

Active Listening



How to Communicate Better

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Introduction

We can all recall situations where we have utterly failed to listen to what someone else is saying. For various reasons, we are simply not taking in anything useful. How many times have you been introduced to a person by name only to not know what their name is thirty seconds later?

The reason this happens is because you have failed to *actively* listen. By italicizing the word “actively”, it might suggest that actively listening is different to plain old listening. In truth, there are only two states when we are communicating with another person: actively listening, and not really listening.

Active listening is the art of listening for meaning. For us to gain meaning from the words of another person, we need to be listening carefully. Meaning is not necessarily assured even when we are actively listening, but we will at least *know* that we don’t understand, and can therefore ask the correct questions to gain enlightenment.

Active listening must become a habit because it is the foundation of effective communication. Imagine a troop commander not really listening to his orders and attacking the wrong target. A failure to actively listen can certainly have dire consequences.

Many people give the appearance of listening but fail to really hear what is being said to them. They assume that listening is such a basic sense that it will happen automatically. This is not the case. Or it might be that they are so used to making all the outward gestures of listening that they are convinced it is really happening. It is not difficult to pick up on tone of voice, body language and facial expressions, all of which indicate the gist of what is being said. All it then takes is to hear a few key words and it becomes very easy to think you have understood everything you’ve been told, and to give the convincing impression that this is so by returning appropriate tone of voice, body language and facial expressions.

Active listening requires the listener to understand, interpret, and evaluate what they are being told. Without this, communication is nothing but a façade, which may suffice when you are passing the time of day talking to a neighbor in the street, but is wholly inadequate in any business environment. As businesses depend on human interaction to succeed, the quality of that interaction must be of the highest caliber, and interaction means communication.

There are many reasons why people fail to listen properly. They may be distracted by an activity they are attempting whilst listening, or by other thoughts in their head they deem to be more important, or they might be thinking about what they are going to say next, which is a common flaw in communication between parties whose opinions differ.

Active listening focuses attention on the speaker. It involves the listener subjugating their own needs for a while in deference to those of the listener. It requires concentration and a genuine willingness to hear what is being said.

Why It Is So Important To Actively Listen

Where there is an absence of active listening, there is poor communication, and where there is poor communication, opportunities are missed and problems are created or perpetuated.

Active listening encourages people to open up, reduces the chance of misunderstandings, helps to resolve problems and conflicts, and builds trust.

Research has shown that the majority of people spend up to 90% of their waking time engaged in some form of communication, be that reading, writing, speaking or listening. However, over half of our communication time is taken up with listening – or what passes for listening. Anyone in a managerial position is likely to devote as much as 70% of their communication time to listening. The higher up the chain of command you go, the more demand is placed on the individual to listen to other people.

Studies also reveal that we properly hear only around 25% to 50% of what is said to us. Out of a 10 minute conversation, you may be getting only 2½ to 5 minutes of useful information. Whilst that may be sufficient to grasp the general thrust of the conversation, it still leaves 50% to 75% that has passed you by. The potential for important details to be missed is therefore significant.

In a way, the importance of listening hardly needs explaining. No one can live in this modern world and not understand the need to communicate with other people. It is not the importance of listening that really requires stressing; it is the misconception that listening is easy and happens by default. All human relationships, from the most personal that we enjoy with our partner and children, through those we have with friends and our more extended family, to those that occur in our work life, and those we experience with mere acquaintances – all these relationships are based on our ability to communicate effectively.

One of the most common complaints following any failed personal relationship is that the other party didn't listen, or that there was a lack of

understanding, which amounts to the same thing. When a person appears to be listening but fails to truly understand what is being said and where the other person is coming from, this is because listening has not really taken place – not the active listening that matters.

Human beings are social creatures. Not only is communication unavoidable, it is truly desirable. We crave interaction as a means of enlivening our time on this earth, and because it keeps us (relatively) sane. It allows us to express our emotions – our hopes and fears, joys and sorrows – and share them with other people who we think may be interested, or who may be able to help us make sense of them. But when we speak, there has to be someone listening for it to have any point.

In simple terms, speaking is one person reaching out, and listening is another person accepting and taking hold. Together, they form communication, and this is the basis of all human relationships. This being the case, it is crucial that the listener is truly listening with a view to offering constructive feedback. How catastrophic would it be if a depressed individual called a helpline and after fifteen minutes pouring out their heart, the listener said: “Uh-huh. What? Sorry, I wasn’t listening, tell me again.” A failure to listen can create immense hurt, if not genuine damage.

