Talking is Sharing, Listening is Caring

by Jean Wilcox Hibben, PhD, MA, CG[SM]

"Talking is sharing, listening is caring," my first speech communication instructor, Clarissa (Tish) Whitney, used to tell us at Santa Ana (CA) College. Hers was a mission of creating caring communicators and she dedicated herself to training us to stop and listen to those around us. Perhaps that is why I elected to get my masters degree in speech communication: Tish Whitney's emphasis on it being at the core of all relationships, with listening being more important than talking. Now, try to convince a public speaker of that!

I teach genealogy research methods at our local family history center and, following a recent class, one of the students, a man I've known for over twenty years, told me that the reason he likes my teaching style is that I take time to listen to what those in the class have to say. He said that, even when the questions are inane (or indicate that the student has not listened to what I just said) or the comments are self-serving (you know the ones: the people who are there solely to share their family history with everyone, not to learn how to improve their research techniques), I listen. And I respond in a way that causes the inquirer to feel uplifted, even if I'm telling him/her that the information is wrong, incomplete, or otherwise flawed. Phrases like "that is an interesting way to look at it; now let's take it a little further by . . ." or "you obviously care a lot about your ancestry; I think that you will benefit from checking these other research avenues." I guess until Bret pointed it out, I hadn't really given it much thought. So I started to do some active observation of my colleagues and here is what I discovered.

While helping at the Genealogical Speakers Guild booth last year, I watched some of my speaker colleagues interacting with others who stopped by the booth. People who were curious about our services asked the general questions, "Why would I want to join the Guild?" and "What can the Guild do for me?" I was surprised by how many Guild members answered by telling personal experiences of speaking all over the country and having large groups attend their seminars, but not explaining what role the Guild had in those events. I also watched one nationally known speaker (obviously very much admired by the person who came up to her) nod and smile as a "fan" told her about a particular research experience. From my vantage point, it was fairly clear that the speaker was not really attending to the message but was just pretending to listen (dubbed "pseudolistening") while watching for a point where she could escape. To me, it was sad. And since it was occurring right by our booth, I thought it didn't make our organization look very good.

True, we are a "speaking" organization and our emphasis is on talking and communicating our all-important message to the audience. However, the speaker who fails to listen to his/her audience is missing out on half of the communication experience. We are doing a potential disservice to those we profess to care about (and who pay us for our expertise). Granted, there are so many things that are vying for our attention today that it is impossible to attend to all of them. If we truly tried to listen to everything and everyone, I do believe we would go crazy – there are just too many messages bombarding us from various media.

It is almost a given that a good speaker at least was *once* a good listener, even if his/her listening skills have slipped some as the role of speaker became more prevalent in his/her life. Before we took on the role of speaker for genealogy societies and conferences we observed those who were already doing it. We recognized the things that we wanted to emulate and those things we definitely wanted to avoid. But once catapulted into the limelight, it seems that the ears got the worst of the deal (some of us because our heads just got too big for them!). Yet ask any serious researcher and he/she will tell you that there is always more to learn. So there is always

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a need to be a listener and to be willing to accept information from outside sources; some of those sources are the same people who are in our audiences.

The late Dr. Seth Fessenden, Professor Emeritus at California State University, Fullerton, devised an effective paradigm of the communication process called "The Assertive Listening Model." Usually we think of assertiveness in the speaking end of communication; however, in the listening process, it's not much different. The assertive listener is one who is concerned (about the relationship and the message), careful (to receive *all* the information), competent (to be certain what is received is what was meant), creative (sometimes exercising unusual means in order to stay attentive), and controlled (not acting or speaking until the message is complete) but not critical (accepting the message even if disagreeing with the information). Obviously, such a system is not applicable in all communication events, but I propose that it is a perfect tool when dealing with listening to our audience members.

When a message is sent (let's say, after a presentation when people are asking questions during the designed Q&A period), the information is subjected to a number of filters in our attempt to decipher it. Some possible filters include memory, attitude, attention, situation, sensitivity, knowledge, perception, and expectations. Let's look at how each of these can negatively impact what you, the speaker, hears.

