

## ENHANCING ACTIVE LISTENING

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### ABSTRACT

Listening is something taken for granted. Of course, everyone knows how to listen! But sometimes distractions get in the way. Active listening is a way of listening and responding to another person in such a way that the person feels that they have really been heard. It takes the conversation one step further into the feelings of the speaker. Active listening is not only a very learnable skill—it is also an attitude. Acceptance of a person, focus and attention is needed to truly listen. Active listening is hard work! A leader's success is determined by the ability to motivate others. One can best motivate by listening and responding to those needs. Active listening techniques establish both rapport and trust between associates. Active listening presumes: *you are important to me*. Communication involves the skills of listening and speaking. To become a good communicator, one needs to develop both these skills. Competence in listening contributes to the development of speaking skills. Active listening is one of the most important elements of communication. In active listening one learns, builds relationships and demonstrates acceptance of others, enhances the self-esteem of others, saves time and money by preventing misunderstanding. Active listening skills fuel our social, emotional and professional success, and studies prove that active listening is a skill everybody can learn. As our listening skills improve, so will our aptitude for conversation. Thus this chapter discusses active listening as one of the most important elements of communication. It also explains what active listening is, how to develop active listening skills and techniques that active listeners need.

**KEYWORDS:** Communication, Active Listening, Conversation, Listeners, Skill, Enhancing

### INTRODUCTION

Whether active or inactive, without a listener being present, there can be no oral communication. Nonetheless, listening is often given little importance. There is no surprise in the suggestion that training is necessary to speak, but it is also necessary to listen. Listening is the receiving and perceiving of a message with intent to respond. Listening is a sustained effort to receive sound and make meaning. It opens up possibilities for continuing interaction. Hearing, on the other hand, is the perception of voices and other communication a person is sending. It may or may not be accompanied by understanding the message. Listening includes both hearing and understanding of the message. Hearing is an involuntary act that happens automatically, but listening is a deliberate voluntary activity.

When one is awake, one hears many sounds and noises. For example, sounds like birds squawking, dogs barking, the noise of vehicles passing by, a spoon or a glass dropping in the kitchen, or the noise of fan. But one does not necessarily listen to all of them. People usually listen to only those sounds and noises that one is interested in.

Listening between people occurs at different levels and some are more demanding than others. Not all interactions require us to listen at the deepest, most demanding levels. Eric van Slyke, in his book 'Listening to Conflict', posts 'six levels of listening': passive, responsive, selective, attentive, active and emphatic listening.<sup>1</sup>

Passive listening is the lowest level of listening in conversation between two people. An individual pays little attention and catches only a few words here and there. The listener does not verbally respond to the speaker. For example, listening while doing other things like watching television, listening to a joke, in everyday conversations where there is not much interest in more information. In responsive listening, the listener provides the speaker with verbal and non-verbal indicators of listening, such as nodding the head or responding with an affirmative sound, such as "uh-huh", but is not actually paying attention or comprehending what is being said. Selective listening occurs when more attention is paid to some of what is being said, particularly to words or phrases of some interest. However, the listener is not interested in the speaker's entire message. Listening attentively requires the asking of probing questions and seeking further information from the speaker. Intellect is engaged in the listening process and the listener comprehends more information than at previous levels. Active listening requires listeners to intellectually and emotionally engage with the speaker. The listener attempts to understand the context of what the speaker is saying and the emotions behind the explicitly of the conversation. The listener provides verbal and non-verbal feedback in the way of questions, gestures and paraphrasing. The listener also uses his/her whole body (eyes, relaxed body) to listen to the speaker. Finally, emphatic listening is listening at its deepest level. The listener projects into the personality of the speaker in order to better understand the speaker's emotions or feelings.

### **Importance of Active Listening and Implications of Effective Listening**

According to listening expert Michael Purdy, 'listening is our primary means of growth and intellectual development. We impart knowledge when we speak; WE LEARN WHEN WE LISTEN (Purdy's emphasis).'<sup>2</sup> Goals that can be accomplished through listening at an interpersonal level are learning, problem-solving, building relationships and demonstrating acceptance of others, enhancing the self-esteem of others and preventing misunderstandings.

