

Active Listening

In our active world of communication one cannot afford to exclude the art of listening. As a leader you must listen to your constituents in order to be effective. You need to try to listen and correctly understand every message from each group member.

Active listening differs from hearing. Hearing is the passive act of perceiving audible sounds with the ear. Listening, on the other hand, is the active pursuit of understanding what the other person is saying and feeling.

In active listening, the receiver tries to understand what the sender is feeling and what the message means. The listener puts his/her understanding into his/her own words and feeds it back to the sender for verification. It is important to feed back only what the listener feels the sender's message meant - nothing more, nothing less. This creates an atmosphere of acceptance and understanding in which the sender can explore the problem and determine a solution.

Listening is important in any relationship, but it is especially important for leaders to listen to their constituents in order to be more effective.

Are You a Good Listener?

- Do you frequently think of other things when others are talking to you?
- Do you doodle, shuffle papers, look at the clock or out the window, read the newspaper, or watch TV?
- Do you silently argue with the talker?
- Do you only selectively hear ideas that fit your beliefs?
- Do you feel most people have little to talk about that is interesting or important?
- Do you listen passively without any facial expressions?
- Do you frequently interrupt others as they are speaking?
- Do you complete sentences or ideas for people when they pause to think?
- Do you silently criticize characteristics of the speaker: voice, looks, manner of speaking?
- Do you have to ask people to repeat what they said because you have forgotten?

Ways to combat these problems

- Have a genuine interest and empathy for others.
- Be able to take another perspective, step in another pair of shoes.
- Let the speaker finish his/her ideas & thoughts before responding.
- Accept others for who they are and where they are coming from, even if they are different from you.
- Do your best to minimize distractions.
- Do not assume that you know what the other person is going to say.

To listen actively is not a simple activity. The following are important characteristics of a "good active listener."

Be there

Be present in heart, mind and spirit with the person. Begin with a clear intention to understand the other person before you seek to have him/her understand you because you really need to hear what s/he has to say first. If you don't have the time, or don't want to listen, wait until you do. Displaying the proper attitude with open body language is important, as well as matching your tempo and tone with the tempo and tone of the person you are listening to.

Listen carefully to the person

Don't plan what you are going to say. Don't think of how you can interrupt. Don't think of how to solve the problem, how to admonish, how to console, or what the person "should" do. Refuse to be blinded by your own prejudices. Don't think or struggle to react.... just listen. Also, watch for what will never be said out loud. Read the nonverbal signals of others.

Accept the person and his/her feelings

The meaning of what the person is trying to say is in a combination of content and feeling. Accept the person and their feelings without judgment or reservation. Don't stereotype the person even though s/he may be very different from you. Also, accept whatever the person's feelings may be or how they may differ from what you think a person "should" feel. Don't be afraid that just because the feeling is expressed the person will always feel that way. Remember that feelings are neither right nor wrong; they just exist and can change, too.

Stay with the other person's point of view without becoming that person

Put yourself in the other person's shoes at his/her point of reference. Don't become that person, but understand what s/he is feeling, saying, or thinking. For clarification try translating what the other person is saying into your own words without being repetitious. Stay separate enough to be objective, but involved enough to help.

Trust the person enough to keep out of it

Trust the person's ability to handle his/her own feelings, work through them, and find solutions to his/her own problems. Stay Objective. Refrain from offering solutions in order to keep yourself removed. Don't intrude on what the person is trying to say.

Most people spend roughly 70% of their waking hours in some form of verbal communication. Yet, how many of us have ever had any formal training in the art of listening? Here are some things you can do to improve your listening skills.

1. **Stop Talking!** You cannot listen if you are speaking.
2. **Approach the listening experience from a state of calm.** To be centered is to be calm at a very deep level, to be without agendas or predispositions as to the outcome, and to be open to experience. Centeredness is a prerequisite to truly open listening. It sets the stage for the points below.
3. **Help put the speaker at ease** – try to remain open-minded, accept the person and his/her feelings, and show that you trust the person enough to avoid interfering. Create a relaxed environment.
4. **Never rule out any topic of discussion as uninteresting.** Creative people are always on the lookout for new information. While some conversations may be inane, it's wise to make sure the subject is not worthwhile before tuning out.

