

Active listening is key / Listen first, talk second

“Hey, are you listening to me?”

“What..., did you say something?”

Charlie messes up

It went like this. Eight people, including Charlie, were at the weekly management meeting of the Notary Sojac Nutcracker and Fire Suppression Company. The President reviewed the latest financial results. Some things were going well, some not so well. (You may have attended similar meetings.) Charlie soon slips into “brain fade.” His body is at the table, but his mind isn’t. He’s hungry; he’s tired; he’s bored; he thinks about the new Marketing Assistant. Charlie is not paying attention. Unfortunately, it shows. Suddenly, he realizes that it’s really quiet. The boss is glowering at him. He says: “Am I boring you?!” Charlie tries to say something, but his dry throat sabotages him – a muted croak comes from his mouth. However, at least his forehead is wet – it’s covered with flop sweat. Charlie’s face gets red. (Oh, the boss’s face is already red.) He looks around and sees one person looking down; one person shaking his head; one person holding her head in her hands; and not-so-good-old Tom smirking at him.

Charlie, were you trying to push your self-destruct button? You weren’t using active listening, a keystone of good human relations skills.

What is active listening?

Active listening is paying careful and sustained attention to what is being said by a person or persons. It may include making brief comments at times and asking careful questions to clarify matters. It is a very basic human relations skill that helps greatly in surviving and thriving with people.

Related or similar terms: empathetic listening; careful listening; attentive listening; complete listening; in-depth listening.

Your active listening quiz

These ten quiz items will help you think about and assess some elements of your listening skills. Think about each statement and describe yourself by checking the “yes” or the “no” block.

1. You give a speaker your undivided attention.
2. You feel impatient when you listen to someone speak.
3. You do not interrupt, unless it’s necessary to clarify a point.

Yes	No

4. After a conversation, you have a clear memory of what was talked about.
5. You show you're listening by nodding, making eye contact, smiling, and making brief comments.
6. You become emotional when someone brings up a "hot button" topic.
7. When someone is talking to you, you figure out what to say when he/she stops talking.
8. Your mind races as you listen, thinking about all the things you have to do.
9. Your attention wanders when you listen to others.
10. You listen to others as you would like to be listened to.

The best answers

They are: 1. yes; 2. no; 3. yes; 4. yes; 5. yes; 6. no; 7. no; 8. no; 9. no; 10. yes. You may want to refer to the quiz and your answers at later points.

Some advantages of active listening

Learning and practicing active listening has some real advantages. Here are some of them.

- Shows your respect for and acceptance of people.
- Helps you to understand others' needs, feelings, and worries.
- Lets you understand points of view that are different from yours.
- Allows you to learn new material or facts.
- Builds trust in relationships.
- Requires you to actively take part in an interaction, rather than being passive and detached.
- Often helps reduce tension and upset in others, just by being listened to.
- Helps develop your patience.
- Often reduces or stops any anger that you may feel toward someone, due to your increased understanding of him.

Some disadvantages of active listening

Yes, there can be some disadvantages.

- Takes time and energy; in some instances, a lot of time.
- Requires continuous, disciplined, and persistent effort and concentration.
- Can lead others to believe you agree with them, whether you do, don't, or are neutral about their comments.
- Active listening can lead people to use you as a "listening post." You may find that someone seeks you out often to "let off steam."
- Sometimes, you may end up listening to someone's paranoid rantings or negative blather.

Some reasons why people don't listen well

There are different reasons for different people at different times. Given that, here are some very common reasons.

