*Effective Project Communication Starts with Good Listening …*

*"We were given two ears but only one mouth, because listening is twice as hard as talking."*

When we mention project communication we primarily focus on the “supply” side of the communication chain. The “demand” side, i.e. listening, is often given little to no attention, whilst the most direct way to improve communication is by learning to listen more effectively.

As a listener, we apply several filters when receiving a message, such as our own judgement and beliefs, and pay attention to the level that matters to us. This often leads to just ‘hearing the word’ without ‘listening to the message’, which can often lead to ‘crossed wires’ where the speaker and the listener are on different wavelengths.

Rather than providing a laundry list of recycled tips and hints on how to improve our listening skills, let’s focus on just three common barriers to effective listening and explore the strategies that can help overcome them.

**#1 Knowing the answer**

This occurs when you think you know what the speaker wants to say before they actually finish saying it. For those impatient listeners, it might lead to cutting off the speaker or trying to complete the sentence for them, and even worse, interrupting by saying that you disagree without letting the other person express what it is you think you disagree with. This behaviour often leads to disagreements, tension and unhealthy conflict, whilst the message is completely lost.

Strategy: Keep an open mind, look for something new and/or interesting in what the speaker is saying. Wait three seconds after the other person has finished talking, take a deep breath and only then respond.

**#2 Red flag words**

These are words that so called ‘press our hot buttons’. The speaker may be unaware of their potential impact and use them unintentionally. They trigger a negative association, engage negative emotions, and divert our attention away from the remainder of the message.

Strategy: When you hear a red flag word, stop the conversation and ask the speaker to repeat what they’ve said, and if required, to clarify what they meant by saying it. You can then either discuss those points further or agree to come back to them later and focus on the rest of the conversation.

**#3 Seeing the trees without seeing the forest**

Some people focus so much on the detail that they completely miss the overall context of the communication i.e. how all those single ‘trees’ fit together. Focussing only on the details is not effective communication. Neither is focusing just on the ‘forest’, as the specific points might be missed or vaguely presented, and the listener ends up filling in the gaps with their own interpretation of what the detail should be. This can lead to misinterpretation of the message and poor decision-making.

Strategy: A good listener will seek to understand the big picture as well as the key details. When communicating with ‘trees’ people, ask them to explain how each point fits into the broader context, strategy or plan. On the other hand, ask the ‘forest’ people to provide concrete examples to ensure they can support their high level view.

And a final word of wisdom … As an old Zen proverb says, "When walking, walk. When eating, eat." When it comes to communication, forget multitasking and give your full attention to either listening or talking. Be there one hundred per cent, with your whole body and mind.

*Contributed by Maja Kowalski, PMI Sydney Communications Director*

*With references sourced from an essay by Michael Webb* [*http://www.sklatch.net/thoughtlets/listen.html*](http://www.sklatch.net/thoughtlets/listen.html)