

Active Listening Skills

Active Listening is a skill. It means open, direct attention to what the speaker is saying. It means actively putting aside assumptions, prejudices, distractions, and defensive and critical thoughts. It means respecting the other's point of view and putting oneself in the other person's shoes. It means using direct eye contact, a voice that encourages and supports, and body language and facial expressions that communicate interest and full attention.

Too often, listening stops or never even gets started. This is a serious problem in communication.

Blocks to Listening – on the part of the listener

1. **Comparing** – Comparing makes it hard to listen because you are always trying to assess who is smarter, more competent, or more emotionally healthy.
2. **Mind Reading** – The mind reader often distrusts what he or she has heard, and consequently tried to figure out what the other person is “really” thinking and feeling.
3. **Rehearsing** – Your attention is on the preparation and crafting of your next comment.
4. **Filtering** – When you filter, you listen to some things and not to others. You may pay attention only enough to see if somebody is angry or unhappy or if you are in danger. Once assured the communication contains none of those things, you let your mind wander. Another way to filter is simply to avoid hearing certain things – messages that may seem threatening, negative or unpleasant or messages that include positive statements that don't fit your personal beliefs. When you filtering you will hear only what you expect or want to hear.
5. **Judging** – If you prejudice someone negatively, you don't pay attention to what they say.
6. **Dreaming** – You are half-listening and something the person says suddenly triggers a chain of private associations. Your mind follows your own train of thought.
7. **Identifying** – You take everything a person tells you and refer it back to your own experiences.
8. **Advising** – You are the problem-solver, ready with help and suggestions. You don't hear the feelings the speaker is expressing and you don't acknowledge the other person's pain.
9. **Sparring** – This block has you arguing and debating with people. One type of sparring is the put-down. You use acerbic or sarcastic remarks to dismiss the other person's point of view. A second type of sparring is discounting. Discounting is often used by people who can't stand compliments.
10. **Being Right** – Being right means you go to any lengths (twist the facts, start shouting, make excuses or accusations, call up past mistakes) to avoid being wrong.
11. **Derailing** – This listening block is accomplished by suddenly changing the topic. You derail the train of conversation when you get bored or uncomfortable with a topic.
12. **Placating** – You want to be nice, pleasant, and supportive. You want people to like you so you agree with everything.

Blocks to Listening – on the part of the speaker

1. **Complete Control of the Message** – A two-way flow of information keeps listeners focused and involved. That way the listener can keep the speaker aware of what the listener is feeling and thinking, allow for clarification of points, or help the message stay on track. When the speaker does not allow for this, the communication process turns into a lecture, interest on the part of the listener usually decreases, and there is low retention of information.

2. **Buzz Words** – Most people have private buzz words which have an emotional charge – sometimes positive but more often negative. These words can also have different meaning for different people. Using buzz words increases the likelihood that the listener will misunderstand what the speaker intends to convey.
3. **Timing** – Sometimes speakers can choose to convey information at times that the listener is in a position to focus on the message. This can be while the listener is in a hurry to get somewhere, when he or she is concentrating on something else, or when it is physically more difficult for him or her to listen (falling asleep, ill, very anxious). The speaker can then blame the listener later for not getting the message.

Four Steps to Effective Listening

1. Active Listening

Paraphrasing – To paraphrase means to state in your own words what you think someone has just said.

Benefits of Paraphrasing:

1. People deeply appreciate feeling heard.
2. Paraphrasing stops escalating anger and cools down the crisis.
3. Paraphrasing stops miscommunication false assumptions, errors, and misinterpretations are corrected on the spot
4. Paraphrasing helps you remember what was said.
5. When you paraphrase, you'll find it much harder to compare, rehearse, spar, advise, derail, and dream. In fact, paraphrasing is the antidote to most listening blocks.

Clarifying – asking questions to get more information or more background.

Feedback – You transform what you saw and heard into a tentative description. Feedback needs to be immediate, honest, and supporting.

2. Listening with Empathy

If you find listening with empathy difficult, ask these questions of yourself:

1. What need is the (anger, etc.) coming from?
2. What danger is the person experiencing?
3. What is he/she asking for?

3. Listening with Openness

Open to ideas other than your own.

4. Listening with Awareness

Does the person's tone of voice, emphasis, facial expression, and posture fit the content of their communication?

Total Listening

1. Maintain eye contact.
2. Lean slightly forward.
3. Reinforce the speaker by nodding or paraphrasing.
4. Clarify by asking questions.
5. Actively move away from distractions.
6. Be committed, even if you are angry or upset, to understanding what is being said.