

Becoming an Active Listener

There are five key elements of active listening. They all help you ensure that you hear the other person, and that the other person knows you are hearing what they say.

1. Pay Attention

Give the speaker your undivided attention, and acknowledge the message. Recognize that non-verbal communication also "speaks" loudly.

- Look at the speaker directly.
- Put aside distracting thoughts.
- Don't mentally prepare a rebuttal!
- Avoid being distracted by environmental factors.
- "Listen" to the speaker's body language.
- Refrain from side conversations when listening in a group setting.

2. Show That You're Listening

Use your own body language and gestures to convey your attention.

- Nod occasionally.
- Smile and use other facial expressions.
- Note your posture and make sure it is open and inviting.
- Encourage the speaker to continue with small verbal comments like yes, and uh huh.

3. Provide Feedback

Our personal filters, assumptions, judgments, and beliefs can distort what we hear. As a listener, your role is to understand what is being said. This may require you to reflect what is being said and ask questions.

- Reflect what has been said by paraphrasing. "What I'm hearing is." and "Sounds like you are saying." are great ways to reflect back.
- Ask questions to clarify certain points. "What do you mean when you say." "Is this what you mean?"
- Summarize the speaker's comments periodically.

Tip:

If you find yourself responding emotionally to what someone said, say so, and ask for more information: "I may not be understanding you correctly, and I find myself taking what you said personally. What I thought you just said is XXX; is that what you meant?"

4. Defer Judgment

Interrupting is a waste of time. It frustrates the speaker and limits full understanding of the message.

- Allow the speaker to finish.
- Don't interrupt with counter arguments.

5. Respond Appropriately

Active listening is a model for respect and understanding. You are gaining information and perspective. You add nothing by attacking the speaker or otherwise putting him or her down.

- Be candid, open, and honest in your response.
- Assert your opinions respectfully.
- Treat the other person as he or she would want to be treated.

Key Points

It takes a lot of concentration and determination to be an active listener. Old habits are hard to break, and if your listening habits are as bad as many people's are, then there's a lot of habit-breaking to do!

Be deliberate with your listening and remind yourself frequently that your goal is to truly hear what the other person is saying. Set aside all other thoughts and behaviors and concentrate on the message. Ask questions, reflect, and paraphrase to ensure you understand the message. If you don't, then you'll find that what someone says to you and what you hear can be amazingly different!

Start using active listening today to become a better communicator, improve your workplace productivity, and develop better relationships.

<http://www.mindtools.com/CommSkill/ActiveListening.htm>

What affects listening?

Active listening intentionally focuses on who you are listening to,

whether in a group or one-on-one, in order to understand what he or she is saying.

As the listener, you should then be able to repeat back in your own words what they have said to their satisfaction. This does not mean you agree with the person, but rather understand what they are saying.

What do you think of the
subject matter?
Have you a lot of experience with it?

Is the speaker experienced or nervous?
What are his/her non-verbal cues?
What frame of mind is he or she?

Will it be hard to understand, or simple? How personable, threatening, intelligent, etc.?
Is it important to you, or just fun?



Is the message illustrated with visuals or examples? Is the space conducive to listening?
or to interaction or exchange
Is technology used effectively? with the speaker?
Are concepts introduced incrementally, Are there avoidable distractions?
or with examples?

Described above are the external factors.

Now: what about you, the center, the listener?

Prepare with a positive, engaged attitude

- Focus your attention on the subject
Stop all non-relevant activities beforehand to orient yourself to the speaker or the topic
- Review mentally what you already know about the subject
Organize in advance relevant material in order to develop it further (previous lectures, TV programs, newspaper articles, web sites, prior real life experience, etc.)
- Avoid distractions
Seat yourself appropriately close to the speaker
Avoid distractions (a window, a talkative neighbor, noise, etc.)
- Acknowledge any emotional state
Suspend emotions until later, or
Passively participate unless you can control your emotions
- Set aside your prejudices, your opinions
You are present to learn what the speaker has to say, not the other way around

Actively listen

- Be other-directed; focus on the person communicating
Follow and understand the speaker as if you were walking in their shoes
Listen with your ears but also with your eyes and other senses

- Be aware: non-verbally acknowledge points in the speech
Let the argument or presentation run its course
Don't agree or disagree, but encourage the train of thought
- Be involved:
Actively respond to questions and directions
Use your body position (e.g. lean forward) and attention to encourage the speaker and signal your interest

Follow up activities

One-to-one

Give the speaker time and space for rest after talking

Express appreciation for the sharing to build trust and encourage dialogue

Check if you have understood

- Restate key points to affirm your understanding & build dialogue
- Summarize key points to affirm your understanding & build dialogue
- Ask (non-threatening) questions to build understanding

Continue dialogue:

- Reflect on your experience to demonstrate your interest (feedback)
- Interpret after you feel you have grasped content
- Apply what you have learned to a new situation

<http://www.studygs.net/listening.htm>

10 Tips to Effective & Active Listening Skills

Written by [Susie Michelle Cortright](#)

Do you ever need someone to listen to you?