Active listening tells the speaker that what they have to say matters. It creates a sense of confidence that advice is at hand; advice that will be considered and useful. A listener is a sounding board that allows the speaker to develop thoughts that may, up to that moment, have been difficult to clarify.

Common Barriers to Active Listening

Listening may be affected by several barriers that impede proper communication.

Ignorance and Delusion

The first barrier to active listening is simply not realizing that it isn't taking place. Most of us can get through life perfectly adequately without developing our listening skills, mostly because we fail to classify listening as a skill to start with, and because most everyone else is in the same state of ignorance. It is very easy to then delude yourself into thinking that listening just involves allowing another person to speak in your presence. Even when you are the one talking and faced with a lousy listener, it still may not dawn that you are every bit as bad at listening as they are. It is only when faced with a truly gifted listener – one who *actively* listens – that we may become aware of how lacking we are by comparison.

Reluctance

The possible result of actively listening to another person may be that you become embroiled in their situation in some way. People who share problems often do so because they are seeking advice, but they may also want the listener to become more deeply involved. Where this is obvious from the outset, the listener may be reluctant to become implicated and may therefore willfully fail to lend a sympathetic and understanding ear.

Bias and Prejudice

The listener's personal interpretation of what they are hearing may cause them to respond negatively to the speaker. They either assume that they know the situation because they have been faced with similar in the past, or they allow their preconceptions to color the way they respond. In the first case, the listener does not properly listen to the facts because they already think they

know the full story. This means they might belittle the problem or offer a response that does not meet the needs of the listener. In the second case, the listener judges the speaker negatively because the speaker's opinions or beliefs run counter to their own.

Subject Matter

The listener may simply not be interested in what the speaker is saying. This may be because they find the subject dull, because they feel it is too far beyond their experience to comment on, or because their lack of knowledge causes them to dismiss the severity of the problem. All these will cause the listener to switch off to a certain extent.

Status of the Speaker

The listener's opinion of the speaker, as a person, may influence the extent to which they are happy to pay attention and give their time. This may be based on simple likes and dislike, or on status. The former situation may cause the listener to hang on every word or positively resent the imposition. The latter situation may also produce these same results: the thoughts of a low status speaker may be deemed unworthy, and those of a high status individual may provoke rapt attention because the listener feels honored to have been included or consulted.

How the Listener is Feeling

Even if it is in your job description to listen to other people, your ability to actively listen to them can easily be affected by how you are feeling at that moment. We all know how this goes. If you're not careful, your emotions can dictate your whole day. This particularly includes how you respond to people who want to bend your ear with their problems. If you are in a good mood, you feel loving and giving and able to offer your best advice based on your incisive analysis of what you have just *actively* listened to. If your mood sucks, the very notion that someone wants to burden you with their thoughts,

let alone their problems, just makes you resentful. So you fake it and pretend to pay attention and be interested, wasting everyone's time.

Time and Place

These are the physical factors that influence whether you are willing or able to actively listen to what you are being told. If you have limited time in which to listen, you may be so concerned with time constraints that you cannot concentrate sufficiently to really listen. The truth is that even five minutes of active listening may prove golden time for the speaker, but it may not be possible with a clock-watching listener.

Location can also be a problem. Having a heart-to-heart in the street next to a mechanical digger in full swing is never going to be conducive to active listening. Equally, trying to talk about a delicate matter with someone who is hard of hearing and who won't wear an aid in the middle of a crowded restaurant is doomed to failure. These may be extreme examples, but they highlight the importance of choosing the right time and place. As a listener, it is far better to be honest and schedule a more appropriate time and place than to succumb to the pressure to listen *now* and then not listen at all.

The Four Components of Active Listening

There are four basic components that allow active listening to take place, and the onus for these is on the listener. These are: acceptance, empathy, honesty, and specifics.

Acceptance

Acceptance is about having respect for the person you are talking to, not on the basis of what they have to say, but rather based on the simple fact that they are a human being who has the right to express their thoughts. This acceptance should be as unconditional as possible, with the proviso that there may be instances where the beliefs or opinions expressed are so anathema to legality and morality that acceptance must be withdrawn.

Accepting means trying to avoid expressing agreement or disagreement with what the other person is saying, at least initially. This encourages the other person to be less defensive and more open to further exploring their situation and revealing more of themselves.

