

Active Listening Techniques

PEOPLE TALK TO US all the time, but do we really hear what they say? Active listening is a communication skill that allows the sender's message to be understood by the recipient. Active listening reflects understanding, improves relationships, strengthens cooperation, and reduces misunderstandings and conflicts. In addition, active listening is courteous and professional.



Objectives:



1. Explain active listening.
2. Identify and demonstrate active listening techniques.
3. Describe ways in which active listening techniques benefit an organization.

Key Terms:



active listening
clarification question
customer relations
debate-oriented
feedback

dialogue-oriented
feedback
discovery question
empathy
employee relations

open system approach
paraverbal techniques
summarizing
statements

Active Listening

Research indicates that most people remember between 25 and 50 percent of what they hear. If this is true, only half of the 10-minute conversation you have with your colleague, boss, or teacher is remembered. Also, you retain less than half of the messages you hear. Are you missing important information? Are you actively listening?

Active listening is a skill that can increase your productivity, your influence, and your ability to persuade and negotiate. In addition, it can help you avoid misunderstandings and conflicts.

The better you listen, the more valuable you will be in your workplace. Excellent communication will help you create good and lasting impressions on others.

DEFINITION

Active listening is a process in which the listener observes the speaker's body language, pays attention to the speaker's emotions, and paraphrases the speaker's thoughts. Information is conveyed from one person to another. The information being conveyed is the message; the person communicating the message is the sender; and the person listening to the message is the receiver.



FIGURE 1. Students actively listen and respond to their teacher.

FEEDBACK

Active listening requires you, the listener, to offer feedback. By providing feedback, you let the speaker know that the message was received. Feedback does not necessarily mean you agree with what the speaker is saying; you are just telling the speaker that you are listening. Passive feedback exhibits few behaviors, but active feedback exhibits strong behaviors to acknowledge receipt of the message. Acknowledgement can be a verbal response, such as, “I follow what you are saying.” Also, paraverbal responses can be exchanged by nodding your head and maintaining eye contact.

Debate-Oriented Feedback

Debate-oriented feedback is a situation in which the sender and listener are in disagreement or competition with one another. For example, if the sender indicates that his or her message is the only legitimate solution, you assume a debate mentality if you counter the message. The underlying objective of debate-oriented feedback is to invalidate the sender's message.

Dialogue-Oriented Feedback

Dialogue-oriented feedback is a situation in which the sender and receiver collaborate to build understanding by exchanging back and forth communication. This is feedback that shows that the receiver intends to discover new meaning in a message. The underlying objective of dialogue-oriented feedback is to validate the sender's message.



BROADENING AWARENESS...

AMAZING ASPECTS: Key Factors in Active Listening

Active listening helps you hear the sender's message and demonstrates that the message is being received. Paying attention is critical. You should look at the speaker directly, and put aside distracting thoughts. Do not mentally prepare a rebuttal while you are listening. In addition, avoid making assumptions and judgments that distort what you hear. Also, you should avoid being distracted by environmental factors. "Listen" to the speaker's body language.

Providing feedback is essential. Use your own body language and gestures (e.g., nodding and smiling) to convey your attention. Encourage the speaker by offering responsive verbal comments. Then reflect what has been said by paraphrasing, and ask questions to clarify certain points. Also, summarize the speaker's comments periodically.

Defer judgment. Allow the speaker to finish each point before asking questions. Do not interrupt with counter-arguments.

Respond appropriately. Active listening is a model for respect and understanding. Be candid, open, and honest in your response. Assert your opinions respectfully, and treat the speaker the way you would want to be treated.

Active Listening Techniques

Showing engagement in the conversation demonstrates sincerity and empathy. **Empathy** is a situation in which the receiver vicariously feels what the sender is feeling, thinking, or experiencing. It involves being sensitive to and aware of the situations of other people. The receiver gives feedback to the sender to confirm that the speaker's message is understood. Empathy is the underlying quality of active listening and dialogue. The listener establishes that he or she cares about the sender and the message.

VERBAL ACTIVE LISTENING TECHNIQUES

Various techniques can be used individually or together to improve overall communication.

Summarizing

Verbal active listening techniques may be to summarize the speaker's message; ask clarification and discovery questions; and restate or paraphrase the message. **Summarizing statements** are restatements that allow you to show the sender that you comprehend the message. Examples of summarizing statements are "I hear you saying..." and "Let's make sure I understand that you have said...."

Clarification Question

The **clarification question** is a technique used to improve meaning in ambiguous or confusing messages. For instance, a clarification question might be: “Could you tell me more about what you meant when you said....”

Discovery Question

The **discovery question** is a technique used to expand the meaning of a message. For example, a discovery question might begin with, “That is an interesting idea. Please say more.” The occasional question or comment indicates you understand the message.

