

Active Listening Skills

LISTENING is half the process of interpersonal communication. No matter how eloquent a speaker's message, it has no value if the message is not received. Active listening occurs when a receiver interprets and understands a sender's message. Being an active listener takes practice and is an important communication skill to be used in all areas of your life.



Objective:



Examine active listening skills that utilize paraphrasing, repeating, and interpreting body language.

Key Terms:



active listening
attend
body language

distraction
effective communication
interact

paraphrase
question
repeat

Understanding How to Use Active Listening Skills

Listening requires so much more than your ears. To actively listen, you must pay attention to a speaker's body language, facial expressions, and words. In addition, you should rephrase his or her ideas to ensure you comprehend the message properly.

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Effective communication is a two-way process in which the receiver understands the sender's message and provides feedback through words and/or actions. It is important in every

personal and work environment because listening actively shows sincerity. In addition, effective communication improves relationships, fosters understanding, and strengthens cooperation. It is proactive and demonstrates accountability and professionalism. However, listening skills are developed through practice.

ACTIVE LISTENING

Active listening is the process of listening in an engaged and deliberate manner. It is an integral part of effective communication that requires the listener to understand, interpret, and evaluate what is heard. Active listening shows you are interested in what the speaker is thinking and feeling. In addition, it proves you want to understand the true meaning of the message. Your feedback assures the speaker that communication is effective. Typically, you should be empathic and nonjudgmental in your response. Active listening helps you interpret facts, thoughts, beliefs, feelings, and emotions. It can help you discern the speaker's motivation and expectations.

Interact

To **interact** (with the speaker) is to make a connection with him or her by paying attention, listening carefully, and providing feedback. You will respond to more than words. Attention to body language helps give you a more complete understanding of the message. **Body language** is the facial expressions, physical movements, and gestures of the sender.

Attend

You should attend to the speaker. To **attend** is to confirm what the speaker is saying by the use of positive body language and short utterances. By attending to the speaker, the listener stays engaged and lets the speaker know the message is being received. As the listener, you may nod your head or say, "I understand."

Question

You should actively listen to the speaker and question him or her. Questioning helps the listener understand and helps the speaker gauge how well the listener understands the message. To **question** is to inquire, which may add new thoughts. Also, through questions, you may reveal your own position.



FIGURE 1. A patient and doctor actively listen to each other as both express body language.

Distraction

You need to ignore distractions to concentrate on the message. A **distraction** is something unrelated to the topic. By ignoring distractions, an active listener can focus his or her full attention on the speaker's message. Avoid distractive tendencies (e.g., looking at your watch). Also, as a listener, do not get too preoccupied with your own thoughts.

Repeat

The use of repetition is an important skill in active listening. To **repeat** is to speak or write the message exactly the way the speaker communicates it. Repeating the message helps the listener learn the message by processing it and internalizing it in his or her own thoughts. It also helps the speaker to know that the message was sent completely and correctly.

Paraphrase

To **paraphrase** is to restate the speaker's message using different words. Paraphrasing is a skill in active listening that helps the receiver process the message. You confirm your understanding of the message by restating or paraphrasing it in your own words. Paraphrasing can be in the form of a question. It gives the speaker assurance he or she has been understood.

ACTIVE LISTENING SKILLS

Active listening skills are developed through practice. As mentioned previously, this set of skills involves paying attention to nonverbal and verbal messages. Also, ignoring distractions is a behavior that must be practiced. Our world is filled with visual, auditory, and sensual messages intended to grab our attention. Yet an active and practiced listener will be able to tune out the distractions.



ON THE JOB...

CAREER CONNECTION: Potential Speaker Flaws

It is unknown who first said, "We were given two ears but only one mouth because listening is twice as hard as talking." But talking effectively and active listening require practice.

The sender must follow guidelines to effectively transmit his or her message to receivers. Speech must be loud enough to be heard easily. The message to be conveyed must be succinct, not including too many issues or extraneous details.

Body language must be honest, not contradicting the speaker's message. For instance, to smile when the message is sad would be contradictory. The speaker must concentrate on delivery, not lose his or her place and not stray from the point of the message. The sender must not get distracted by having too much concern with watching the response of the audience.

BODY LANGUAGE SKILLS

Again, body language is facial expressions, physical movements, and gestures employed by the sender and the receiver. It communicates nonverbal messages that are part of effective communication. Body language is expressed in the way you hold and move your body and includes eye contact, breathing, and perspiration. The sending and receiving of body language signals can be conscious or unconscious. By paying attention to a speaker's body language, the listener can discern more meaning than by just listening to words.

Seeing the Signs

Positive, approachable body language is important in healthy work and personal environments. The ability to read the body language of colleagues improves team building and task completion. For instance, direct eye contact expresses interest. In contrast, down-cast eyes or no eye contact shows disinterest or even guilt. Also, crossing one's arms over the chest expresses a defensive posture and a negative message. Meanwhile, mirrored body posture is a situation in which two people face and look directly at each other, showing agreement. Non-mirrored body posture, however, is a situation in which two people face each other, and one person looks down and is slightly hunched. These people are not in agreement.

Hand gestures and other body language are nonverbal signs expressed in workplaces, in social situations, or at home, proving words are only part of how people communicate.



FIGURE 2. A father and his children share active listening and body language over a guitar lesson.

Summary:



Active listening is an integral part of effective communication. Active listening requires the listener to understand, interpret, and evaluate what is heard. Active listening is a skill needed in casual conversation and in professional careers.

You are able to interact with the speaker when you listen carefully and provide feedback. You attend to a speaker when, as the listener, you stay engaged and let the speaker know the message is being received. Asking questions helps the listener understand and helps the speaker gauge how well the listener understands the mes-

sage. As an active listener, you need to ignore distractions and concentrate on the message. Repeating the message helps you process information. You confirm your understanding of the message by restating or paraphrasing it in your own words. Body language provides nonverbal messages and gestures that help the speaker and the audience communicate effectively.

Checking Your Knowledge:



1. What occurs in the process of active listening?
2. How does the audience give the speaker feedback?
3. Why do the speaker and audience benefit by listeners attending to the speaker?
4. Do you think that asking questions, repeating, and paraphrasing the words are methods that help the audience better understand the message?
5. What are 10 examples of body language demonstrated by the sender and recipients?

Web Links:



Active Listening

<http://www.mindtools.com/CommSkill/ActiveListening.htm>

Actively Listening

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

Body Language

<http://www.wikihow.com/Read-Body-Language>