

## What is active listening with an example?

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It is one thing to listen, and it is another to listen actively. Communication is key in any relationship, yet we find ourselves devoting less and less time to truly listening to one another. Genuine listening has become so rare. With active listening in the workplace, you can improve working connections, comprehend tasks, and grow professionally and personally. In Edgar Dale's Cone of Experience research, it was discovered that we only remember between 25% and 50% of what we hear. That means when we think we are listening, we are only hearing or capturing part of the message, hence the importance of having skills such as active listening.

### What is Active Listening?

The term Active Listening was created in 1957 by two psychologists (Carl Rogers and Richard Farson). Rogers and Farson define active listening as *'an important way to bring about changes in people. They indicate how clinical and research evidence clearly shows it as one of the most effective agents for individual personality change and group development. And also how active listening brings changes in peoples' attitudes toward themselves and others; shaping their basic values and personal philosophy'*.

Active listening is a crucial [communication skill](#). It goes beyond just listening, it involves paying attention to what someone is saying. It involves understanding and grasping what the other person is saying, concentrating on their thoughts rather than your thoughts. A good active listener makes the other person feel heard and valued. According to Nixaly (2020), active listening is the ability 'to listen with complete attention and an engaged mind and body. For some the skill may come naturally for others it is a skill that can be obtained through practice. By committing and learning active listening skills, leaders can become effective listeners and over time become better leaders.

### Active Listening Skills

Active listening is a skill that can be developed and acquired through practice. It is a skill that is developed over time and can be difficult to master. It requires patience and commitment for one to acquire this skill. Listening is not the same as hearing, you could be hearing someone speak but it does not necessarily mean you are listening. Active listening involves concentrating on what is being said unlike just passively 'hearing' what the next person is saying. Being able to understand what your

coworkers are saying and then providing useful feedback is a crucial element of being a team player.

According to Glassdoor, through active listening, you may strengthen interoffice connections and improve communication by demonstrating to your coworkers that you are genuinely listening to what they have to say. Active listening is an essential part of creating positive relationships at work. People tend to gravitate toward active listeners because they feel valued and respected when talking with them.

The following are active listening skills (adapted from an [article by Vantage circle](#)):

1. **Attitude-** the first step to being a good active listener is to have the right attitude. Attitude is defined as a feeling of emotion that comes from understanding that we must be respectful towards what others say about a fact or state. When learning to be an active listener starts by being respectful towards what others say and understanding that we all can learn something new and valuable from others over and above what we may believe or feel. When we respect those around us, we tend to look beyond our thoughts and become better listeners.
2. **Attention-** Being a good listener, requires being able to pay attention. People's attention span differs, others tend to be distracted easily whilst others can focus on the conversation. To be, an active listener one must practice how to stay focused and pay attention. Mind games or puzzles are a great way to learn how to focus and pay attention. Others make use of meditation as a tool to help in learning how to retain focus and full attention.
3. **Adjustment-** being an active listener requires being able to keep an open mind even when it differs from your beliefs or thoughts. When we keep an open mind and are ready to invest our time, we adapt to the situation and, in the end, become better listeners.
4. **Face the speaker-** In most Western cultures, maintaining eye contact as you speak to someone or facing the speaker is one of the key aspects of effective communication. Being a good listener involves giving the speaker your undivided attention. Nobody wants your divided attention while they are speaking to you, be it your friend or colleagues. It is important to avoid distractions while you are talking. Face the speaker when one is talking to you and try to show that you are present in the conversation.

5. **Don't interrupt-** Interrupting someone as they speak is not only rude but in a way makes you seem superior to the other person. Interrupting says that your thoughts or beliefs are more important than those being shared by the next person. Should you have a question or need clarification about what is, being said, try to pause the conversation politely, seek permission from the speaker before interrupting the conversation.
  
6. **Use verbal and non-verbal skills-** According to Glassdoor, using non-verbal and verbal cues makes one feel important or respected during a conversation. Making use of cues such as smiling, head nods, and eye contact can help make the other person feel confident especially about what they are sharing. It is also important to be mindful of your posture as it also conveys a lot about you as a listener. Paraphrasing, asking thoughtful questions, and giving positive encouragement is another way to show that you are a good listener.
  
7. **Be empathetic-** Showing empathy during a conversation shows the speaker that you understand what they are saying and are putting yourself in their shoes. It will enable you to feel the speaker's emotions, either sad, joyful, or fearful. Being empathetic shows that you are immersed in the conversation and that your soul and heart are in the conversation.

