

When you prepare to listen you will face a challenge. You can listen without expectation or judgment if you remember this person is not you-listen to each word, go for the meaning and confirm your interpretation. No matter how long you have known the person or no matter how like-minded you are, they have come through a substantially different set of life experiences.

It can be challenging when you set your mind to listen. Whether you are friends, like-minded co-workers or kindred spirits, do not assume that the speaker shares your perspective. You each are very different with different life experiences, family history, cultural background and perceptions. If you keep this in mind you can listen without making assumptions or expectations about how the conversation will go. Without your assumptions you will hear better, making others feel safe to speak their mind.

Lis-ten-ing n. the process of receiving, constructing meaning from, and responding to spoken and/or nonverbal messages

■ Benefits to Mastery of Active Listening

Paying attention to what someone else is saying is a very good way to make them feel (heard) validated and accepted for their uniqueness. Usually when we are listening to someone speak we are in the mindset of making assessments and forming opinions about what they are saying. Or we are thinking, “please hurry up” so we can take our turn and speak the thoughts we are busy formulating. When you truly listen there is often a pause after the speaker finishes speaking. This pause allows you to process what you have just heard. Then, when you reflect back what you heard or ask a clarifying question, the person you are speaking with will really know you were listening. Now that’s communicating!

The benefit to having people feel heard is that they will offer further information, more creative ideas and they won’t shut down. Imagine how much more you can learn if you really pay attention. Think of what you could be missing.

“Race, class, gender, culture, region, specific family history, and specific personal history, all have their influences. You will hear them better, and they will feel safer to speak, if you can set your theories aside and just listen.” (Judy Harrow)

■ Listening Tips

- Focus on the person speaking instead of your own reactions.
- Become the speaker as they are talking and imagine you are walking in their shoes.
- Mimic to yourself what you hear them saying (not aloud).
- Listen with all your senses (even your gut!)
- Be mindful of the points the other is making, withhold judgment and avoid making the speaker “right” or “wrong”.
- If you disagree with the speaker or even find it difficult to relate, try thinking of some common interests, values or reasons for the need to collaborate.
- Let the speaker’s argument or conversation come to completion.
- Only the person’s opinions and perceptions are the reality of any discussion.
- Get involved and engage in the discussion.
- Respond to questions actively to show your interest.
- Lean forward, or nod to offer encouragement and show your interest.
- Use facial expressions to show you are hearing. Smile, move an eyebrow, look surprised or puzzled. You have 15 muscles in your face for expressions. Use them.
- Summarize what you hear.
- Don’t look bored when someone else is. Tapping fingers, humming to music, rolling eyes, fidgeting, are all nonverbal forms of communications.
- Ask clarifying questions.

We have two ears and one mouth. That is probably because listening is twice as hard as talking. Keep trying.

■ Vocabulary

- **Paraphrase** – A restatement of what you heard in the conversation, in another form or with other words, often to clarify meaning.
- **Restate** – To state again.
- **Empathy** – Direct identification with, understanding of, and vicarious experience of another person's situation, feelings, and motives.
- **Consensus** – General agreement or accord. An opinion or position reached by all.
- **Understand** – To perceive and comprehend the nature and significance of. To grasp or comprehend the meaning intended or expressed by another.
- **Reflect** – To express carefully considered thoughts regarding what you have heard.
- **Clarify** – Asking questions in order to make clear or easier to understand; elucidate. To make clear; to free from obscurities; to brighten or illuminate.

■ **Examples of Responses**

Clarifying responses;

- “oh my”
- “Do you mean that...”
- “Did you say...”
- “Let me get this straight.”
- Laughter
- “Let’s see if we are on the same page.”
- “Are you saying...”
- “Ah ha, Do you mean to tell me...”
- “So you feel that...”
- “It sounds like your perception is...”
- “Let me just make sure I understand what you are saying.”

Empathic responses;

- “So you think that...”
- “What you need now is...”
- “You’re anxious about...”
- “Seems you’re unsure of...”
- “Wow! Really confusing (to you) !”
- “You’re really feeling...”
- “It seemed to you that...”
- “...Pretty tough (for you then/now), huh.”
- “Really mystifying” (to you)...”
- “You were furious with me then!”
- “So you felt you were up against...”
- “They totally missed your point!”
- “Now you look really...”

