

Active Listening

Hear What People Are Really Saying

Listening is one of the most important skills we can have and develop. How well you listen has a major impact on your ability to lead, the quality of your relationships with others, and even in the career world: your success in your job. We may take for granted that listening is a skill and is a matter of discipline and patience. Active listening is a skill that everyone can use and everyone needs. It is especially important to leaders; not just leaders, but those who are seeking to influence others in a way that grows them closer to Christ.

- We listen to obtain information.
- We listen to understand.
- We listen for enjoyment.
- We listen to learn.
- We listen to influence and lead.

Given all this listening we do, you would think we'd be good at it! Truth be known, we're not. Depending on the study being quoted, we remember a dismal 25-50% of what we hear. That means that when you talk to your boss, colleagues, customers or spouse for 10 minutes, they only really hear 2½-5 minutes of the conversation.

Turn it around and it reveals that when we are receiving directions or being presented with information, you aren't hearing the whole message either. You hope the important parts are captured in your 25- 50%, but what if they're not?

Clearly, listening is a skill that we can all improve in. Improving listening skill will give us incredible benefits as well. By becoming a better listener, you will improve your productivity, as well as your ability to influence, lead your group, persuade negotiate. What's more, you'll avoid conflict and misunderstandings – all necessary for workplace success.

Good communication skills require a high level of self-awareness. By understanding your personal style of communicating, you will go a long way towards creating good and lasting impressions with others.

The way to become a better listener is to practice "active listening". This is where you make a conscious effort to hear not only the words that another person is saying but, more importantly, to try and understand the total message being sent. I am not talking about psychoanalysis, okay? In the psychology field, active listening, while very similar at many points, is different than what we are talking about here.

In order to do this we must pay attention to the other person very carefully. We have to be in the moment—not thinking about what we are going to quickly say next. We must actually understand

what they are communicating. Communication is more than the words that we say. It is also body language, tone, the unspoken way that we demonstrate in our eyes, and other facial features.

I cannot allow myself to become distracted by what else may be going on around me, or by quickly forming counter arguments or what I will say next when the other person stops speaking. Nor can I allow myself to lose focus on what the other person is communicating. All of these barriers contribute to a lack of listening and understanding.

Tip:

If you're finding it particularly difficult to concentrate on what someone is saying, try repeating their words mentally as they say it – this will reinforce their message and help you control mind drift.

To enhance our listening skills, we need to let the other person know that we are listening to what he or she is saying. To understand the importance of this, ask yourself if you've ever been engaged in a conversation when you wondered if the other person was listening to what you were saying. You wonder if your message is getting across, or if it's even worthwhile to continue speaking. Or like they really wanted to be somewhere else rather than talking with you? It feels like talking to a brick wall and it's something you want to avoid.

Acknowledgement can be something as simple as a nod of the head or a simple "uh huh." You aren't necessarily agreeing with the person, you are simply indicating that you are listening. Using body language and other signs to acknowledge you are listening also reminds you to pay attention and not let your mind wander.

Tip:

When you are working on body language, think about visual clues that you can give off to the other person you are in conversation that lets them know you are engaged with what they are saying. Squinting your eyes, nodding your head, and saying "yeah" is a powerful way to demonstrate that you are deeply thinking about what they are saying.

You should also try to respond to the speaker in a way that will both encourage him or her to continue speaking, so that you can get the information if you need. While nodding and "uh huhing" says you're interested, an occasional question or comment shows that you have thought deeply enough about what they have said to you that you are processing and there are certain areas that you would like them to explain further. Recapping or summarizing what has been said communicates that you understand the message as well. You may say something like, "So what you are saying...or Let me make sure that I heard you correctly..."

Becoming an Active Listener

There are six 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 are saying.

1. Pay attention.

Give the speaker your undivided attention and acknowledge the message. Recognize that what is not said also speaks loudly.

- Look at the speaker directly.
- Put aside distracting thoughts. Don't mentally prepare a rebuttal!
- Be careful about your own internal conversation.
- 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 are 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.
- Demonstrate that you are processing carefully what they are saying in a way that makes them feel comfortable and confident.
- Encourage the speaker to continue with small verbal comments like yes, yeah, and uh huh.

3. Provide feedback.

Our personal filters, assumptions, judgments, definitions, and beliefs can easily 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.
- Seek for clarification and precision as you understand them.

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 X; is that what you meant?"

4. **Defer judgment.**

Interrupting is not only disrespectful, it is a waste of time. It frustrates the speaker and limits full understanding of the message. Furthermore interrupting severely affects your ability to lead others. It backfires and you end up reaping disrespect from those you are trying to lead.

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

5. **Think Discipleship (Redemptively)**

As we lead others, we are pointing them to spiritual growth in their walks with Christ and their relationships with others.

- Pray that the Holy Spirit would lead you to respond wisely and carefully.
- Slow down. Be okay with silence before you respond.
- Consider the following questions:
 1. What more do you need to know to understand what they are at in their walk?
 2. What areas do you need to challenge them to grow in their walk?
 3. What are they saying about their needs?
 4. What does this particular statement reveal about their need to grow in this area?
 5. How do you need to respond now? How can you follow up later?
- Remember that the goal is spiritual growth.

6. **Respond Appropriately.**

Active listening is a model for respect and understanding. You are gaining information and perspective as well as demonstrating that you care about others enough to truly engage them.

- Be candid, open, and honest in your response.
- Assert your ideas and convictions respectfully and carefully.
- Speak the truth in love—not only in a truthfully but a loving way.

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, then there's a lot of habit-breaking to do!
- Be deliberate with your listening and remind yourself constantly 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 question, 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!
- Seek the power of the Holy Spirit to continually transform you into a better lover of both God and others!

Adapted from www.mindtools.com/CommSkil/ActiveListening