Listening makes our loved ones feel worthy, appreciated, interesting, and respected. Ordinary conversations emerge on a deeper level, as do our relationships. When we listen, we foster the skill in others by acting as a model for positive and effective communication.

In our love relationships, greater communication brings greater intimacy. Parents listening to their kids helps build their self-esteem. In the business world, listening saves time and money by preventing misunderstandings. And we always learn more when we listen than when we talk.

Listening skills fuel our social, emotional and professional success, and studies prove that listening is a skill we can learn.

The Technique. Active listening is really an extension of the Golden Rule. To know how to listen to someone else, think about how you would want to be listened to.

While the ideas are largely intuitive, it might take some practice to develop (or re-develop) the skills. Here's what good listeners know — and you should, too:

1. Face the speaker. Sit up straight or lean forward slightly to show your attentiveness through body language.

2. Maintain eye contact, to the degree that you all remain comfortable.

3. Minimize external distractions. Turn off the TV. Put down your book or magazine, and ask the speaker and other listeners to do the same.

4. Respond appropriately to show that you understand. Murmur (“uh-huh” and “um-hmm”) and nod. Raise your eyebrows. Say words such as “Really,” “Interesting,” as well as more direct prompts: “What did you do then?” and “What did she say?”

5. Focus solely on what the speaker is saying. Try not to think about what you are going to say next. The conversation will follow a logical flow after the speaker makes her point.

6. Minimize internal distractions. If your own thoughts keep horning in, simply let them go and continuously re-focus your attention on the speaker, much as you would during meditation.

7. Keep an open mind. Wait until the speaker is finished before deciding that you disagree. Try not to make assumptions about what the speaker is thinking.

8. Avoid letting the speaker know how you handled a similar situation. Unless they specifically ask for advice, assume they just need to talk it out.

9. Even if the speaker is launching a complaint against you, wait until they finish to defend yourself. The speaker will feel as though their point had been made. They won't feel the need to repeat it, and you'll know the whole argument before you respond. Research shows that, on average, we can hear four times faster than we can talk, so we have the ability to sort ideas as they come in...and be ready for more.

10. Engage yourself. Ask questions for clarification, but, once again, wait until the speaker has finished. That way, you won't interrupt their train of thought. After you ask questions, paraphrase their point to make sure you didn't misunderstand. Start with: “So you're saying...”

As you work on developing your listening skills, you may feel a bit panicky when there is a natural pause in the conversation. What should you say next? Learn to settle into the silence and use it to better understand all points of view.

Ironically, as your listening skills improve, so will your aptitude for conversation. A friend of my partner once complimented me on my conversational skills. I hadn't said more than four words, but I had listened to him for 25 minutes.

<http://powertochange.com/students/people/listen/>

Active Listening

(drawn from *Communication in Organizations*, by Dalmar Fisher)

Reflective listening has its roots in the fields of counseling and psychotherapy, particularly in Carl Rogers's "client-centered" therapy. This is not to say that people in organizations should become therapists, but rather that this one therapeutic skill can be very useful in many everyday work situations.

Reflective listening is used in situations where you are trying to help the speaker deal with something. As you will see, it is very similar to what Tannen would call rapport-talk.

There are two major aspects of client-centered listening – the "listener orientation" and the "reflective technique".

Listening Orientation

In reflective listening, the listener adopts what Rogers called "the therapist's hypothesis". This is the belief that the capacity for self-insight, problem-solving, and growth resides primarily in the speaker. This means that the central questions for the listener are not "What can I do for this person?" or even "How do I see this person?" but rather "How does this person see themselves and their situation?"

Rogers and others have made the underlying orientation of the listener more specific by noting that it contains four components: empathy, acceptance, congruence, and concreteness.

Empathy is the listener's desire and effort to understand the recipient of help from the recipient's internal frame of reference rather than from some external point of view, such as a theory; a set of standards, or the listener's preferences. The empathic listener tries to get inside the other's thoughts and feelings. The idea is to obtain an *emic* rather than *etic* understanding of the situation.

