

Effective Listening

Listening is more than just hearing what someone else says; demonstrating active listening shows the speaker that their message is being both received and fully understood. These top tips provide useful advice on how to ensure you are an effective listener.



Good listening means actively concentrating to absorb and understand the information you receive rather than passively 'hearing' what is being said. This includes:

- **decoding the language you hear**, as well as the language you see, i.e. body language
- being on the alert for any **hidden messages**, or a gap between what is said and what is genuinely felt by the speaker
- **asking questions** to clarify points you do not understand, and checking to see that you have received the message correctly
- following and supporting the speaker, by mirroring their body language subtly, or repeating key points in what they say to confirm that you have understood

These tips will help you to listen effectively.

Maintain attention

It is important to keep your attention focused on the speaker to fully understand what they are saying to you. If you find it difficult to stay focused, you can train yourself to become better by:

- Giving the speaker your full attention and concentrating on his/her needs for the whole time you are interacting.
- **Being open** to what is being said - for example, if it is something you disagree

with, let the other person speak without interruption and consider their points objectively.

- Looking for the points that may be **hidden** within what is said (sub-text).
- **Taking notes** of key points.
- **Pausing to think of questions**, rather than formulating them in your mind while the speaker is talking. Small pauses for thought can reassure your speaking partner that you are engaged by what they have said.
- **Asking questions**. Showing an interest by clarifying points and asking for further information will help you build a rapport with your speaking partner. This will ultimately make the exchange more engaging for you.

Use positive body language

Responding to the speaker's body language by observing carefully and mirroring their postures subtly shows you are receptive to the speaker's message. You can do this by:

- making eye contact frequently
- adopting an open posture: for example, leaning forward towards the speaker demonstrates your interest
- not leaning back in your chair with your arms crossed in front of you as if to say 'Come on then, interest me'
- smiling

Use reflective listening techniques

Reflective listening enables you to draw more out of your speaker. For example:

- **Ask open questions**, such as 'How do you feel about work?' rather than closed questions which can be answered by a simple 'yes' or 'no' (e.g. 'Do you like it here?').
- Encourage openness on the part of the speaker by saying things like 'Can you tell me more?' or by saying 'Go on ..'
- Reflect feelings back to the speaker to show that you understand the emotions they are expressing, e.g. 'So you felt excited?'
- **Develop empathy**. Try to gain a deeper understanding of how the speaker feels. For example, you could use phrases such as: 'You felt X because Y' or 'You felt devalued because the promotion went to someone with less experience?' However, do not be tempted to say 'I know how you feel', or tell the speaker about your experiences. Despite having shared similar/the same experiences, do not ever assume that another person's feelings will be the same as yours. Every person's responses are unique to them.
- Finally, do not be afraid of using **silence** to show you are listening: it will prompt more thought and comment from the other person.

Test understanding

A simple way of demonstrating this component in conversations is to rephrase or restate what has been said back to the speaker. Some useful ways of doing this are:

- 'Can I just clarify? You're saying that ...'
- 'My understanding is that ..'
- 'Let me make sure I've got this right; you're saying ...'

Don't simply repeat what the person had said. Instead, rephrase the highlights or key points, but take care not to distort the meaning.

Build on what has been said

Building on someone's proposal or idea is another component of active and effective listening. Listening is not about sitting back and waiting for the information to come to you; it is about **adding to the speaker's point of view with ideas of your own**, while taking care not to hijack the original idea.

A simple way of building is to highlight those aspects or points you like about the information you have been given and to share any of your own associated ideas or facts, if appropriate. Examples of ways you can do this include:

- 'What you said about ... is really interesting. I think we should discuss this more.'
- 'Your thoughts on ... sparked off some ideas and I'd like to propose we ...'

Summarising

Summarising the conversation is a critical skill for active listening. It clarifies and reinforces the message for both listener and speaker. It **finishes off one subject**, creating the opportunity to move onto another, if you are discussing a number of topics. It also gives the speaker the chance to correct the listener if they summarise inaccurately. It may be appropriate to do this after each defined topic, especially when a decision has been taken. Alternatively, it is sometimes preferable to save the summarising to the very end of the conversation and then go over your notes to review what has been said and agreed. A good way of beginning to summarise may be:

- 'So let's recap on what has been said and agreed.'
- 'OK, let me note down the key points we've discussed.'

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