- *Too much ego.* This involves focusing on yourself and not respecting someone enough to really pay attention. This could include plain old arrogance – thinking you're superior to the speaker. Really, why should you listen to him? What could you possibly learn?
- *Multi-tasking.* This kind of multi-tasking is the "I can do two things at once" variety. Ideally, at least one of these things is listening, but who knows? Most natural multi-taskers find it hard to listen because their minds are almost always racing. "I have so many things to do and I may not have enough time to finish them all." Is that you? Do you suffer from "time hunger" – a burning desire to have more time or to do as many things as possible in the shortest time possible? News flash! It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to really do two things at the same time. You will likely move back and forth, often quickly, between tasks. This is not a good recipe for effectiveness and efficiency, unless you're focused on very simple, very highly practiced, or very routine tasks.
- *Feeling bored.* You may find the topic or the speaker boring. This feeling can be magnified if the speaker uses a monotone, with little or no inflection. Someone who rambles may also create a feeling of boredom or impatience.
- *Dislike.* You may dislike the person enough to tune him out. OK, but you may still need to listen and understand the message.
- *Distractions.* This is a very common problem, as in letting yourself be distracted by hunger, fatigue, fears, worries, aches and pains, fantasies, and seemingly random thoughts.
- *Fantasies.* Some people are prone to daydreaming. Daydreams often center on fears or wishes. You might daydream about the past, the present, or the future. If you're daydreaming, your listening is bound to be poor.
- *Emotional takeover.* Your emotions may hijack your reason in response to what you hear. You become upset, angry, irritated – ticked-off to one degree or another. You're not going to listen very well if you're upset or hoppin' mad.

- *Think fast.* Well, we all can think faster than we can talk. So, it's easy to get ahead of the words being spoken. You can get ahead of the story. While you're thinking ahead and trying to figure out what comes next, you aren't listening very well, are you?
- *Judgments.* This has a nasty edge to it. Do you begin to make judgments about what's been said? Do you evaluate the spoken words as dumb, useless, or whatever else comes to mind? When we make a negative judgment call, our minds tend to shut down. We don't listen...why should we? It's over and done with. This problem obviously leads to inattentive listening (if you're listening at all). But, it may also weaken your relationship with the speaker. Do you now think less of her because you believe she said something not so bright? Have you ever said something that was not so bright? I thought so. I have, more times than necessary.
- *Interrupting.* This may be the moldy oldie of all moldy oldies. Yes, sometimes there are reasons to interrupt – more about that later. If you don't have a very good reason to interrupt a speaker, try keeping your mouth shut and listen. (OK, if the building catches fire, feel free to interrupt.)
- *Body language.* Sigmund Freud said it a long time ago: "If his lips are silent, he chatters with his fingertips; betrayal oozes out of him at every pore." So what? Well, if you're bored, it probably shows. If you don't like the person, it probably shows. If you don't like what's being said, it probably shows. Body language can sometimes speak louder than words.
- *"Brain fade."* Sometimes people lose their focus when they're listening to complex or difficult descriptions or explanations.
- *Selective listening.* For example, you listen to your boss, but not your peers or subordinates; you listen to your friends, but not your spouse; you listen to men, but not women; you listen to high-prestige people, but not "just plain Joe;" you listen to people of your race, but not people of different races – well, you get the idea. This is, in large part, a "no respect" problem.
- *Rehearsing.* Ah, caught you, didn't I?! (OK, I caught myself too.) It's quite common for a listener to be figuring out her response, even if one is not needed or wanted. Listen first; come up with a response later, if you need one.
- *Spoken skills.* This can be a tough one. Some people are not very articulate; some people use poor grammar; some people use inappropriate words or phrases; some people have regional or foreign accents that may put you off. Yet, the *message* may be important to hear.
- *Seeking answers.* Some listeners believe they must be able to provide answers as people speak to them. This may involve interrupting to do that. But, the speaker may not want or need an "answer" from you. She may not be seeking counsel or advice, but an understanding listener.

Does it seem like a long list? It's not nearly as long as it could be, but you get the idea. There are a lot of traps and snares on the road to active listening. Let's face it, active listening is not easy. But, who said life should be easy? It wasn't you, was it?

Better listening skills: 1

Here are some basic building blocks of active listening.

