listen. What needs more clarification? What seems incomplete or confusing?
5) Apply the Elements of Reasoning to the message as you listen. Identify key concepts, articulate the purpose of the information, note underlying assumptions, and identify questions at issue.
6) Assess your own biases and consider the assumptions and point of view of the speaker.
7) Paraphrase what is said to demonstrate understanding and ask for clarification if confused.