Empathy

This is usually interpreted as the listener's ability to understand the speaker's situation on an emotional level, based on the listener's own frame of reference rather than a sense of what *should* be felt – which is sympathy, not empathy. In other words, to empathize with the speaker, you should know how they are feeling because you have experienced the same or very similar feelings yourself. For example, you cannot properly have empathy with a bereaved individual unless you have experienced a similar loss of a loved one.

Empathy may also be defined as the listener's *desire* to feel the speaker's emotions, regardless of their own experience, but this does not really get to the heart of the matter. True empathy is a rare and wonderful thing, and requires that there is a genuine emotional reaction in the listener based on personal experience.

Honesty

This is self-explanatory. This refers to openness, frankness, and genuineness on the part of the listener. This means that the listener is open about their reactions to what they have heard. This must necessarily come after the acceptance component, and once the speaker has divulged as much as they are going to. Honest reactions given too soon can easily stifle further elucidation on the part of the speaker.

The aim is that candor on the part of the listener evokes candor in the speaker. When one person comes out from behind a facade, the other is more likely to do the same.

Specifics

This refers to the need to deal in details rather than generalities.

Often, a person who has a problem will avoid painful feelings by being abstract or impersonal. They may speak about general situations that “other people” experience, without directly involving themselves or suggesting that they are in any way affected. For communication to be worthwhile, the listener should therefore request that the speaker is more specific. This may necessitate a direct challenge to the speaker to open up on a personal level and “own” the problem they are pussy-footing around. Clearly, this could work two ways.

For these four components to work effectively, they should be clearly evident in the listener. Whilst some people may speak openly in the vain and unsubstantiated hope that their listener will respond correctly, others will require upfront signs that their words will be received as they would wish. This is a decidedly tough ask, especially in a business environment where the two people may be manager and employee and have little knowledge of how the other person usually behaves. In this case, it has more to do with the speaker’s intuitive assessment of the listener than on the listener’s ability to create the perfect listening persona.

Improving Your Active Listening Skills

The first step is to accept that improvement is possible and necessary. Once this has been done, there are specific skills that can be learned so that you can almost instantly become an active listener and more effective communicator. Practice, however, is the key to your success. Only through the repeated application of these skills will they become second nature to you.

Bear in mind that body language is a large part of active listening. You may be perfectly able to actively listen lying on your back on a bed with your eyes shut, but that will not convince the speaker that you are paying full attention, and may cause them to be reticent with their information, or not to bother at all.

Face the speaker – It is important to adopt the correct physical attitude. Slouching in a chair that is facing a window whilst the speaker is placed to one side of you does not create the right impression. You should be sitting up straight, your body facing the speaker and canted slightly forward to show your interest through positive body language.

Maintain eye contact – This does not mean never blinking or looking away. There needs to be a comfortable and comforting degree of eye contact when two people are communicating. Where eye contact is broken, it should not be to take an interest in someone or something else. It is pretty obvious when this is happening. There is no magic formula for when to break eye contact, for how long, and where else to look. Just remember that eye contact will be largely governed by how genuinely interested you are in what the speaker is saying. If you have no interest, or are not concentrating with active listening, then you can be fairly confident that your level of eye contact will be giving the game away.

Assess the emotion, not just the words – Active listening also involves actively analyzing the speaker's body language, tone of voice and facial expressions. Very often, words on their own are a poor guide as to how a person is feeling. Sometimes they are in direct contradiction. If communication is to be effective, it must be honest, so the goal of active listening is to decipher the

truth of a situation, Even if the speaker comes to you, don't assume that they will be straight-talking. They may want you to look behind the words at their body language, because they may need the truth coaxed out of them if it is too painful to simply utter.

Minimize external distractions – Trying to speak or listen when there are distractions around you is difficult. You need to turn off the TV, switch off the radio, stop reading, stop writing, and just pay attention. The speaker must also cease any distracting activities.

Respond appropriately – If you are genuinely taking an interest and listening, this should take care of itself. However, do bear in mind that some people are less animated than others, and if you are like this, you may want to insert a few nods or verbal acknowledgements. It may help to say you understand or offer other spoken encouragements every so often. Be careful not to overdo it, though. Saying “wow”, “really?”, and “fascinating” every few seconds can be distracting in itself, or it may seem false, as though you are sticking to some formula you read in a book. You can also ask questions, provided they do not interrupt the flow of the speaker's thoughts.