- *Commit to it.* Remember how you like to be listened to. Surprise! Others like to be listened to also. Review the advantages of active listening discussed earlier. You may be surprised by what you learn when you *really* listen to someone. Be a listener, be a learner.
- *Patience.* Active listening *always* involves patience. Impatience is always a listening barrier. If you're a naturally patient person, you're already on the way to being an active listener. If you're fast-moving, change-oriented, intense, and a multi-tasker, you have a longer way to go. It's a simple formula: impatience = poor listening. Even if you're naturally impatient, you can still focus on being as patient as you can be when you listen to people.
- *Open mind.* Whatever you do, keep an open mind about the person and her message.
- *Body language.* Face the person. Keep good eye contact – no glares or “looking daggers.” Caution: continuous eye contact may be seen by some as rudeness or hostility. It can be helpful to break eye contact for a moment now and then. Try to relax. Tension is easily sensed and may be read by people as “he looks like he's in the starting blocks for the 100 meter sprint so he can get away from me.” Fiddling with objects, such as a pencil, a watch, or a coffee mug is seen by many as a sign of boredom or lack of interest – or as just plain annoying. Foot tapping may also be perceived as a sign of impatience.
- *Persistence.* Stay with the person. Hear her out, even if the story is long. Don't let yourself become distracted.
- *Ego control.* Get your ego under control. It's not all about you. Really, it isn't.
- *Distractions.* If you realize your mind is wandering, just go back to active listening. Over time you'll find that you can get back on track faster and faster. Listening while you're at a desk covered with papers and other objects may distract you. There seems to be an almost irresistible pull to those objects. You just *have* to glance at them. Clear your desk or move to a different location, if this is a problem. If I'm on a telephone call at my desk, I often close my eyes. It removes the temptation to peek at papers.
- *No judgments.* Wait until his tale is told before you reflect on the worth of what's been said, if you have to. Remember that if you pass judgment on part or all of what's being said, you may stop listening. You've made up your mind – next case!
- *Perceptions may differ.* Remember that someone may perceive and interpret events and situations involving people in a very different way than you do. Here's where perception *is* reality.

Better listening skills: 2

Further steps to improving active listening skills are:

1. *Pay attention.* Much of the material covered to this point focuses on paying attention to the speaker or speakers. If you're not paying attention to someone who is talking to you, you lose by a forfeit. It's really that simple. The active listening quiz is largely focused on paying attention.

2. *Show you are listening.* Look interested, smile or nod now and then, say “yes” or “I see” (or something similar) occasionally. Be careful. Don’t barrage the speaker with nods and comments so he becomes distracted by your intrusions or irritated because you’re talking over him.
3. *Clarify information.* The general rule, as stated previously, is...don’t interrupt. When you must, be sure you have a good reason. For example: there’s an important statement that you’re not sure about.

Other person: “I was really upset. I didn’t know whether to talk to the boss or not. I thought I would...”

You: “Did you actually talk to him?”

Other person: “No, I didn’t.”

Some possible questions or probes:

- “Did you mean...or...?”
- “I’m not following you. Could you cover the last point again?”
- “Please help me to understand that.”
- “Could you explain – did you mean you left for the day?”
- “You sound upset. Did his comment bother you?”

Remember you can write down words, phrases, or questions that you want to comment on or ask questions about later on. People are likely to appreciate someone taking notes as long as the note-taker looks at the person much of the time. Be careful: sometimes people do *not* want notes taken. Often they are fearful of a loss of confidentiality. They may worry about you losing your notes and Mr. Nosey Parker finding them and gossiping about them. This is more likely to happen in a work setting. Unless you’re *really* sure, ask the person if it’s OK to take notes.

Also, remember that some people, when interrupted, go back to page one and start over from the beginning. Woe (maybe) is you!