5. **Demonstrate that you want to listen**— stay alert by standing or sitting straight, if sitting lean forward slightly, and maintain eye contact. Show the speaker you are interested.
6. **Accept the speaker’s message.** On the face of it, this would seem to be an argument for gullibility—for believing almost anything anyone tells you. It’s not. The point here is to suspend judgment during the immediate experience of listening. In accepting “as is”, you’re not making a determination as to the truth or falsity of the statement, you’re simply acknowledging exactly what the speaker is saying—right or wrong, good or bad, true or false. This capacity for total acceptance frees the mind to listen for other clues, for example ...
7. **Remove distractions** – this includes your preoccupations, daydreaming, and presumptions, as well as environmental distractions. Don’t doodle, tap, shuffle paper, use the computer. Shut the door, turn off the television.
8. **Listen for the whole message.** One estimate has it that 75% of all communication is non-verbal. If you take away the words, what’s left? Plenty, it turns out. Beyond the words themselves is a host of clues as to what the speaker is communicating. Some examples: posture (rigid or relaxed, closed or open); facial expression (does it support the words?); hands (clenched, open, relaxed, tense?); eyes (does the speaker maintain eye contact?); voice tone (does it match the words?); movement (are the speaker’s movements intense, relaxed, congruent (with the message) or conflicting; do they suggest that the whole speech is “staged”?) What you’re looking for here are inconsistencies between what is said and what is really meant, clues that tell you the spoken message isn’t really genuine. Get the idea?
9. **Practice Active Listening** – ask questions, seek clarification, reflect the speaker’s feelings, and periodically summarize. Ask questions! This encourages others & shows you are listening while developing ideas further.
10. **Don’t get hung up on the speaker’s delivery.** Then there are factors that simply reveal an awkwardness in delivery rather than any attempt to mislead. The key is being able to distinguish between the two. It’s easy to get turned off when someone speaks haltingly, has an irritating voice, or just doesn’t come across well. The key to good listening, however, is to get beyond the manner of delivery to the underlying message. In order for this to happen, you have to resolve not to judge the message by the delivery style. It’s amazing how much more clearly you can “hear” once you’ve made the decision to really listen rather than to criticize.
11. **Empathize** – seek first to understand the speaker’s words, intent, and feelings. Try avoiding autobiographical responses, a.k.a. relating the information to your self, because it has a tendency to make others feel like their message isn’t unique. Try to see the other person's point of view.
12. **Avoid structured listening.** It’s popular among some communications teachers to recommend a format for listening, either in the form of questions (“What is the speaker’s main point? What is he/she really saying?) or key words (e.g., purpose, evidence, intent). The problem with this approach is that it creates a dialogue of noise in the listener’s mind which interferes with clear reception. Better to operate from the openness of the centered state (above) and receive the information just as it comes, without any attempt to structure or judge it. Think of your mind as similar to the central processing unit of a computer in which the data comes in and is stored without change, available for subsequent access.

13. **Be patient** – Do not interrupt. Allow plenty of time, do not interrupt, do not ever walk away. If the conversation becomes heated, reschedule another time to sit down.
14. **Hold your temper!**
15. **Tune out distractions.** Poor listeners are distracted by interruptions; good listeners tune them out and focus on the speaker and the message. It's a discipline that lends itself to specific techniques for maintaining one's focus. Here are some things that will help: Maintain eye contact with the speaker; lean forward in your chair; let the speaker's words "ring" in your ears; and turn in your chair, if necessary, to block out unwanted distractions.
16. **Acknowledge Criticism, but don't React** – if the speaker offers criticism, seek to absorb it and acknowledge that it has been offered, but avoid becoming defensive or angry. If you decide in advance not to become defensive, then there is no need to think about your own plan of attack (i.e. counter arguments, excuses, denial), and there is more time to listen to the speaker.
17. **Go easy on arguments & criticism.** This attitude will put others on the defensive, making communication difficult.
18. **Be alert to your own prejudices.** This goes along with #3 above, but it's so important that you may want to think specifically about the impact of your prejudices on your ability to really hear what's being communicated. Often, we are unaware how strongly our prejudices influence our willingness and ability to hear. The fact is: any prejudice, valid or not, tends to obscure the message.
19. **Resist the temptation to rebut.** Why is it that, when we hear someone saying something with which we strongly disagree, we immediately begin mentally formulating a rebuttal? Many reasons, but one of the most common is our natural tendency to resist any new information that conflicts with what we believe. Keep in mind: you can always rebut later, when you've heard the whole message and had time to think about it.
20. **Take notes sparingly.** The world seems to be split between those who take prolific notes and those who take few or none, with each side equally strong in its position. I come down toward the latter view for this reason: the more focused you are on writing down what is being said, the more likely you are to miss the nuances of the conversation. There are two good ways around this dilemma. You can write down only key words and then, after the conversation, meeting, etc., go back and fill in, or you can take notes pictorially, that is, by diagramming what the speaker is saying. It's a technique called, "mind-mapping" and it was first popularized by a writer named Tony Buzan well over a decade ago in a book entitled, "Use Your Head". You may want to look up his books; he's written several.
21. **Stop Talking!** First & last, this is most important!

Six Steps to Better Listening

1. Learn to concentrate, focus on what the speaker is telling you, try to understand details.
2. Run a TV test with a friend, listen to a TV show and see how many of the ideas you can remember!
3. Cut out distractions, resolve to turn off the stereo and TV and put the newspaper or your magazine away when someone is trying to talk with you.

4. Accept controversy, realize there will be difficult subjects, work through them; it makes life interesting!
5. Repeat instructions practice repeating instructions & directions correctly.
6. Help others listen set a good example, listen to what others tell you and model that behavior.

Active listening allows the leader to understand what messages the group members are sending him/her and is also the foundation for returning feedback effectively to those members.