Focus on the speaker – This means fighting the temptation to prepare what you are going to say whilst they are speaking. This can be difficult to resist, especially when the speaker says something that sparks a useful response in us that we fear we will have forgotten by the time they finish speaking. If you do want to recall a point they have made, try remembering just one trigger word that will help, rather than working out your whole reply in your head in advance. Remember that the conversation will usually follow a logical flow once the speaker has finished, so there should be no need to do anything other than listen.

Minimize internal distractions – If you are finding that your own brain is chattering away when you are supposed to be listening, try to refocus your thoughts on the speaker, and keep doing this as often as required. Your ability to do this will improve with practice. It may help to behave as though your life depends on what they have to say, or you could try repeating their words mentally as they say them.

Be sincerely interested – The above two skills will be easier to master if you are genuinely interested in what the speaker has to say. As mentioned already, disinterest is a huge barrier to active listening, and conjuring interest may not be easy.

Have sympathy, feel empathy – These will allow you to take more of an interest. You can empathize by remembering a time when your emotions were on a par with the speaker's. If you cannot recall such an occasion, you can sympathize through acceptance – accepting that they are a human being who requires understanding.

Be open-minded – Don't prejudge the speaker. Even when they begin with a comment that rankles with you, wait until they have finished before making any decisions. Some people do not express themselves too well and may not mean exactly what they say. Comments they make subsequently make place a different perspective on their initial comments. The key is to be patient and wait. Do not assume, or allow preconceptions to wreck communications. The moment people start to disagree, the harder it becomes for both parties to actively listen.

Avoid "me" stories – These happen when a speaker says something that triggers a memory of something similar in your own experience. Then you are just waiting for them to shut up so you can share. This can be disastrous for communication because as soon as the speaker ends their sentence, you jump in and take over. "Me" stories normally begin with "Yeah, that's just like me ..." Phrased in such a way, the listener has justified their interjection by linking their circumstances with the speaker's. However, such stories are little more than an opportunity to talk about your favorite subject: yourself. They may also end up taking the conversation so far off-topic that the original impetus is lost. Keep your stories to yourself, unless the speaker specifically asks if you have experienced a similar situation because they genuinely want to know how you handled it.

Don't be scared of silence – Active listening requires that you take time to absorb what you have heard, analyze it, and then respond. Commenting instantly may give the impression that you have been formulating your response when you should have been listening. You may also be coming in too early. The speaker may only have paused to clarify their thoughts before speaking again, and may need that silence to think in. Be assured that if they do want you to speak, they will let you know. They may ask: “What do you think?” or “What would you do?”

Practice emotional intelligence – This is all about being aware of your emotions and opinions. As much as your emotions can aid active listening by creating empathy, they can also hamper communication if they cause you to disagree with the speaker. This can clearly produce negative results if you start an argument, but it can also be detrimental even if you keep your counsel and say nothing. Having negative thoughts about what you are being told will work against your ability to actively listen, and you will almost certainly transmit this to the speaker in your body language. You can combat this problem by being more emotionally intelligent. This means accepting that the feelings you have could, if you let them, affect your listening abilities, and then deciding to keep them under wraps, at least until the speaker has said all they want to say.

Take notes – Although this may make you appear like a psychiatrist, jotting down a few key words can really help. This counters the need to interrupt for fear of forgetting, and provides a reference for once the speaker has finished so that you know you will be able to address the pertinent issues. Some people may want to speak at length without interruptions, and even the most attentive and active listener will then struggle to recall all the details they wanted to comment on. This tactic obviously has more relevance in formal and business situations. It might be policy to ask whether the speaker minds you scribbling a little as they speak, and to explain the purpose of doing so.

Check your understanding – This is a good way to focus your thoughts on listening, to demonstrate to the speaker that you really are listening, to help clarify the listener's thoughts, and to make sure that you genuinely do understand. This is a matter of asking clarification questions when appropriate, and may involve restating part of what you have heard. You may start off with: "So I am right in thinking ..." or "Let me just clarify ..." or "So are you saying ..."

Reflective Listening

Reflective listening refers to the final point made above, and it deserves a separate chapter because it concerns how the listener deals with what they have heard. This is what makes or breaks the art of communication.

The four components of active listening – acceptance, empathy, honesty and specifics – all work towards creating reflective responses in the listener.