Memory

Perhaps the questioner's subject triggers a memory. He/she asks about doing research in a courthouse, for example. The word "courthouse" reminds you of your recent run-in at the local courthouse, which was fraught with problems and you begin to mentally relive your experience, missing all that the audience member asked.

Attitude

On occasion, the speaker may develop an attitude, possibly fueled by a prejudice against the audience member or by the group to which one is speaking. Any question asked will result in an attitude of resistance. Even if we have been poorly treated by the host organization or a member of it, we need to rise above getting an attitude that will cause us to be anything less than professional.

Attention

Is something else demanding your attention? Perhaps bleed-through from the room next door is causing your attention to be drawn away from the audience member and his/her question. It sometimes takes a large amount of personal control to avoid being distracted, but we owe that to our audience members.

Situation

Perhaps the situation is not conducive to listening. The need to go to the bathroom, get something to eat, pack up the projector and laptop, find the treasurer for your promised fee, etc., all can make the situation less than ideal for listening. Sometimes the best way to combat this filter is just to be honest: "I am sorry, we are completely out of time; if you take my card and e-mail me about the concern, I would be happy to give it my undivided attention."

Sensitivity

Let's face it, there are some things we do not want to hear about. The person who asks about such a topic is likely to trigger the sensitivity filter causing us to shut out the message. The person who insisted on extolling the virtues of a known criminal caused me to react defensively, missing some of the points that individual was trying to make. Rising above our own areas of sensitivity is not an easy feat, but can result in becoming further educated.

Knowledge

Sometimes we think we know it all, or at least all there is to know about a particular subject. When an audience member attempts to tell us something, we may shut down, already "knowing all that needs to be known" about the topic. But the knowledge filter also works in a reverse manner: sometimes we don't know enough to understand what the person is

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talking about. I confess, my lack of knowledge of world history and geography creates a phenomenal filter when people start talking about various parts of Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. I have to force myself to both stay focused and humble myself to ask for clarification in order to understand what is being asked. Responding with "I do not know enough about that aspect of the topic" is far better than making something up.

Perception

Many elements affect our perceptions: our health, our upbringing, our education, our experience, etc. All of these things add to (or subtract from) what we understand about what is being said to us. This can include the difficulty of understanding a person who has a prominent accent or whose grasp of English is minimal; some allow their personal prejudices to infiltrate their listening process when interacting with these folks. Faced with such a situation, I suggest trying to relax and listen for ideas instead of individual words, then requesting clarification of specifics, if necessary.

Expectations

Too many of us believe we know what the questions will be. Someone begins to ask a question, getting out, "Where are the . . ." and our internal voice fills in the blank, causing us to offer the answer before the full question is even uttered, responding with, "there are two online sources for that information," only to be told, later, that the person was looking for repositories in a particular state. How embarrassing! Solution: wait until the entire question is asked.

The well-known process called "active listening" involves being attentive to the speaker, repeating the basics of the message, and verifying that the message heard was the message sent. This works great in the one-on-one communication model, but it also works for speakers when responding to audience questions. Avoid the filters noted above, then repeat the individual's question—clearly and loudly (though possibly more succinctly than it was originally stated)—so that you can verify you heard it accurately and so that the rest of the audience can hear it. Then give your response or, if you do not have an answer, ask if anyone in the audience can help. All of this creates what is called "immediacy": I, the speaker, become connected to the audience and we are in the problem-solving process together. The result: the group feels as if I am in league with them and I am frequently invited back.

So often we want to appear to be super-speakers: we know all the answers, we can respond to all issues, we can control all circumstances. Members of the booking organizations frequently put us up on pedestals. But, as speakers, we need to keep those pedestals a bit closer to ground level: falling off hurts a lot when they are too high! If we let people know we are human and don't know everything, it's OK. We won't lose bookings because we aren't know-it-alls (but might lose them if we pretend to be all-knowing). And when we are unable to attend to the fascinating family story of an audience member, we need to communicate that in a courteous, solicitous manner. I think we will get more respect than if we pretend to listen to the concerns of the other person, perhaps inadvertently misleading the individual or maybe missing out on a booking because we didn't hear the request to come speak!

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