PARAVERBAL TECHNIQUES

Paraverbal techniques are nonverbal actions that demonstrate the attentiveness of the receiver. These techniques used by the receiver include facing or leaning toward the speaker and maintaining eye contact. Other techniques are facial expressions of curiosity and interest as well as nodding. Acknowledging the message with body language may help to remind you to pay attention and not to let your mind wander.

BARRIERS TO ACTIVE LISTENING

A wandering mind is when you are thinking about something other than the sender’s message. Inattentiveness may prevent you from fully understanding the message. An active listening technique to help you stay focused is to mentally summarize or repeat the speaker’s words as the sender is saying them. Pay close attention to the message being conveyed, and do not allow yourself to be distracted by what may be going on around you. By exhibiting your listening skills, you will reassure the sender that the message is being received and that his or her efforts are appreciated.

Pre-Judging

A barrier to active listening is pre-judging a speaker’s message when you think you understand the message before he or she has finished speaking. Pre-judging also occurs when you have a preconceived value judgment of the sender’s message. In both cases, you become impatient with the sender’s message and interrupt the sender or appear judgmental in the feedback given. Just remember that listening with an open mind is an important skill. You listen to gain information, to understand, to enjoy, and to learn. How well you listen has a major impact on your job effectiveness and the quality of your relationships with other people.



FIGURE 2. This man shows paraverbal responses while he actively listens to a message.

Mentality

Assuming a confrontational, debate mentality can cause you to intentionally rebut the sender's message. In a business context, this mentality could cause a customer service representative to disagree with the customer or might cause an employer to invalidate an employee's idea or work experience.

One active listening technique to overcome a debate mentality is for you to think as a learner. Each time you actively listen to a customer or employee, something new will be learned, which could benefit the organization. Your job as a receiver is to siphon new meaning out of messages, not to debate or form counter-arguments.

Organizations Benefit from Active Listening

Customer relations is a key area in which active listening techniques help facilitate customers' feelings of being respected and understood. Customer service representatives who use summarizing statements of the customer's concerns convey empathy for and an understanding of the customer's situation. Active listening promotes a service-oriented reputation for the organization and improves customer loyalty. Active listening techniques, such as problem clarification and discovery questioning, help a customer service representative understand customer problems accurately and prescribe effective solutions.

In organizational development, an **open system approach** is a method that assumes the organization wants to improve or develop products and services using customers' ideas. The customer ideas are gleaned by using active listening techniques (e.g., discovery questions in discussions with customers).

EMPLOYEE BENEFITS

Employee relations is a key area in which active listening techniques can help employees feel respected and valued. When leaders in organizations acknowledge the competencies, ideas, and successes of employees through feedback, it enhances job satisfaction. Employee satisfaction contributes to a positive and fulfilling work environment that helps maintain a positive work culture. In addition, an open system approach assumes that the organization is interested in soliciting employees' ideas to learn ways to improve and develop new processes. Active listening through discovery questions is a valuable way to acknowledge employee ideas.

Summary:



Active listening occurs when the listener observes the speaker's body language, pays attention to the speaker's emotions, and paraphrases the speaker's thoughts. It requires you, the listener, to offer feedback to let the speaker know the message was received. Debate-oriented feedback occurs when the sender and listener are in disagreement or competition with one another. In contrast, dialogue-oriented feedback

occurs when the sender and receiver collaborate to build understanding by exchanging a message back and forth. Summarizing statements, clarification questions, and discovery questions demonstrate feedback the active listener gives the speaker.

Barriers to communication can be a listener's wandering mind when the receiver is thinking about something other than the sender's message. Inattentiveness may prevent the listener from fully understanding the message. Other barriers are prejudging a speaker's message and having a preconceived value judgment of the sender's message. Active listening, however, promotes a service-oriented reputation for the organization and improves employee and customer loyalty.

Checking Your Knowledge:



1. What are traits that demonstrate active listening?
2. What are paraverbal responses?
3. Explain some other active listening techniques.
4. Explain the nature of barriers to active listening.
5. How can active listening improve customer relations?

Expanding Your Knowledge:



Studies have shown that people remember only 25 to 50 percent of what they hear. Prepare and deliver a speech to the class. Then ask the recipients of your message to write down what they have heard. Test the percentage of what you have said compared to what is remembered. Do you need to improve your content or delivery to raise the percentage of how well your message is heard?

Web Links:



Actively Listening

<http://www.studygs.net/listening.htm>

Active Listening

<http://www.colorado.edu/conflict/peace/treatment/activel.htm>

Tips

<http://powertochange.com/students/people/listen/>

Better Listener

<http://psychcentral.com/lib/2007/become-a-better-listener-active-listening/>

Active Listening

http://www.go-get.org/pdf/Rogers_Farson.pdf