The main principles of reflective listening are:

- Listen more than you talk.
- Deal with personal specifics, not impersonal generalities.
- Decipher the feelings behind the words, to create a better understanding of the issues.
- Restate and clarify what you have heard.
- Understand the speaker's frame of reference and avoid responding from your own frame of reference. (Frame of reference means the views a person has on an issue based on their own subjective experience of it.)
- Respond with acceptance and empathy, not coldly or with fake concern.

Dealing with personal specifics means that the listener chooses to explore the effects on the speaker. If someone is worried that they may be about to lose their job, the focus should be firstly on that person's fears, not on the current state of the job market. The speaker will no doubt have already researched the facts and figures and probabilities, and will have heard a hundred times from well-meaning individuals that their job may not be lost. What is required in this case, and what reflective listening provides, is the chance to let the concerned person express their fears to another human being. This is often the primary reason for talking.

When the listener responds on a personal level, the conversation remains at the level the speaker intended. This allows them to further explore their feelings, improve their understanding of the situation, and perhaps attain a healthier attitude. There is no point in the listener saying: “Don’t worry, I’m sure it won’t happen.”

This is an empty platitude that reveals the listener has not even slightly grasped the reason the speaker opened up. Telling a worried person not to worry is tantamount to ending the conversation there and then. It is dismissive of the real problem, which is the speaker’s emotional reaction to the situation. This is particularly damaging when it has been such a huge step to reveal those emotions in the first place.

Reflective listening is concerned with responding, which underpins all effective communication. It is not about leading the speaker in a direction chosen by the listener because the listener believes this to be the best course of action based on their own frame of reference. The responsive listener addresses those matters that the speaker is currently discussing.

However, the reflective listener must evaluate not just the words spoken, but all that the speaker is conveying through their body language, tone of voice, and facial expressions. All this will provide the best interpretation of the speaker’s true emotional state. When a person feels that they are understood at an emotional level, that’s the moment when they feel they are *truly* understood.

Always remember that the emotion you read in a person’s expression may be completely at odds with the content of their spoken message. Content refers to the ideas, reasons, theories, assumptions, and descriptions that are expressed verbally by the speaker. Since many people do not state their emotions explicitly within such content, the listener will need to respond to the implicit emotional tone. A simple example would be if you asked how a friend was doing, and they responded in a monotone and with pain in their eyes: “I’m doing great”. Which message would you take as real?

The reflective listener would respond to the evident sadness and distress in their friend. This is a crucial skill to master: the ability and willingness to confront negative emotions and deal with them constructively. This may involve the listener in a long conversation, where a simple “Don’t worry!” would not. However, unless those underlying negative emotions are dealt with, then although the initial listening may have been actively performed, it can still be ruined by a lack of reflection.

This does not mean that assumptions should be made; this is responding from your own frame of reference. You know that the last time you looked so miserable, something terrible had happened, so you assume that must be the case now. The friend in question may indeed be doing great; they may just have gone over on their ankle and be in a little pain at that precise moment. The only way to establish the truth would be to respond with a gentle challenge: “Are you sure you’re feeling all right? You look like you’re suffering.”

Pitfalls to Avoid

Repetition in responses – Constantly using the same response can give the impression you are on autopilot. You should also avoid your responses being statements, such as, “You’re saying ...” or “You feel ...” It is better to respond with questions.

Pretending to understand – It is quite possible when listening to an emotional person to get a little lost. Emotions can muddle our thoughts and words. If you get lost, speak up and ask for clarification or you may spend a great deal of time operating in ignorance or on a misconception.

Trying too hard – As much as you may want to help, and feel that you have understood every nuance of the issue, resist the temptation to offer explanations that go beyond your knowledge base or beyond the facts that are definitely known. Amateur psychologists are a dime a dozen.

Not trying hard enough – Make sure to gauge the speaker's emotions as best you can. Missing key emotions or devaluing them may cause the speaker to clam up in frustration.

Rambling on – Keep your responses short. Remember you should be listening more than talking. Don't mistake long-windedness for helpfulness.

Missing non-verbal messages – This is a huge mistake, for reasons already stated.

Conclusion

Anyone interested in improving their communication skills should understand how active listening differs from the listening they normally practice.

Remember that there are two types of listening: active listening and not really listening. Active listening is not some super-listening skill beyond the reach of mere mortals; it is a skill anyone can master if they are willing to accept their current inadequacies and make the effort required.

Active listening is also not just a skill that belongs in a business or other professional environment; it is useful for anyone who seeks to improve the quality of their communication with other people. Only when you begin to actively listen will you realize just how much you were missing previously.