Expressed verbally and nonverbally through messages such as "I follow you," "I'm with you" or "I understand," empathy is the listener's effort to hear the other person deeply, accurately, and non-judgmentally. A person who sees that a listener is really trying to understand his or her meanings will be willing to explore his or her problems and self more deeply.

Empathy is surprisingly difficult to achieve. We all have a strong tendency to advise, tell, agree, or disagree from our own point of view.

Acceptance is closely related to empathy. Acceptance means having respect for a person for simply being a person. Acceptance should be as *unconditional* as possible. This means that the listener should avoid expressing agreement or disagreement with what the other person says. This attitude encourages the other person to be less defensive and to explore aspects of self and the situation that they might otherwise keep hidden

Congruence refers to openness, frankness, and genuineness on the part of the listener. The congruent listener is in touch with themselves. If angry or irritated, for example, the congruent person admits to having this feeling rather than pretending not to have it (perhaps because they are trying to be accepting). They communicate what they feel and know, rather than hiding behind a mask. Candor on the part of the listener tends to evoke candor in the speaker. When one person comes out from behind a facade, the other is more likely to do as well.

In some cases, the principle of congruence can be at odds with the principles of empathy and acceptance. For example, if the listener is annoyed with the other person, they probably have to suspend empathy and acceptance until they sort things out.

Concreteness refers to focusing on specifics rather than vague generalities. Often, a person who has a problem will avoid painful feelings by being abstract or impersonal, using expressions like "sometimes there are situations that are difficult" (which is vague and abstract), or "most people want..." (which substitutes others for oneself). The listener can encourage concreteness by asking the speaker to be more specific. For example, instead of agreeing with a statement like "You just can't trust a manager. They care about themselves first and you second", you can ask what specific incident the speaker is referring to.

In active listening, it is important not only that the listener have an orientation with the four qualities of empathy, acceptance, congruence and acceptance, but that the speaker feel that the listener has this orientation. Consequently, a good listener tries to understand how the other is experiencing the interaction and to shape their responses so that the other person understands where they are coming from. Furthermore, the listener must be prepared to deviate from the four principles if that's what the other person wants. For example, if the other person asks for an opinion, the listener should give it, rather than avoid it as implied by the principles of empathy and acceptance.

The Technique of Reflection

A listener can implement the elements of listening orientation through a method known as reflection. In reflection, the listener tries to clarify and restate what the other person is saying. This can have a threefold advantage: (1) it can increase the listener's understanding of the other person; (2) it can help the other to clarify their thoughts; and (3) it can reassure the other that someone is willing to attend to his or her point of view and wants to help.

Listening orientation and reflection are mutually reinforcing. Empathy, acceptance, congruence, and concreteness contribute to the making of reflective responses. At the same time, reflective responses contribute to the development and perception of the listening orientation.

Some principles of reflective listening:

More listening than talking

Responding to what is personal rather than to what is impersonal, distant, or abstract.

Restating and clarifying what the other has said, not asking questions or telling what the listener feels, believes, or wants.

Trying to understand the feelings contained in what the other is saying, not just the facts or ideas.

Working to develop the best possible sense of the other's frame of reference while avoiding the temptation to respond from the listener's frame of reference.

Responding with acceptance and empathy, not with indifference, cold objectivity, or fake concern.

Responding to what is personal means responding to things the other person says about him- or herself rather than about other people, events, or situations. If a co-worker said, "I'm worried that I'll lose my job" the reflective listener would try to focus on the worried "I" rather than on the job situation. A response such as "It's scary" would be better than "Maybe the cutbacks won't affect you." When the listener responds to personal statements rather than impersonal ones, the other usually stays at the personal level, exploring further aspects of his or her experience, improving his or her understanding of the situation, and developing a more realistic, active approach to solving problems.

Because the goal of the process is for the other person, rather than the listener, to take responsibility for the problem, reflective listening means responding to, rather than leading, the other. Responding means reacting from the other's frame of reference to what the other has said. In contrast, leading means directing the other person to talk about things the helper wants to see the other explore. The responsive listener addresses those things the other person is currently discussing, often testing his or her understanding of the other by restating or clarifying what the other has just said. This usually encourages the other to build on the thoughts and feelings he or she has just expressed and to explore further.