An inadequate understanding of the nature of a problem is one of the common reasons for failing to produce a good solution. Listening contributes to problem solving by allowing a clear understanding of a problem. By showing that one is listening, really listening, respect to the speaker is demonstrated. Not listening can be interpreted as indifference to what the speaker is saying. Non-judgmental listening demonstrates acceptance of others and can have a powerful effect on their lives. For example, when a parent listens to a child, it helps build the child's self-esteem. In the business world, listening saves time and money by preventing misunderstandings. Listening skills fuel social, emotional and professional success and studies prove that listening is a skill that can be learnt.

### **Process of Listening**

According to Sandra D Collins, the process of listening consists of five basic stages: sensing, interpreting, evaluating, responding and memory.<sup>3</sup> In the sensing stage, listeners select or ignore one or more stimuli from a multitude of stimuli like visual, aural and sensory stimuli. Only what is important is heard. The interpreting stage is the process of assigning meaning to selected stimuli. Listeners supply meaning to the visual, aural and sensory messages felt during the sensing stage. In other words, the listener tries to figure out what the speaker really means. Next, the listener evaluates the message, makes more extensive inferences and judges the speaker and the message. The responding stage is very

important. Once a listener has sensed, interpreted and evaluated the speaker's ideas, feedback is given. Without feedback speakers can only assume that they have communicated their message effectively. A listener will not always agree with what a speaker is saying, but a listener's responses show listening and understanding. Finally, memory storage is the end result of effective listening. Once a listener has completed all the above stages, a decision is made on what part of the speech is to be retained and stored in memory.

Listening actively is the first step. Paying close attention to make sure that the speaker's message is being correctly heard is the prime aspect. It is followed by interpretation; where one makes sure that understanding the speaker's message is done accurately in order for evaluation to occur. Evaluation involves asking questions to avoid jumping to conclusions. The final stage is to respond so the speaker knows that he/she has been heard.

### **Signs of Listening and Non-Listening**

Signs of listening include face and bodily movement, such as smiles (interested looks on faces), occasional direct eye contact, and an upright or forward leaning posture. Other signs could be occasional movements and glances at the watch (usually towards the end of the presentation open postures), changing facial expressions depending on the speech content along with occasional nods of head. Participation by asking questions, clarifications, giving answers to questions posed can also be considered as signs of listening.

Signs of non-listening include absolutely no practical movement of the face, void of expressions, unwavering eye contact, drooping eye lids and slouched posture with indications like restless movements, aimless looks around the room, drumming fingers, tapping pencils and repeated glances at the watch can be a few among the many other signs of non-listening. Frowns, narrowed eyes or sceptical looks, arms locked across the chest, raised eyebrows or rolling eyes and no participation at all is also taken as a sign of non-listening.

### **Barriers to Listening**

While listening to someone there are many barriers that can prevent a person from really hearing what is being said. These barriers can be both internal and external ones. Listening is not a passive activity because the listener receives the thoughts and feelings of the speaker. While listening, several thoughts run through the mind. People think much faster than they listen. So, it is quite likely that the thinking is interrupted by several other thoughts. One may race ahead of the speaker's words or may drift into another world. This can severely hamper the process of listening. While sitting in a classroom, how often has it happened that the mind is elsewhere thinking about something?

External barriers include the various things happening around the listener, such as noises, clutter, and other interruptions, that act as barriers to active listening. Before a listener starts actively listening to someone, external barriers need to be eliminated. For example, turning off cell phones and putting down other tasks.

There are also many barriers to active listening that come from within the listener, such as barriers include past experiences, prejudices, assumptions made, certain attitudes, and personality traits. One example is comparison: trying to figure out how what is being said is better/worse than something else (e.g. "Does she think that she is the only unhappy person? My problem is so much bigger than hers."). Another is personal experience – one's past experience can leave "emotional cotton" in one's ears – causing misinterpretation of what someone is saying. This can be followed by automatically talking after the first recognised word the speaker says; not to the overall meaning of what the speaker has

said. Mind-reading, thinking in advance that it is known what someone is going to say, can lead to mentally “tuning out” before the speaker is finished talking or worse yet, interrupting the person to finish their sentence. In either case, this leads to misunderstanding, frustration, and possibly even anger.

