

ACTIVE LISTENING

Introduction

Hearing and listening go hand in hand but listening is NOT the same as hearing. Hearing is a physical ability. Listening is a skill.

Listening is one of the most important skills a person can have and develop. How well a person listens affects the quality of their relationships with others, their understanding of their job and their productivity at work.

You may think you are a really good listener but most of us are not as good at listening as we think we are. Most studies show that we remember about 25% to 50% of what we have heard. So when we talk to someone, they will remember less than ½ of what we said.

Often when people talk to each other, they don't really listen to what the other person is saying. Maybe they are distracted or only partially listening to the other person. Maybe they think they have heard all of this before. They may be planning in their mind what they want to say when that person stops talking. They may be bored. All of these factors can prevent them from fully listening to what the person is saying.

HOW CAN WE IMPROVE OUR LISTENING SKILLS?

By practicing "ACTIVE LISTENING".

Active listening is defined as making a conscious effort to hear not only the words that another person is saying but also trying to understand the message being sent. Active listening improves the understanding between the speaker and the listener and helps reduce conflicts. It promotes success in the workplace and it improves communication with others.

Active listening focuses the attention on the speaker. In order to do this, you must pay attention to the other person very carefully.

According to the Conflict Research Consortium at the University of Colorado there are several benefits of active listening as follows:

Benefits of ACTIVE LISTENING

- It makes people pay attention and listen carefully to what others say

- It avoids misunderstandings
- It encourages people to open up and say more

Active listening helps improve our relationships with our peers at work, our friends and family. It can help us develop trust and respect for each other. It can help us to understand our job roles better and what is needed for us to succeed. It helps us better understand our clients, what they are experiencing and what they need.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, active listening is a good way to improve communication with children. It shows the child you are interested in what they are saying and that you want to hear more. Active listening helps to build a strong relationship that will continue to get stronger as the child grows. This strong relationship will make it more likely that the child will talk to you when they get older about their hopes and the problems they may be having.

Active listening is useful when people are in conflict. If the speaker feels the other party is truly listening, the speaker is more likely to explain what they are feeling and why. If both parties in a conflict do this, it is more likely that they will be able to find a solution to their conflict.

Steps to Becoming an Active Listener (L*I*S*T*E*N)

L: Look at the speaker

- It is important to face the speaker and not let objects block your view. Move away from behind the computer or the stacks of papers on your desk.
- Give the speaker your undivided attention.
- Maintain frequent eye contact with the person speaking if this is culturally appropriate. Eye contact is considered to be important for effective communication in most Western Cultures showing that you are focused on the other person. However, in some cultures,

eye contact can be considered to be disrespectful or rude. Some of these cultures include Asian, Hispanic, Native American and Middle Eastern among others. The speaker may feel guilty, shy, ashamed, or may have other emotions that prevent them from maintaining eye contact. That is okay if the speaker can't look directly at you. You need to focus on yourself and your actions.

I: Involve yourself in the conversation

Use your body language and gestures to convey your attention.

- Use facial expressions to show you are understanding what the speaker is feeling and saying. For example, if the speaker is happy, you can smile. If the speaker is unhappy, you can frown.
- Nod occasionally while the other person is speaking. This does not mean you are in agreement with what the person is saying. Nodding helps to send the message that you are listening.
- Make sure your posture is open and inviting. Lean slightly forward to show interest. Keep your arms unfolded. We can fold our arms for many reasons but to the speaker it can seem as if we aren't listening or have no interest in what they are saying.
- Encourage the speaker to continue by using small verbal comments like "yes", and "uh huh".
- Keep your legs and body still. Don't bounce your leg or move about the room.

S: Stay Focused

- Give the speaker all your attention. Put away papers, computers and anything else that could be a distraction. Put your phone on vibrate. Turn off the TV or radio.
- Remember key words and phrases that the speaker says.
- Don't be distracted by the speaker's accent or mannerisms.

- Don't get distracted by your own thoughts. It is easy to mentally wander off, especially if you are bored and not interested in what the speaker is saying. You may be thinking of what to have for dinner or a task you need to do. You may be trying to think of something you want to say to the speaker when the speaker is done talking or forming a rebuttal to what they may be saying. These actions prevent you from really listening to what the speaker is saying.

T: Talk to the speaker to get clarification or give feedback.

- Allow the speaker to finish their point before asking questions. Wait for them to pause and then ask questions to help you understand what the speaker is saying. You can say, "I didn't understand what you said about..." or "did I understand you correctly when you said..."
- Show that you understand what the speaker is saying by restating (reflecting) their feelings and words back to them. Put this into your own words (paraphrasing). This helps show the speaker that you were listening and understand what they said. To reflect feelings you may say something such as, "you must be so excited" or "I can see how difficult that is for you". To paraphrase you may say "So what you're saying is..." or "So you think that..."
- If you are uncertain what the speaker is feeling or saying, ask for clarification. For example, you can say, "I heard you say ... Is that what you meant?" or "Sounds like you are saying... is that correct?"
- Don't interrupt the speaker with your thoughts or ideas. Interrupting can send messages such as, "what I have to say is more important or interesting" or "I don't really care what you have to say."

E: Empathize

Empathy is defined as the ability to understand and share the feelings of another. To experience empathy, you must put yourself in the other person's place and let yourself feel what it must be

like to be that person at that particular moment. This is not easy but it is a very helpful thing to do. Empathy will encourage communication better than anything else

- Expressing sadness, joy or fear through facial expressions and words when the speaker expresses these feelings shows the speaker that you are listening and understanding them.
- Let the speaker pause and gather their thoughts when they need to. The listener should remain silent during this time. The speaker will continue to speak when they are ready. If the listener starts talking or asking a lot of questions, the speaker may shut down and the listener may never learn what they really wanted to say. You can sometimes learn more by being silent than if you start asking questions.

N: Neutralize your personal feelings

Active listening shows respect and understanding. Active listening allows you to gain information and learn the speaker's point of view. Attacking the speaker or putting them down adds nothing and may actually cause the speaker to stop talking.

- Don't judge the other person or be critical of what they say. Keep an open mind.
- Don't jump to conclusions. The speaker is sharing their own thoughts and feelings and you don't know what these are unless you listen.
- Treat the other person in a way that you think he or she would want to be treated. Treat them as YOU would want to be treated.
- Show respect and understanding.

SUMMARY:

The goal of Active Listening is to truly hear and understand what the other person is saying. To achieve this goal:

- You must concentrate on their message. Stay focused on what the speaker is saying. Be attentive. Look towards the speaker and maintain some eye contact when appropriate. Use facial expressions to show the speaker you understand what they are feeling or saying. Nod occasionally and use phrases such as "uh- huh" or "yes" to let the speaker know that you are listening.

- Clear your mind of all other thoughts and behaviors. Don't plan in your head what you want to say when the speaker stops talking or what you will fix for dinner. Keep still in your seat with arms unfolded.
- Ask for clarification when needed and paraphrase to ensure you understand the message. Use phrases such as, "I heard you say...Is that what you meant?" or "I didn't understand what you said about..."

It takes a lot of concentration and determination to be an active listener. It also takes a lot of practice. If you don't use Active Listening skills, then you may find that what someone says to you and what you hear are very different!

Start using these Active Listening techniques today to become a better communicator, improve your workplace productivity, and develop better relationships.

Title ACTIVE LISTENING

- Objectives

After reading this course you should have learned:

The definition of active listening

The benefits of active listening

The steps needed to become an active listener