## The importance of Active listening in the workplace

In a study conducted in 2003 by Faye Doell (York University psychologist), it was found that those who "listen to understand" have better, happier relationships with others. In the workplace when you are that person who allows others to communicate fully and openly, your co-workers or employees will be more likely to come to new you for idea sharing or to include you in projects. "Business people need to listen at least as much as they need to talk. Too many people fail to realize that real communication goes in both directions." - Lee Iacocca (former president and CEO of Chrysler Corporation)

The following are benefits of active listening in the workplace:

- **Improved productivity**

Active listening improves workplace productivity on so many levels. When employers fail to truly listen to their employees they run the risk of losing them. Workers who feel unheard are likely to seek other opportunities and feel resentful. It is important to actively listen to employees' views and ideas and offer

proper feedback, as this helps in improving workplace performance and productivity. It is important to develop a culture of mutual trust and understanding through solid internal communication channels.

- **Build trust**

Proper communication through active listening helps in building trust in the organisation which in turn helps the organisation to meet its goals. It is important to have trust to have a healthy workplace. To build trust the following is key:

- Lending an ear
- Being honest and supportive
- Being non-judgemental
- Healthy communication
- **Resolves conflicts**

Good communication can help resolve misunderstandings within the workplace. Conflict usually arises when we fail to respect or understand other's views or opinions from their perspective. Active listening helps in respecting and recognising other people's opinions and helps us in appreciating them. Through active listening, conflicts are resolved and a culture of respect are formed within the workplace.

- **Healthy work relationships**

In a study by Faye Doell in 2003, it was found that there are two types of listening: 'listening to respond' and 'listening to understand'. People who listen to understand show greater empathy. The more people within the workplace make use of active listening the better the work relationships. Through active listening, healthy work relationships are formed.

- **Acceptance**

When people in the workplace value each other the organisation is likely to succeed. Both employers and employees must actively listen to each other, this helps in accepting each other. Employees and employers must be accepting of the organisation's values and vision. Acceptance helps in minimising confusion hence active listening can help boost morale and give a sense of acceptance.

## **Examples of Active listening**

In a workplace study sponsored by Siemens and conducted by SIS International Research, it was found that employees spend an average of 17.5 hours per week communicating. The communication was centred on clarifying communication issues and breakdowns between peers, leadership and customers. The cost was estimated at than \$500K annually in lost productivity. This research showed the importance of leaders training their employees on the importance of good communication. This starts with the leaders being good communicators first.

According to Rick Fulwiler, PhD, CIH, CSHM, President of Transformational Leadership Associates, a program director at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, and the former Director of Health and Safety Worldwide at Procter and Gamble "The overarching principle of effective listening is to seek first to understand, then to be understood,". He goes on to say that "It requires much more energy than just passive listening, but you will not be as successful without effective listening skills."

The following are typical responses that one can use to show that they are [actively listening](#) (adapted from an article by Alyson Doyle (2020))

- **Building trust and establishing rapport:** "Tell me what I can do to help." "I was impressed to read on your website how you donate 5% of each sale to charity."
- **Demonstrating concern:** "I'm eager to help; I know you're going through some tough challenges." "I know how hard a corporate restructuring can be. How is staff morale at this point?"
- **Paraphrasing:** "So, you're saying that the uncertainty about who will be your new supervisor is creating stress for you." "So, you think that we need to build up our social media marketing efforts."
- **Brief verbal affirmation:** "I understand that you'd like more frequent feedback about your performance." "Thank you. I appreciate your time in speaking to me."
- **Asking open-ended questions:** "I can see that John's criticism was very upsetting to you. Which aspect of his critique was most disturbing?" "It's clear that the current situation is intolerable for you. What changes would you like to see?"
- **Asking specific questions:** "How long do you expect your hiring process to last?" "What is your average rate of staff turnover?"
- **Waiting to disclose your opinion:** "Tell me more about your proposal to reorganize the department." "Can you please provide some history for me regarding your relationship with your former business partner?"
- **Disclosing similar situations:** "I was also conflicted about returning to work after the birth of my son." "I had the responsibility of terminating some of my personnel, due to downsizing, over the last two years. Even if it's necessary, it never gets easier."

Active listening is a powerful tool and a skill which if acquired can help build better relationships and improve the performance of organizations. By focusing more on what others are saying one can learn a lot more than they know and become a more thoughtful leader or employee. I hope through this article we have learnt the importance of not just listening but listening to understand.

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