This is then followed by rehearsing, or trying to figure out what could be given as a response. Instead of listening to the person, thoughts about a correct response to what is being said are on the mind. The next aspect of consideration could be judging or discounting the speaker’s values and therefore writing off what the person is saying. This distorts the listener’s ability to really hear their message, e.g. “Look at that haircut” or “He’s loud and obnoxious.” Also, something the speaker says can trigger its own thought process and the listener starts to daydream. Finally, there is a tendency to only listen initially to the speaker, then begin to search for a fix or advice to offer the person.<sup>4</sup>

Sparring occurs when the listener focuses on the components of the speaker’s message that are disagreed with and then verbally attacks the person when they are finished speaking. The listener fails to take into consideration that this person’s experiences are unique, and that only he/she is the expert on themselves. In relation to this response, the listener can also filter or twist the message to only hear what he/she wants to hear and ignores everything else. What is actually being said goes unheard. Making assumptions, the process of coming to some kind of conclusion about someone or something with incomplete information, is another issue. Assumptions about people are made constantly, and can severely limit the ability to communicate effectively and honestly with other people. Finally, perceptual errors are the ones which mean that perceptions of people and events are often distorted due to the failure to consider important information. One can overemphasise certain things, while downplaying others. This process is affected by a number of factors: age, health, sex, culture, social roles, previous experiences, and even self-concept. People tend to judge others on the basis of how they view themselves.

### **Techniques to Develop Active Listening**

Active listening is really an extension of the Golden Rule; to know how to listen to someone else, a person should think about how he or she wants to be listened to. While the ideas are largely intuitive, it might take some practice to develop (or re-develop) listening skills.

The first requisite is to face the speaker with an open, relaxed posture, sit up straight or lean forward slightly to show attentiveness through body language. Maintaining eye contact is also important and this needs to be done to the degree that everybody remains comfortable. Minimising external distractions like turning off the TV, putting down the book or magazine, and asking the speaker and other listeners to do the same is preferred too. Respond appropriately to show that there is understanding. Murmur (“uh-huh” and “um-hmm”) and nod. Raising the eyebrows is helpful too. Saying words such as “Really,” “Interesting,” as well as more direct prompts: “What did you do then?” and “What did she say?” is what will draw attention too. Focusing solely on what the speaker is saying means trying not to think about what should be said next. The conversation will follow a logical flow after the speaker makes his/her point. Minimise internal distractions, keep an open mind and wait until the speaker is finished before deciding that there is a scope for disagreement. Try not to make assumptions about what the speaker is saying. Refrain from attempting to solve the speaker’s problems or doing the person’s things for him/her. Unless advice is specifically asked for, assume the speaker just needs to talk it out. Do not interrupt, wait until they finish. Research shows that, on average, human beings can hear four times faster than talking, so there should be the ability to sort ideas as they come in...and be ready for more. Engage oneself by asking questions for

clarification, but, once again, wait until the speaker has finished. That way there will not be any interruption to the speaker's train of thought. It is better to ask the speaker to clarify a point that one needs to be sure of to confirm it was heard correctly. Use phrases like the following: "as I gather, you want to tell...", "so you mean to say that...", "Oh; your feeling towards...", "Do you mean that..."

As listening skills develop, one may feel a bit panicky when there is a natural pause in the conversation. What should be said next? Ironically, as 'the listening skills improve, so will the aptitude for conversation'.<sup>5</sup> Listeners can take notes to help remember what the speaker said. Timing responses and questions can also be one of the solutions.

### **Things to Remember**

Keeping an open mind by setting aside one's prejudices and opinions is of great use. If the speaker becomes quiet, allow time to gather their thoughts and process information before jumping to conclusions regarding the conversation. Periods of silence can be very cathartic. Learn to settle into the silence and use it to better understand all points of view. Active listening does not mean one agrees with, but rather understands, what the other person is saying. Acceptance is different from agreement. Acknowledge any personal emotional state. Try to suspend the emotions or just passively listen. All feelings are acceptable, but not all behaviours. A person might express feelings of anger, which is fine. However, it is not okay for a person to physically attack in anger.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

Active listening is one of the most important elements of communication. In active listening we can learn, build relationships and demonstrate acceptance of others, enhance the self-esteem of others, save time and money by preventing misunderstandings. Listening skills fuel our social, emotional and professional success, and studies prove that listening is a learned skill. As listening skills improve, so will aptitude for conversation. Experience shows that after having the opportunity to be truly listened to without interruption, evaluation and judgment, many people feel encouraged and empowered. People probably heard things that they had not heard before which broadens understanding of how other people see things. It also may help clarify some things in their own mind, while providing some needed emotional release. During such communication, minds can be opened allowing people to be more receptive to new ideas. In creating a trusting environment, it is hoped that the seeds of communication will have been planted, replacing the negative emotions that grow between people. Hopefully, this will lead to a willingness to develop resolutions and lead to a win-win solution to a conflict.

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