■ **Caution Against**

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|---------------|------------|----------------------|
| ▪ Lecture | ▪ Moralize | ▪ Interrupt |
| ▪ Vent | ▪ Explain | ▪ Question |
| ▪ Generalize | ▪ Fix | ▪ Reassure |
| ▪ Blame | ▪ Warn | ▪ Monolog |
| ▪ Defend | ▪ Disagree | ▪ Analyze |
| ▪ Interrogate | ▪ Ramble | ▪ Change the subject |

■ **Exercises 1**

Are you paying attention?

Goal: To define and demonstrate active listening.

Objective: To be able to pick up the emotional message and be able to restate it in your own words, without analyzing, judging, or giving advice.

Activity: Use one of the following sentences for an idea to practice. Have one person listen and one person respond.

Example: Speaker states: “My bag was just stolen by a man as I walked to my car.”

Listener responds: “Are you alright? That must have been frightening.”

Describe your feelings after a job well done.

Describe your feelings after under performing on a task.

Describe your feelings prior to an important meeting.

Describe your feelings after someone embarrassed you in front of others.

Describe your feelings after a presentation or project failed.

Describe your feelings when you were intimidated by someone.

Describe your feelings when a team mate said something mean or sarcastic.

Listener, remember, active listening demonstrates interest with appropriate body language, reflection and questions for clarification. (Academic Press)

■ **Exercise 2**

What are your annoying listening habits?

Discuss the habits below with a mentor or coach to discover if you have any of these poor listening habits. Can you think of any others? Identify examples of your own.

1. Interrupting the speaker

2. Not looking at the speaker

3. Rushing the speaker and making him feel that he's wasting the listener's time

4. Showing interest in something other than the conversation

5. Getting ahead of the speaker and finishing her thoughts

6. Not responding to the speaker's requests

7. Topping the speaker's story with "That reminds me. . ." or "That's nothing, let me tell you about. . ."

8. Forgetting what was talked about previously

9. Asking too many questions about details

■ **Exercise 3**

Fill in the blanks with reflective, clarifying responses.

Example:

Speaker: “ Now I feel like I am getting the flu, and I’m thinking, oh no, I can’t handle this right now with this big project coming due...and who will take care of the details if I am not here...no one...so I guess I am feeling nervous.”

Listener: “You feel stranded, like you don’t have anyone to help. Do you need to get another person on the project with you?”

“I just can’t seem to get over being reprimanded. It doesn’t seem fair.”

“Carl can be such a great guy, but when he comes in the room yelling I just shut down.”

“I wish I was more prepared for this project.”

“I made another mistake on this document. I will never get this right

“I never seem to be satisfied lately. I feel critical about everything.”

“My secret admirer just sent me flowers!”

“I think I am going to skip lunch today and work straight through.”

“I never got a call back from anyone at their office. Someone could have called me at least!”

“Why didn’t you tell me you broke the copier? I have a deadline!”

Conversation: a vocal competition in which the one who is catching his breath is called the listener.

■ Exercise 4

Fill in the blanks with reflective, clarifying, empathic responses.

“I worked on the project until three o’clock this morning. I shouldn’t have waited until the last minute. I really don’t feel like I am turning in quality work anymore. The last time I did this I swore I would never procrastinate on another big project, but here I am again!”

“I just finished my presentation. Six people in the room were frowning through most of it, but I really tried to focus on the three others who seemed receptive and interested with my ideas. I spent the last several weeks on this presentation and I am convinced I am on the right track.”

“I spoke with Candice about the misunderstanding we had last week. I explained that I had left her a voice message regarding my inability to make that meeting. She still is pretty upset about me not being there. I guess I should have also sent her an email. She says I should have found a replacement! This is the second time I have messed up with her!”

Hear-ing (hir^hing) n. The sense by which sound is perceived; the capacity to hear. Range of audibility, earshot. An opportunity to be heard. To listen to attentively, to attend or participate in.

■ Further Reading

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