

Active Listening - Communication Skills Training from MindTools.com

7-9 minutes

Listening is one of the most important skills you can have. How well you listen has a major impact on your job effectiveness, and on the quality of your relationships with others.

For instance:

- We listen to obtain information.
- We listen to understand.
- We listen for enjoyment.
- We listen to learn.

Given all the listening that we do, you would think we'd be good at it! In fact most of us are not, and research suggests that we only remember between 25 percent and 50 percent of what we hear. That means that when you talk to your boss, colleagues, customers, or spouse for 10 minutes, they pay attention to less than half of the conversation.

Turn it around and it reveals that when you 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 percent, but what if they're not?

Clearly, listening is a skill that we can all benefit from improving. By becoming a better listener, you can improve your productivity, as well as your ability to influence, persuade and negotiate. What's more, you'll avoid conflict and misunderstandings. All of these are necessary for workplace success!

Watch this video to learn how to hear the whole message by using active listening techniques.

Tip:

Good communication skills require a high level of [self-awareness](#). Understanding your own personal style of communicating will go a long way toward helping you to create good and lasting impressions with others.

About Active Listening

The way to improve your listening skills 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, the **complete message** being communicated.

In order to do this you must pay attention to the other person very carefully.

You cannot allow yourself to become distracted by whatever else may be going on around you, or by forming counter arguments while the other person is still speaking. Nor can you allow yourself to get bored, and lose focus on what the other person is saying.

Tip:

If you're finding it particularly difficult to concentrate on what someone is saying, try repeating his or her words mentally as he says them – this will reinforce his message and help you to stay focused.

To enhance your listening skills, you need to let the other person know that you are listening to what 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 continuing to speak. 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 can also help you to pay attention.

Try to respond to the speaker in a way that will encourage him to continue speaking, so that you can get the information that you need. While nodding and "uh huhing" says you're interested, an occasional question or comment to recap what has been said also communicates that you are listening and understanding his message.

Tip:

Be aware that active listening can give others the impression that you agree with them even if you don't. It's also important to avoid using active listening as a checklist of actions to follow, rather than really listening. It may help to practice [Mindful Listening](#) if you find that you lose focus regularly.

Becoming an Active Listener

There are five key active listening techniques you can use to help you become a more effective listener:

1. Pay Attention

Give the speaker your undivided attention, and acknowledge the message. Recognize that non-verbal communication also "speaks" loudly.

- Look at the speaker directly.
- Put aside distracting thoughts.
- Don't mentally prepare a rebuttal!
- Avoid being distracted by environmental factors. For example, side conversations.
- "Listen" to the speaker's [body language](#).

2. Show That You're Listening

Use your own body language and gestures to show that you are engaged.

- Nod occasionally.
- Smile and use other facial expressions.
- Make sure that your posture is open and interested.
- Encourage the speaker to continue with small verbal comments like yes, and "uh huh."

3. Provide Feedback

Our personal filters, assumptions, judgments, and beliefs can distort what we hear. As a listener, your role is to understand what is being said. This may require you to reflect on what is being said and to ask questions.

- Reflect on 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.

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 XXX. Is that what you meant?"

4. Defer Judgment

Interrupting is a waste of time. It frustrates the speaker and limits full understanding of the message.

- Allow the speaker to finish each point before asking questions.
- Don't interrupt with counter arguments.

5. Respond Appropriately

Active listening is designed to encourage respect and understanding. You are gaining information and perspective. You add nothing by attacking the speaker or otherwise putting her down.

- Be candid, open and honest in your response.
- Assert your opinions respectfully.
- Treat the other person in a way that you think she would want to be treated.

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 skills are as bad as many people's are, then you'll need to do a lot of work to break these bad habits.

There are five key techniques you can use to develop your active listening skills:

1. Pay attention.
2. Show that you're listening.
3. Provide feedback.
4. Defer judgment.
5. Respond appropriately.

Start using active listening techniques today to become a better communicator, improve your workplace productivity, and develop better relationships.