

*Attending skills* involve the ways that we attend to strangers who are speaking. One thing we need to do is indicate to strangers that we are involved in the conversation. This is accomplished by our body postures. If we are leaning backward with our arms crossed, speakers will probably assume that we are not involved. If, in contrast, we lean forward and face strangers when they are talking, they will probably assume we are listening. Eye contact also is important. In the European American-subculture "it involves focusing one's eyes softly on the speaker and occasionally shifting the gaze from his [or her] face to other parts of the body" (Bolton, 1990, p. 181). We need to keep in mind, however, that rules for eye contact vary across cultures (see the next chapter). Attending requires that we give strangers our undivided attention. To do this, the environment in which we are communicating should not distract us.

Following skills indicate to strangers that we are trying to understand their perspectives (Bolton, 1990). The first thing we need to do is give strangers time to speak. Strangers need time to decide whether they want to talk and to decide what to say. This often requires that we be silent more than we would like. We also need to indicate to strangers that we are interested in what they have to say. We could begin, for example, by checking our perceptions and then asking strangers to tell us more about their views. We can invite strangers to talk by saying "I'm interested in what you have to say" or "Would you like to talk about it?" When we are listening we need to let strangers know we are paying attention and encourage them to continue speaking. This can be accomplished by saying things like "mm-hmm," "oh," "I see," and so forth.

Comprehending skills involve ways that we can understand the strangers better (Bolton, 1990). Perception checking (discussed earlier) is one method that we can use to comprehend better what strangers are saying. Another way we can make sure we are understanding strangers is to paraphrase what they say in our own words. By restating what the other person says in our own words, we ensure that we have not misinterpreted the other person's position. This can easily be accomplished by saying something like "I want to make sure I understand what you're saying . . ." The other thing we can do to increase our understanding is to use probing questions—questions designed to find out who, what, when, where, why, and how. We need to be careful, however, when we ask questions. If we ask too many questions, we end up dealing with our own agenda, rather than trying to understand strangers.

Active listening can help us better understand strangers if we listen without presupposing any particular outcome, and focus on what is being said, as well as how it is being said in the conversation we are having. Stated differently, we must stop the internal monologue (e.g., thinking about what we are going to say next) that is going on in our heads (Howell, 1982).

## Feedback

We seek feedback from strangers and provide feedback on their communication when there is uncertainty present (Ashford & Cummings, 1983). *Feedback* refers to "the response listeners give to others about their behavior. . . . Feedback from others enables us to understand how our behavior affects them, and allows us to modify our behavior to achieve our desired goals" (Haslett & Ogilvie, 1988, p. 385). Feedback may be verbal or nonverbal. Affective or evaluative feedback tends to be given nonverbally, while cognitive or content feedback tends to be given verbally (Zajonc, 1980).

There are several concrete suggestions for giving effective feedback when communicating with strangers that are useful (Haslett & Ogilvie, 1988). First, feedback should be direct and specific, and be supported by evidence (e.g., a rationale needs to be given). Indirect and vague feedback generally is not effective with people in the United States (especially in the middle-class subculture). Second, the issue on which the feedback is given needs to be separated from the person. Avoid judging strangers being given feedback. Third, present the situation on which feedback is being given as a mutual problem (e.g., do not blame strangers for screwing up). Fourth, do not overload strangers with negative feedback; mix negative feedback with positive feedback. Fifth, provide the feedback at a time close to the occurrence, but at a time strangers will be receptive. If I am emotionally upset and unable to control my anger, for example, it will not do any good to give me feedback until I have calmed down. Sixth, deliver feedback in an assertive, dynamic, responsive, and relaxed style. Finally, be trustworthy, fair, credible, and preserve strangers' public images when giving feedback.

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## Ability to Empathize

The one skill that consistently emerges in discussions of effectively communicating with strangers is empathy. *Empathy* is multifaceted, involving cognitive (thinking), affective (feeling), and communication components:

"Cognitively, the empathic person takes the perspective of another person, and in so doing strives to see the world from the other's point of view. Affectively, the empathic person experiences the emotions of another; he or she *feels* the other's experiences. Communicatively, the empathic individual signals understanding and concern through verbal and nonverbal cues" (Bell, 1987, p. 204). The cognitive, affective, and communication components are interrelated and all must be present for strangers to perceive that we are being empathic.

Empathy involves (1) carefully listening to strangers, (2) understanding strangers' feelings, (3) being interested in what strangers say, (4) being sensitive to strangers' needs, and (5) understanding strangers' points of view (Hwang et al., 1980). While these indicators of empathy include verbal components, we tend to rely on nonverbal behavior more than verbal behavior when we interpret strangers' behavior as empathic (Bell, 1987).

When we are *empathic*, we imagine how strangers are feeling. Sympathy often is confused with empathy. When we are *sympathetic*, we imagine how we would feel in strangers' situations.<sup>10</sup> The "Golden Rule"—"Do unto others as you would have them do unto you"—that many people are taught as children involves a sympathetic response to strangers, not an empathic response (Bennett, 1979). The "Platinum Rule"—"Do unto others as they would have you do unto them"—involves an empathic response. The Platinum Rule is reasonable as long as what strangers want done unto them does not violate our basic moral principles or universally accepted principles of human rights

**Most of us are sympathetic, not empathic, when we communicate on automatic pilot. The reason for this is that we tend to assume that strangers look at the world same way we do when we communicate on automatic pilot. In order to respond to strangers with empathy, we must be mindful. It is only when we are mindful that we can imagine how strangers feel. The greater our empathy, the more accurate our predictions of and explanations for strangers' behavior will be.**

(From Gudykunst, W.B. *Bridging Differences. Effective Intergroup Communication*. 4<sup>th</sup> edition, London: Sage Publications, 2004, pp. 260-263)