

tional pattern will make it easier to keep track of where the interview is going and what missing pieces must be covered eventually.

In such wayward conversations, however, you must serve as guide. Use of transitional phrases helps keep the organizational pattern on track. "I think we've covered the problems of alcoholism sufficiently, so unless you have a final thought why don't we move along to the subject of power and how managers use it."

You then stay with power until you have what you want—unless the conversation takes another erratic spin into another subject, from point 1 to point 7, for example. If you decide to pursue point 7 and get back to point 1 later, some kind of transitional remark will help. "Your comment on assertiveness among women is a point I had on my list of questions. Let's talk more about it now, but I do want to get back to power later on."

Transitions flow more smoothly if you utilize the respondent's words. "Something you said earlier—about your having to learn to be less thin-skinned in response to criticism—reminds me that I want to talk about that." If you are about to ask something personal, such as whether *she* ever became emotional over criticism, using her words to introduce the subject makes it seem less harsh. It's as though she herself had brought it up. In a sense, she did. Such a transition also shows that you're listening. Nothing encourages conversation and personal candor more than good listening.

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CHAPTER NINE

Learning to Listen

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- Q. Tell me about listening.
 A. Ah, listening. Listening is the one area of human activity where it makes sense to be a little selfish. Imagine! The more you take from a speaker through listening, the more that speaker will give.
 Q. Huh?

Journalistic interviewers are not equal. Some get more than others. They do it not by clever questions. Quite the opposite. They get more information by asking fewer questions and listening more intensely. Two kinds of listening are involved.

The first kind of listening occurs when you know precisely what kinds of details you want out of an interview. If you want quotable quotes or anecdotes, you must listen for them and recognize them when they occur. Sources don't say, "Here's an anecdote for your lead"; they just talk. It's up to you to distinguish the quotable kernels from the chaff.

People don't often encounter the second kind of listening. Here you listen with the entire self, the eyes and the body as well as the ears. You listen from the other person's point of view, listen not to judge but to understand,

*Paraphrasing Nichols and Stevens (1957).

taken interviewing classes, find a whole new world opening up to them, the timid finding the courage to go out and meet new people, the arrogant finding the courage to venture out from their fortresses to learn and appreciate other points of view.

The second price is the risk of involvement. So powerful a tool is listening that we find ourselves getting involved with the people to whom we listen. Studs Terkel explained that in the haste of interviewing the working people who comprised his best-selling *Working* he sometimes neglected certain social amenities. A Brooklyn fireman invited him for dinner and Terkel mumbled something about having to hustle to another appointment. "You runnin' off like that?" the fireman said. "Here we been talkin' all afternoon. It won't sound nice. This guy, Studs, comes to the house, gets my life on tape, and says 'I gotta go.'" Terkel stayed. "Looking back," he wrote, "how could I have been so insensitive?" (Terkel, 1974.)

HOW TO BE A PROFESSIONAL LISTENER

The following suggestions can help you develop listening skills. Part of the skills development comes in recognizing common pitfalls. Another part comes in recognizing precisely what you should be listening for.

Get Ready to Listen

This relates to the question, What, precisely, do you listen *for*? The advance preparation discussed in earlier chapters is part of getting ready. A carefully planned interview will make it clear just what you want out of the interview, and thus you can identify the points and the supporting material for which you should listen.

Another part of getting ready is the physical aspect discussed by Richard Meryman; fatigue or the mental cloudiness induced by alcohol or drugs will hamper your ability to listen, and so Meryman suggests a physical kind of training for important interviews.

Not so obvious is the need to recognize and eliminate the emotional filters that often block our listening ability. We are talking here about the topics that, sometimes without our hardly realizing why, make our blood boil or turn cold. Such words as *home, mother, patriotism, sex, abortion, Communist, Republican, Democrat*, contain a certain emotional content for individuals. Mention of "home" triggers such strong emotions that, instead of listening to what the speaker is saying about home, we are suddenly picturing mentally a beloved or hated childhood experience.

Everyone has a set of such words. The words accumulate through life's experience, and they change over time. "Evolution" and "hippie" contain less emotional content than they once did; "yuppie" and "AIDS" are more current

at this writing. If you faced up to these emotional land mines—perhaps by writing them down—you'd not let them interfere.

