

Active Listening

Active listening is listening with a purpose. It is more than just hearing which is the act of perceiving sound. When you hear a sound or noise, you are receiving aural stimuli. Listening goes beyond just registering that there is a sound in the environment. It involves receiving and interpreting the aural stimuli, and creating meaning from the sound.

Using active listening skills can help to minimize or avoid unnecessary conflict. It can bring clarity and understanding to conversations and interactions with other people. To work, the listener focuses on the words and the feelings of the speaker for understanding. Active listening happens when the listener hears the various messages being sent, understands their meaning, and then verifies the meaning by offering feedback.

Characteristics of active listeners:

- Spends more time listening than talking
- Let's the speaker finish his or her own sentences
- Let's the other person finish speaking before responding
- Allows the other person to speak and does not dominate the conversation
- Aware of own biases
- Asks open-ended questions
- Focuses on what is being said and not what one's response will be to the speaker

To develop these skills and characteristics, it helps to be aware of some verbal active listening techniques, and nonverbal techniques. You can also test your skills through the active listening checklist.

Active Listening Techniques

Type of Action	Purpose of Action	Implement Action	Examples
Encouraging	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To convey interest in what the speaker is discussing 2. To keep the person talking 	Don't agree or disagree. Use noncommittal words with positive tone of voice	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "I see..." 2. "Yes..."
Restating or Clarification	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To show that you are listening and understand 2. To check the listeners perception of the speaker's message 	Restate the other's basic ideas, emphasizing the facts.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "If I understand, your idea is..." 2. "In other words, this is..."
Reflecting or paraphrasing	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To show that you are listening and understand 2. To show your understanding of their feelings 	Restate the other's basic feelings	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "You feel that..." 2. "You must feel angry that..."
Summarizing	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To pull important ideas, facts, etc. together. 2. To establish a basis for further discussion 3. To review progress 	Restate, reflect, and summarize major ideas and feelings	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. "These seem to be the key ideas..." 2. "If I understand you, you feel that..."

When engaging in active listening, or in any form of communication, it is important to remember that there is more to it than just the spoken part. There are many non-verbal behaviors to listening and communicating.

Table adapted from The Poynter Institute, 2002.

Checklist for Active Listeners

- ___ Do you paraphrase or rephrase what has been said before you respond?
- ___ Do you seek clarification (I'm not quite sure what you mean)?
- ___ Do you open all meetings with meeting ground rules (including one person speaks at a time)?
- ___ Do you encourage everyone to participate?
- ___ Do you look at and make eye contact with others when they are talking to you?
- ___ Do you make every effort to understand the question from the questioner's point of view?
- ___ Do you seek an immediate response or run quick meetings (some people need more time to process new information)?
- ___ Are you aware of the numerical imbalance in meetings (men vs. women)?
- ___ Do you go around the table and address each person by name and give them an opportunity to speak?
- ___ Do you watch for body language and indicators that certain individuals want to participate but look frustrated because peers keep cutting them off?
- ___ Do you have meetings where a few voices dominate the meeting?
- ___ Do you remain neutral until all points of view have been presented?
- ___ Do you balance participation between different styles?

These questions are meant to provoke thought and discussion.

If you answer no to any of these, the impact your actions have on others may vary from your intentions.

Active listening is a way to bring your impact closer to the intended effect.

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