

Listening Skills

**“The most basic of all human needs is the need to understand and be understood.
The best way to understand people is to listen to them.” – Ralph Nichols**



We all want others to understand us. However, failure to listen and understand what is being said is miscommunication – which is the most common root cause of disputes and communication problems.

Listening is definitely not the same as hearing. The sound of words reach the eardrum, but **much of the time the hearer does not translate it into a message to be understood by the brain.** Much is being said about the importance of communication, but most of the

emphasis is on the effectiveness of the *speaker* in reaching the listener. **Greater attention should be focused on a person's ability to listen to others, to comprehend as much as possible, not just facts, but intent and emotional overtones as well.** As Epictetus once wisely said, “We have two ears and one mouth so that we can LISTEN twice as much as we speak.”

According to Wienmann (1977), listening and listening-related abilities such as understanding, open-mindedness, and supportiveness constitute the single dimension upon which people make judgments about communication competence.

Active or reflective Listening is *the* most valuable listening skill and focuses attention on the speaker. In active listening we are **showing genuine interest in understanding what *the other person is thinking, feeling, wanting or saying.*** We check our understanding *before* we respond with our own reply. We *restate or paraphrase* our understanding of their message and reflect it back to the sender to verify. This feedback process distinguishes active listening, makes it effective and facilitates mutual understanding.

Key elements of active listening that help you ensure you hear the other person, and they know you are hearing and understanding what they are saying are:

1. **Pay close attention.** Give the speaker your undivided attention. Acknowledge the message. Recognize non-verbal clues to their message.
 - Look directly at the speaker.
 - Avoid distracting thoughts or mentally prepare your response!
 - Avoid distractions from environmental factors.
 - “Listen” to and visually “read” the speaker’s body language.



Crucial Conversation Tools (Cont'd)

2. Demonstrate you are listening.

- Nod occasionally to show your interest.
- Use your own body language and gestures to convey your attention.
- Smile and use other facial expressions.
- Make sure your posture is open and inviting.
- Encourage the speaker to continue with small verbal comments like 'yes', and 'uh huh.'



3. Provide feedback.

What we hear can be distorted by our personal assumptions, judgments, and beliefs. To understand what is being said, you need to reflect the message back and ask questions.

- Paraphrase. "What I'm hearing is..." and "So what you mean is..." and "If I understand you correctly..."
- Ask questions to clarify particular points. "What do you mean when you say...?" "Is this what you mean?"
- Summarise the speaker's comments regularly.

4. Postpone judgment.

Interrupting frustrates the speaker, shows a lack of respect, and limits full understanding of the message.

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

5. Respond Appropriately.

Active listening is a model for respect and understanding. You are gaining information and perspective.

- Be sincere, open, and honest in your response.
- Assert your opinions respectfully.
- Treat the other person as he or she would want to be treated.

"Listening provides empowerment. As a listener, you don't have to 'do' anything, 'fix' anything, or 'change' anything. When people are 'heard,' they will 'do,' 'fix' and/or 'change' things for themselves."

– Carol McCall

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