Avoid Prejudging People

This has been discussed earlier (Chapters 2 and 5), with the suggestion that if you've come to interview a convicted child molester you ought at least to show respect and appreciation for the answers you receive, particularly if they are candid answers to sensitive questions. You don't have to like the person you are interviewing. But as long as the conversation produces information, you are on the right track. No doubt if your tone and attitude are judgmental—the child molester is a rotten and unworthy person—the attitude will be quickly perceived and lead either to defensive hyperbole or to clamming up altogether.

The child molester is so extreme an example that the point may be lost. You can easily envision an article or broadcast documentary on child molestation and imagine how interviews with both molesters and victims can contribute to the drama and public understanding of the topic. But what about the respondent who is a bore?

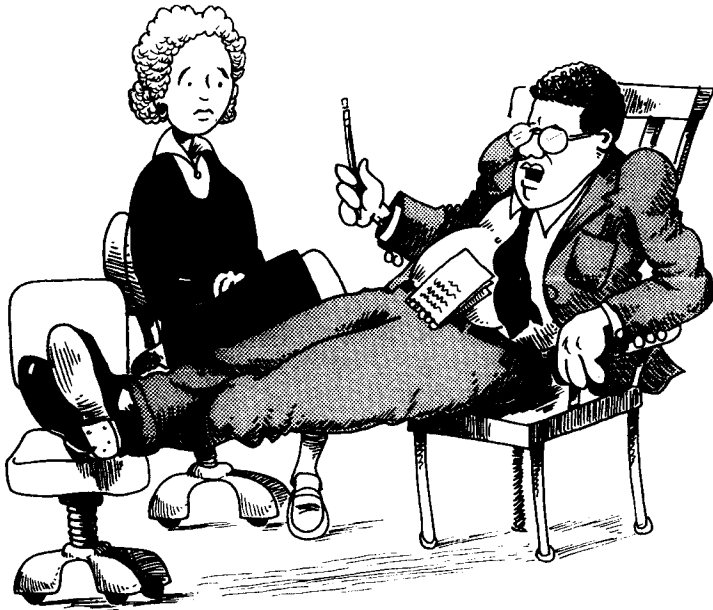
Judging a person a bore is the surest way toward a self-fulfilling prophecy. So what if the football coach has uttered the same clichés for forty years? Perhaps the journalists have been asking cliché questions. A listening and thinking reporter may be able to overcome that. Some suggestions for doing so are offered in Chapter 13, but the major suggestion at this point is to avoid stereotyping people in the first place. Even if you have interviewed a person repeatedly and received the same tired old answers, you should remain optimistic. You may not be able to change the other person, but you can change you—the interview purposes you pursue, the questions you ask, and especially the acuteness and perception of your listening. Maybe the reason some people are boring is that they have superficial personality characteristics that cause others not to listen to them. They're ugly or shy or they stutter. A professional interviewer works around these problems and listens for what is being said, not the manner of presentation.

Listen for Major Points

Listening to conversation is not like listening to a prepared speech. A good speaker generally has a theme supported by two or more major points, with each point supported by facts, illustrative examples, and anecdotes. Good speakers often identify their main points, alerting their audience by such remarks as, "My next point is . . ." Interviews, unfortunately, often ramble the way conversations do. That's not necessarily bad as a means of achieving conversational rapport, but along the way both parties to the conversation must identify the conceptual elements—the points—of what is being said. The

tioned this bizarre posture in a workshop attended by newspaper professionals, a business writer confessed to the sudden realization that he, too, had indulged in sloppy posture almost as bad.

Showing that you're listening means avoiding all the pitfalls cited here. It means utilizing the subtle and mostly nonverbal signs that facilitate communication covered in Chapter 5, such as alert body posture, eye contact, smiles, nods, and paralanguage responses such as Uh-huh or Mmmmm.



How to be too casual while interviewing

Dress for Listening

What has dress to do with listening? Years ago, college students asked that question frequently. The answer then, as now when the question is less frequent, is that in theory dress wouldn't seem to make a bit of difference. But in practice it makes a world of difference. People often dress to tell the world something about themselves. Other people perceive that message. Visiting the plush office of a bank president while wearing faded jeans and tattered sweatshirt will probably result in disaster. Your mode of dress suggests that you've come to make a statement, not to listen. True, that might not be your conscious intent, but that's the way the president perceives it—unless you can offer a reasonable explanation as Scott Martell did the time he showed up for a black-tie store opening wearing blue jeans (Chapter 1).

So it's best to dress in a way that does not call attention to yourself. Don't wear a tattered sweatshirt to the banker's office, but don't wear a cocktail dress to interview migrant farm laborers in the field. On the other hand, don't go to ridiculous extremes trying to fit in.