Active Listening Skills


**Listening**

To hear accurately what is being said and to understand the intended meaning without judging.

**Benefits of Active Listening**

- Reduces friction and resolves conflicts productively
- Alerts you to opportunities to hear people who want your help
- Helps you develop insights into understanding people
- Cements relationships with colleagues, family and friends
- Removes blocks and filters that get in your way
- Ensures positive progress in planning
- Asserts your confidence, authority, and leadership better than words
- Tells you when to act and how
- Bridges gaps in understanding before they become crises
- Gives you greater flexibility and confidence
- Helps the person you are listening to feel that you are not trying to change him or her
- Helps the person you are listening to feel understood
- Keeps the communication channels open to explore other alternatives
- Helps the person you are listening to develop a clearer understanding of his/her issues

**When to Use Active Listening**

- When you hear feelings
- When the person you are listening to says they have a problem
- When you are willing to take the time
- When you really want to help the person you are listening to
- When you trust that person to make his/her own decisions
- When the message from the person you are listening to is not direct and straightforward
- When your own feelings and values are not too strongly involved
When not to use Active Listening

- When you try to manipulate the person into thinking as you do
- When there is no genuine empathy
- When you don’t have the time to deal with the issue, but if it is important, make time later
- When the message is direct and clear
- When you have a big stake in the outcome so that you cannot remain objective

Attending Behaviours

To indicate your readiness and attentiveness both physically and psychologically, the listener should “attend” to the speaker at all times.

Steps

1. Arrange the environment to assist with effective communication
2. Face the person to whom you will be talking
3. Make eye contact to show attention and to help receive information (This may or may not be appropriate, depending on the cultural background of the person who is listening)
4. Lean slightly toward the person to indicate interest and receptiveness
5. Be aware of the person’s ‘comfort zone’ - 1 to 1 ½ metres is comfortable for most people accustomed to Western society (This will differ for individuals from other cultures)
6. Show genuineness through facial expressions and other non-verbal behaviours

Three Techniques for Active Listening: Reflecting, Paraphrasing, Probing

Reflecting

- Repeating or mirroring the words of the other person to ensure that you heard correctly, and are not making assumptions about what the person said
- Forces the speaker to really think about what s/he is saying
- Speakers will often solve their own problems through discussion

Example

A friend comes to you and says in a very frustrated tone of voice, “This has been the worst day of my life.” You might respond with “The worst day of your life?” This forces the person to consider the meaning and impact of his/her words. S/he will likely respond with something like “Well, maybe not the worst, but it was frustrating.”
Paraphrasing

- Condensing the other person’s statements into your own words to ensure understanding and to try to get the main point - the “meat” of the message.
- Repeat the statement in your own words so that the other person can let you know whether or not you have grasped the meaning.
- Use when the message from the other person is not very clear, or when you are more personally involved in the issue.

Some communication leads to help with paraphrasing

These phrases may be helpful when you trust your perceptions are accurate and the other person is receptive to your comments:

You feel...
It seems to you...
From where you stand...
You think...
What I hear you saying...
In your experience...
I’m picking up that you...
You mean...

These phrases may be helpful when you are having difficulty perceiving clearly or when the other person doesn't seem to be responding to you:

Could it be that...
Would you buy this idea...
Is it possible that...
Are you feeling...
It seems that you...
...is that the way it is?
...is that what you mean?
I guess that you’re...
I wonder if...
I’m not sure if I’m with you, but...
Could this be what’s going on...
Is there a chance you...
Maybe I’m out to lunch, but...
If you did more of... you might find that...
Probing

- Use when you aren’t understanding the other person, or when you want to help him/her come to a better understanding for him/herself
- Can involve using closed questions, open questions, or both

Closed Questions

- Have only one answer or one direction in which to answer
- Tend to shut down or limit discussion
- Force people to make decisions

Examples

- Are you mad at him?
- Do you think he should be fired?
- Which option should we take?
- What did he do next?

Open Questions

- Have many possible answers or directions
- Tend to open up discussion
- Force people to think about other possibilities

Examples

- What does that feel like?
- Can you tell me more about it?
- Where would you like to begin?
- Can you tell me what that means to you?
- How would you like things to be?
- What have you thought of?
- What options can you think of?
- How do you see things changing?
- What would you like to do about it?
- What’s that like?
- What’s most important for you?

Summary

- Whichever technique you use, listen not only for the words, but also for the feeling tone behind them.
- To understand the message, you must try to understand the other person’s point of view (frame of reference), even if you don’t agree with it.
- Don’t insist on having the last word.
Reflecting on Listening

Source: Used with permission. Weisberg, Mark, and Jean Koh Peters. Experiments in Listening. (For more information, contact Mark Weisberg <weisberg@post.queensu.ca>.)

- What is the role of listening in your teaching? What is the balance of listening and speaking in your work life? In your life as a whole?
- What are the different ways in which you listen?
- What concrete circumstances or factors enhance your listening? What detracts from your listening?
- What would change if everyone at work or home listened slightly better?

Answer this question 10 times:

I would be a better listener if
I would be a better listener if
I would be a better listener if
I would be a better listener if
I would be a better listener if
I would be a better listener if
I would be a better listener if
I would be a better listener if
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I would be a better listener if

Keep a listening log: Observe your listening during an 8-hour day, for a 24-hour period, or for up to a week. Review the week, noting key points of listening in the days just past. Look for trends, critical incidents, rich moments, and factors that may have made you a better listener.