

## Active Listening

There is a distinction between hearing and listening. Hearing is the capacity to be aware of and receive sound. Listening involves not only receiving sounds but, as much as possible, trying to understand their meaning, seeking clarification, being sensitive to vocal cues, observing movements and taking into account the context of communication.

Active listening is where you make a conscious effort to hear not only the words that another person is saying but, importantly, to try and understand the total message being sent. And then repeat back in your own words what the person said to you.

Active listening is a key skill in effective communication, and crucial to facilitating effective dialogue.

Three common listening modes, relevant to dialogue situations:

1. **Competitive or combative listening** happens when we are more interested in promoting our own point of view than in understanding or exploring someone else's view. We listen either for openings to take the floor, or for flaws and weak points we can attack.
2. In **passive listening** we are genuinely interested in hearing and understanding the other person's point of view. We are attentive and passively listen. We assume that we heard and understood correctly, but stay passive and do not seek clarification.
3. **Active listening** is where we are genuinely interested in understanding what the other person is thinking, feeling, needs or what the message means and we are actively checking out our understanding before we respond with our own message, by reflecting it back to the sender for clarification. This clarification process is what distinguishes active listening from other modes and makes it effective

## The process of active listening

Active Listening is engaging fully in the listening activity. When learning active listening as a new skill, follow our top tips and practice, practice, practice!

- Use your own words when repeating and clarifying what the speaker has said. Parroting back the words *verbatim* is annoying and does not ensure accurate understanding of the message.
  - Don't respond just to the meaning of the words; look for the feelings or intent beyond the words. The dictionary or surface meaning of words is not the message.
  - Inhibit your impulse to answer questions immediately. Sometimes people ask questions when they really want to express themselves (or make a statement) and are not open to hearing an answer.
  - Know when to stop using active listening. Once you accurately understand the sender's message, it may be appropriate to respond with your own message. Don't use active listening to hide and avoid revealing your own position.
  - If you are confused and know that you do not understand, either tell the person you don't understand and ask him/her to say it another way, or use your best guess. If you are incorrect, the person will realize it and will likely attempt to correct your misunderstanding.
  - Active listening is a very effective first response when the other person is angry, hurt or expressing difficult feelings toward you, especially in relationships that are important to you.
  - Use eye contact and listening body language. Avoid looking at your watch or at other people or activities around the room. Face and lean toward the speaker and nod your head, as it is appropriate. Be careful about crossing your arms and appearing closed or critical.
  - Be empathetic and non-judgemental. You can be accepting and respectful of the person and their feelings/beliefs without invalidating or giving up your own position, or without agreeing with the accuracy and validity of their view.
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