



Active Listening

"The most important thing in communication is to hear what isn't being said" (J. W. Roper)

Listening is the leader's secret weapon. It is easy to tell people what to do, how to improve or how to solve their problem. Instead of telling, try asking and listening. Let them discover what to do and how to improve. Let them discover the answer to their problem. That way they have more ownership and commitment to the way forward, and they learn some skills and independence in the process.

Types of listening

There are four types of listening that people use:

- 1) **Inactive listening:** the kind of listening which we should avoid. It is inefficient and unproductive and hears only the words which go in one ear and out the other.
- 2) **Selective listening:** probably the most common kind of listening. This is when we hear only what we want to hear and filter everything else out.
- 3) **Active listening:** this is when we make a conscious effort not only to hear the words but also to listen for the complete message the speaker is sending. It takes into consideration the intent and the non-verbal communication of the speaker. Active listening is non-judgmental and empathetic.
- 4) **Reflective listening:** Like active listening, reflective listening takes in the whole message. It is particularly important when dealing with a complicated issue or resolving a conflict or dispute. Reflective listening is used to clarify what is being said and to convey mutual understanding. The listener often asks questions to clarify the message.

Benefits of effective listening

Active and Reflective Listening are the marks of an effective listener. Active listening involves the following:

- Demonstrating empathy
- Being non-judgmental
- Understanding and responding to nonverbal communication
- Understanding your own emotional filters which cause mental blocks
- Being prepared to listen
- Being motivated to listen
- Striving for accuracy

Steps towards active listening

There are five steps we can take to develop active listening:

- 5) **Listen to the content.** Listen to what the speaker is saying in terms of facts and ideas. Listen to the words, not just the nonverbal communication. Be as accurate as possible. Use your intellect to hear what is being said. Be aware of what the speaker is saying.

- 6) **Listen to the intent.** Listen to the emotional meaning of what is being said. Use your intuition to "hear" the underlying messages. The speaker may use various methods of delivery, such as persuasion, to gain your agreement.
- 7) **Assess the speaker's non-verbal communication.** Read and interpret what the speaker is "saying" with body language and other nonverbal signals. Be aware of gestures, posture, eye contact, tone of voice and facial expression.
- 8) **Monitor your nonverbal communication and emotional filters.** Be aware of the messages you are sending with your nonverbal communication. Be aware of emotional filters that might affect your understanding of the receiver. Emotional filters are the "hot buttons" which cause people to stop listening. By being aware of people's emotional filters, you can control them.
- 9) **Listen to the speaker with empathy and without judgment.** Try to put yourself in the speaker's shoes and understand what is shaping the feelings behind the message. Don't prejudge the speaker; listening with empathy and without judgment validates the speaker. You may not agree with what is being said, but you show that you understand why it is being said, and that you will take the time to listen to the message.

Keys for effective listening

There are three keys to effective listening:

1. Paraphrasing

When someone talks, try paraphrasing back to them what they said. If you get it right, the other person will be delighted that you were listening so well. If you get wrong, the other person will correct you and you will quickly avoid any future misunderstandings. Paraphrasing is not the same as agreeing: it simply shows you have understood the other person.

2. Asking open questions

"The wise man doesn't give the right answers; he poses the right questions" (Claude Levi-Strauss)

Skilful use of questions will enable the leader to:

- Explore what others want/think/believe/fear
- Increase levels of participation
- Encourage others to share their experience or express their opinion
- Develop creative problem solving and foster new ideas
- Encourage people to reflect before deciding on some action
- Support consensus decision making
- Promote greater commitment to decisions

The best kind of questions to encourage dialogue are known as OPEN questions; these are questions which open up exploration of the issue and enable those involved to identify new approaches.

Close questions often start "Do you agree..." or "Shall we...?"

Open questions usually begin with words/phrases like:

- What?
- How?
- When?
- Where?
- Who?
- Which?
- In what way?
- To what extent?

We need to be a bit careful about how we use the **"Why?"** word; see the tips on effective questioning below.

- Rephrase questions to avoid beginning with “*Why?*”, as this may cause others to defend and justify their ideas or behaviour.
- Ask one question at a time. Be clear and concise.
- Wait for people to reply, and don't be afraid of silence.
- Ask questions that prompt people to think deeply.
- Seek to promote insight, not just gather information.
- Ask about, and listen, for feelings as well as facts.
- Respond to non-verbal communication with feedback.
- Use your non-verbal communication to keep questions from sounding too intrusive.
- Move from general to specific questions.
- 10. Challenge assumptions and generalizations.

3. Debriefing

After any significant meeting, spend a few minutes debriefing with a colleague. You will both have heard and seen different things. Together, you will quickly get more intelligence and feedback than if you try scribbling notes furiously during the meeting. An effective debrief will cover the following:

- *Hot buttons*: What were the hot buttons for each person at the meeting? Did we press the hot buttons effectively and get people properly engaged around their issues? Did everyone have the same hot buttons or different ones?
- Red issues: What were some of the objections, issues and challenges people raised against what we were saying? Did we handle them? What do we do about them next?
- Roles: Who had what role in the meeting? Who is the real decision-maker? Do they all have a common agenda or not?
- Body language: What was that telling us about how people were feeling about each of the topics that arose?
- Our own performance: How did we do? What could we do better both individually and as a team? How can we divide up responsibilities better next time?
- Next steps: What happens next and who is going to do it?

Filters in listening

Filters are the mental attitudes or beliefs we hold, through which we tend to filter everything we hear. Filters cause us to hear selectively and prevent us from listening actively and objectively. The key areas which influence our emotional and mental filters include:

- Our expectations
- Our relationships
- Our past experiences
- Our values and beliefs

To become an effective listener you have to be able control your own personal filters by:

- Identifying them
- Separating yourself from them mentally (or physically) to minimise their influence
- Concentrating on keeping an open mind as you listen

TASK: Identifying and controlling your filters

Try this exercise to help you identify the kind of filters, which might prevent you from being an effective communicator.

1. *What emotional and mental filters do I have?*
2. *What is the effect of these filters on my leadership role?*
3. *What can I do to control these filters?*

Remember that when people feel strongly about an issue, their emotions will colour their ability to communicate and to listen.