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Disconfirming

Listeners that deny the feelings of the speaker are sending **disconfirming** messages. Examples of disconfirming messages include: "You shouldn't feel bad . . ." or "Don't cry . . . there is no need to cry." This misbehavior discourages the source to continue speaking and decreases perceptions of empathy.

Defensive Listening

An individual who engages in **defensive listening** perceives a threatening environment. Defensive communication has been defined as "that behavior which occurs when an individual perceives threat or anticipates threat in the group" (Gibb 1961, 141). Defensiveness includes "how he appears to others, how he may seem favorable, how he may win, dominate, impress, or escape punishment, and/or how he may avoid or mitigate a perceived or anticipated threat" (141). In other words, defensiveness is a process of saving "face." The issue of face is associated with people's desire to display a positive public image (Goffman 1967). An example of defensive listening is, "Don't look at me, I did not tell you to do that. . . ."

Selective Listening

Selective listening happens when a listener focuses only on parts of the message. She takes parts of the message that she agrees with (or does not agree with) and responds to those particular parts. We reduce cognitive dissonance or psychological discomfort, screening out messages that we do not agree with, to remain cognitively "stable." For example, if we recently bought a new SUV, we may choose not to pay attention to messages suggesting that SUV's are not environmentally sound. We would, however, choose to pay attention to messages that suggest SUV vehicles rated higher on safety tests.

Ambushing

Ambushers will listen for information that they can use to attack the speaker. They are selectively and strategically listening for messages that they can use against the speaker. Often ambushers interrupt the speaker. They do not allow the speaker to complete his thought and jump to conclusions. Ambushers make assumptions and get ahead of the speaker by finishing his sentences. They are self-motivated and lack dual perspective.

Responding to Perceptions

Listening effectively takes time and effort. Not only do we want to avoid the common listening misbehaviors just discussed, it is equally important that we make a conscientious effort to respond to others appropriately. Based on what you now know about perception, you can understand the challenges in accurately interpreting the actions of others. Have you ever jumped to a conclusion about another's thoughts, feelings, or motives only to learn later that your perceptions were mistaken?

> **John:** *"What's wrong with you?"*
> **Kyle:** *"Nothing . . . why?"*
> **John:** *"You sure are acting like there's something wrong."*

In this interaction, John's question may seem like an innocent attempt to help out a friend in need; however, it includes the assumption that he has accurately interpreted the behaviors he has observed leading him to believe there is something

bothering Kyle. The end result of such an interaction is often defensiveness and a missed opportunity for effective communication.

A simple tool for handling your interpretations of other's behavior is to use a **perception-check**. A complete perception-check consists of three parts:

1. A description of the behaviors you have noticed
2. Two possible interpretations of the behavior
3. A request for clarification about how you should interpret the behavior

Let's return to our previous example of John and Kyle. Rather than approach Kyle assuming his interpretations were correct, John might have said:

> *Hey Kyle, I noticed that you slammed the door behind you (1). I'm not sure if you had a rough day at work, or if you're upset about something (2). What's going on? (3)*

With this statement, John communicates the actions he noticed and then offers his own interpretations of Kyle's behavior in a way that makes clear he could be mistaken. He then offers Kyle an opportunity to share his feelings and explain his behavior.

While using a perception-check will not guarantee success, individuals will usually respond favorably to your attempt to collaborate. When delivered with sincerity and matched with appropriate nonverbal behaviors, the perception-check can become a simple, yet effective method to ensure you avoid acting on inaccurate interpretations.

Summary

This chapter explored the perception process: selection, organization, and interpretation. You should now have a better understanding of why we attend to some messages and not to others, and how we use these messages to make sense of our own behavior and that of others. Attribution theory explains how we attach meaning to behavior; however, even with the best of intentions, the process we use to fully understand another is inherently flawed.

We also explored the listening process. Listening involves our physical response to a message (hearing) as well as the cognitive processes we engage in to attribute meaning to a message and provide observable feedback. We spend more time listening than in any other communication activity. As a college student, you spend even a larger percentage of your waking hours listening and responding to others. Hopefully, this content provided you with an awareness of your listening style (people-oriented, action-oriented, content-oriented, and time-oriented) and what motivates you to listen. Being aware of your own style and your tendencies for the common listening misbehaviors, you can improve your ability to respond appropriately. Finally, using the perception-check can help you respond to situations when you may not be sure if your interpretations of others' actions are correct.

References

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