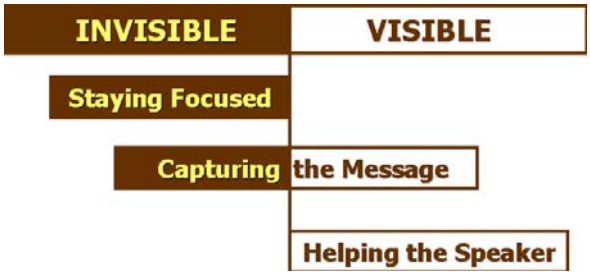
# Learning to LISTEN Improvement Techniques

## Staying Focused




- **Create a receptive listening environment.**
  To the extent possible, choose or change the physical setting to make it as distraction-free as possible. This includes everything from clearing off your desk to silencing the phone, adjusting the room temperature, closing the window shades, and finding comfortable chairs.

- **Stow away troubles**.
  If you are particularly frazzled before a conversation, give yourself a few minutes to acknowledge the many issues on your mind and then visualize literally filing those pieces of concern away in a cabinet until after the conversation.

- **Challenge yourself to learn just one thing.**
  This strategy can work whether you lack interest in the speaker's subject or don't feel up to the effort required to follow a detailed or complex subject. By daring yourself to take away even one item of interest or knowledge from the conversation, you can push yourself beyond a temporary spell of boredom or mental laziness.

- **Be here now.**
  Whenever your thoughts get stuck going over something the speaker has already said or start racing ahead to formulate what you are going to say in response, force your attention back into the present moment.

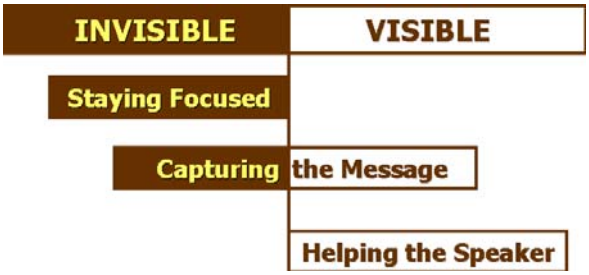
- **Maintain strong eye contact with the speaker.**
  Use what is called the "hitchhiking theory" - where your eyes focus, your ears follow. However, it is important to keep in mind that eye contact is not viewed as favorable behavior in all cultures.

- **Focus on the speaker's lips.**
  This technique literally gives the mind a visual, external focus.

- **Make a list of words or topics that push your buttons.**
  Just being aware of what you are emotionally sensitive to can help limit your reaction in the event a speaker introduces such things into a conversation.

- **Know when to delay a listening.**
  This option may not always be viable, but if you are tired, not feeling well, or unusually stressed, you and the speaker may be better off rescheduling.

## Capturing the Message




- **Find common ground.**
  When you are having trouble staying open-minded long enough to hear a speaker out, think about something you have in common with the speaker rather than obsessing on your differences.

- **Listen for transition words.**
  Identify and follow the underlying structure of a speaker's message. For instance, when a speaker introduces a point with a sequence flag like, "first, second or third," then chronology may be important. Or, a speaker may use those phrases to order a series of increasingly persuasive supporting facts to lead up to his/her major conclusion.

- **Explore emotions.**
  Encouraging the speaker to talk about how he/she feels can provide additional insight into what he/she thinks. You can do this by making reflective statements or asking questions: "You seem very enthusiastic about this plan," or "Can you tell me what makes you so passionate about supporting this project?"

- **Fish for what isn't said.**
  Whether as a result of simple forgetfulness or purposeful concealment, speakers often fail to convey their whole message. To be an effective listener you should probe for more: "Is there anything else you wanted to cover?" or "I know you didn't mention it, but could this issue be related to the problem of accounting?"

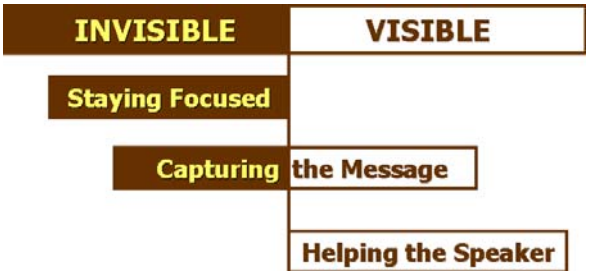
- **Check for consistency between verbal and nonverbal.**
  Because "approximately 68% of the meaning of a message is transmitted nonverbally," don't rely on the speaker's words alone or you may miss the majority of the message. A speaker's intonation, facial expressions, and gestures can provide clues about the credibility or completeness of a message.

- **Remember through repetition.**
  Repetition is the key to remembering what a speaker has said. One of the ways you can provide yourself with memory-enhancing repetition is by paraphrasing the speaker's main ideas back to him/her. However, avoid parroting back to the speaker: review the essence of what is being said.

- **Practice asking different kinds of questions.**
  Good listeners have a variety of questions at their disposal, including ones that follow up on ideas presented by the speaker, ones that request elaboration, and ones that compare or contrast elements of the speaker's message. Build your own set of questions to use when needed.

- **Put mental speed advantage to work.**
  Use the excess mental capacity that results from the differential between thinking rate (300-500 words per minute) and speaking rate (about 200 words per minute) to internally summarize the speaker's message.

## Helping the Speaker




- **Take in a long, deep, leisurely breath.**
  Note that this is a foolproof way to stop yourself from interrupting someone – because it is impossible to speak when you are taking a breath! Having a glass of water nearby is another way to keep your mouth occupied with something other than talking.

- **Put yourself in the speaker's shoes.**
  By nurturing feelings of empathy toward the speaker, you are more likely to provide the speaker with the support he/she needs to get a message across.

- **Actively manage nonverbal cues.**
  Develop a conscious awareness of the nonverbal cues you are sending and be more sensitive as to whether or not those cues are appropriate and helpful from the speaker's viewpoint.

- **Think about what others will think of you.**
  A healthy concern for one's self-image can motivate you to be more careful about what you say or do. Be respectful of others and you will be respected in your own right.

- **Put your ego on hold.**
  Proactively helping the speaker is a supporting role, not a starring role. In many ways, being a listener requires that you relinquish the limelight to the speaker. This can take practice.

- **Eliminate distractions.**
  If you have a weakness for gazing out the windows, close the blinds. If you are prone to chewing on pens, doodling on note paper, or playing with paper clips, make sure you remove these temptations from your listening environment before starting a conversation.

- **Prepare to be tested.**
  Pretend as though you will be asked to present a formal report about the conversation to someone important. This false pressure can provide the motivation you need to take some personal responsibility for the speaker's success.