4. *Being empathetic.* Showing understanding (or empathy) is not easy for some people. Individuals vary dramatically in their level of natural understanding. Having said that, for true active listening, you will sooner or later need to understand what was said in terms of the person’s needs, feelings, worries, or concerns. So, what is empathy? It’s you being able to understand someone’s words in a clear and objective way. You may or may not attach emotion to your understanding. Even if you feel some emotion, the best form of understanding is objective. Try to put yourself in the person’s shoes. How might you feel? What might you think? What would you want to do?
5. *Paraphrasing and summarizing.* When you paraphrase and/or summarize, you show interest in what’s been said; you show that you really are trying to understand the speaker; and you help yourself to remember what’s been said. Paraphrasing and summarizing also creates a feedback loop. You are giving feedback to someone and that person, in return, gives you feedback. Two-way feedback helps in listening, communication, and understanding.

When to paraphrase or summarize can be tricky. Pick your spots carefully. Here are a few examples of paraphrasing and summarizing:

- “OK, I see you having two key issues – (1) ...; and (2) Is that right?”
- “You seem to be making three points, this, that, and the other. Am I missing something?”
- “This seems complicated. I’m going to summarize....”
- “Let me summarize – tell me if I’m on point or not.”

Paraphrasing is usually helpful, but be careful of summarizing too quickly. Not sure about summarizing? Check and see if the speaker has completed the thought or described the problem or issue. Don’t lead the person to conclude that you want to “take over” from her. One of the critical values of careful restating and summarizing is to communicate that you’ve been listening carefully and you get what she’s saying.

Faking active listening

Sometimes people just don’t pay attention to a speaker. However, they make it look like they’re paying attention. They give off (fake, that is) some signs of active listening – leaning toward the speaker, nodding now and then, showing a slight smile, and looking like they understand.

Why would someone do this? I don’t really know, but here are a few guesses:

- Laziness – lack of motivation to listen.
- Really don’t know how to be an effective listener.
- Out-and-out disrespect – but cynically fake listening to the speaker.

Bottom line: simple – don’t fake it.

When you’re not face-to-face

So far I’ve been talking about face-to-face communication. You’re listening to one person or a small group. But, a lot of interactions take place over the telephone. So, what’s the difference? You can’t read the person’s body language. For all you know, *he’s* trying to multi-task; and you can become distracted by things in your environment – like the items on your desk or counter.

All the usual rules of listening apply. But you may need extra focus on the loudness or softness of what’s being said; the degree of excitement or boredom that seems implied in the words; and the inflections in the person’s voice.

Let’s face it. There’s a lot more chances for misunderstanding when you’re having a telephone conversation.

Golden Rule application

Listen to others as you would like to be listened to.

Ten good quotes about listening

- When people talk, listen completely. Most people never listen.
Ernest Hemingway
- Everything has been said before, but since nobody listens we have to keep going back and beginning all over again.
André Gide
- You cannot truly listen to anyone and do anything else at the same time.
M. Scott Peck
- The greatest compliment that was ever paid me was when someone asked me what I thought, and attended to my answer.
Henry David Thoreau
- Man's inability to communicate is a result of his failure to listen effectively.
Carl Rogers
- We have two ears and one mouth so that we can listen twice as much as we speak.
Epictetus
- Be a good listener. Your ears will never get you in trouble.
Frank Tyger
- You are educated when you have the ability to listen to almost anything without losing your temper or self-confidence.
Robert Frost
- Seek first to understand, then to be understood.
Stephen R. Covey
- I think the one lesson I have learned is that there is no substitute for paying attention.
Diane Sawyer

Your good listening check list

Do:

- Pay attention.
- Respect the person.
- Keep your ego under control.
- Don't interrupt unless it's really necessary.
- Try to relax and be patient.
- Show you are listening.
- Clarify information when you really need to.
- Show understanding.
- Paraphrase and summarize, as needed and when appropriate.
- Listen to the person as you would like to be listened to.

Don't:

- Be a “fake listener.”
- Show boredom or impatience.
- Do something else while you're listening.
- Allow yourself to be distracted by internal factors (as daydreaming) or external factors (as papers on your desk).