While questions can be responsive rather than leading, they very often work to limit the other's initiative by focusing attention on something the listener feels should be discussed. Though small, the question "Why?" can be particularly damaging, since it defies the other to find a justification or logical explanation that is acceptable to the helper. Instead, you might try: "That's interesting; can you tell me more about it?".

Perhaps most important, the reflective listener tries to respond to feelings, not just to content. Feelings emerge in the emotional tone that the speaker expresses, such as anger, disappointment, discouragement, fear, joy, elation, or surprise. Content refers to ideas, reasons, theories, assumptions, and descriptions -- to the *substance* of the speaker's message. As Tannen notes, in troubles-talk, the speaker is often not looking for the solution of the surface problem, but rather for a way to deal with the emotional and social ramifications.

In addition, Carl Rogers notes that a person who receives response at the emotional level has "the satisfaction of being deeply understood" and can go on to express more feelings, eventually getting "directly to the emotional roots" of their problem.

Usually, the listener can be most in touch with the other's frame of reference by responding to feelings that are expressed rather than unexpressed. Since many people do not state their emotions explicitly, this may mean responding to the emotional tone that they express implicitly.

It is extremely important for the reflective listener to respond to negative and ambivalent feelings because this communicates that the listener accepts the unpleasant side of the other's experience and is willing to join in exploring it. Such acceptance provides a major release for a person who has previously felt it necessary to suppress negative feelings. The energy that has been used to keep these feelings in check can now be devoted to exploring the problem.

Here is a little quiz intended to build your skill in applying the concepts just discussed:

A computer consultant, Jack Phillips, does work both for you and for another member of your department (Joyce Carton). One morning you walk up to Jack's desk and he greets you as follows:

Jack: What am I supposed to do about Joyce? She throws more work at me than I can possibly handle. I've told her but she won't listen. I don't want people to think I'm trying to get out of doing my job but she's really got me totally buried

Which of the possible responses listed below would represent reflective listening, and which would not?

1. Hang in there: I'm sure it will work out eventually
2. I'll talk to Joyce about it
3. It sounds like this is really getting you down
4. You're worried people will think you are a slacker?
5. Joyce is really unfair, huh?
6. Have you discussed it with Jim [the boss]?
7. You were discouraged when Joyce didn't listen?

8. Why have you let things go on this long?
9. Your really getting fed up with the situation.

The next step is to actually try it out on people. It will be awkward at first. It is really hard to say reflective things in a way that sounds natural for you. But you'll find that even bad attempts tend to produce immediate results, maybe because most people rarely have the experience of being listened to in this way.

Advantages of Reflective Listening. Used appropriately, reflective listening may provide three very positive results:

The listener gains information. Reflective listening encourages the speaker to talk about more things in greater depth than he or she would be likely to do in simply responding to directive questions or suggestions. Such depth of discussion often exposes underlying problems, including ones the speaker had not recognized previously.

The relationship between the two persons develops. The elements of listening orientation -- empathy, acceptance, congruence, and concreteness -- are likely to increase as the reflective listening process continues. These are the ingredients for an open, trusting relationship.

The activity arouses and channels motivational energy. Because the listener is an accepting and encouraging partner but leaves the initiative for exploring and diagnosing the problem mainly up to the speaker a normal outcome of the process is that the speaker will recognize new avenues for action and will begin making plans to pursue them.

Some Dangers to Avoid

Stereotyped Reactions. Constantly repeating a phrase like "you feel that ..." or "you're saying that ..."

Pretending Understanding. If you get lost, say "sorry, I didn't get that. What are you saying?"

Overreaching. Ascribing meanings that go far beyond what the other has expressed, such as by giving psychological explanations or by stating interpretations that the other considers to be exaggerated or otherwise inaccurate.

Under-reaching. Repeatedly missing the feelings that the other conveys or making responses that understate them.

Long-windedness. Giving very long or complex responses. These emphasize the listener's massive effort to understand more than they clarify the other person's point of view. Short, simple responses are more effective.

Inattention to nonverbal cues. Facing or leaning away from the other, not maintaining eye contact, looking tense, or presenting a "closed" posture by crossing the arms are only a few of the nonverbal cues a listener should avoid. "Correct" verbal responses are of little use when accompanied by nonverbal signals that contradict them

Violating the other person's expectations. Giving reflective responses when they are clearly not appropriate to the situation. For example, if the other person asks a direct question and obviously expects an answer, simply answering the question is often best. In other words, if someone says: "what time is it?" you don't usually say "You're feeling concern about the time".

The Choices Made by the Reflective Listener

