

# Active Listening Techniques

**Unit:** Communication Skills

**Problem Area:** Develop Communication Skills

**Lesson:** Active Listening Techniques

■ **Student Learning Objectives.** Instruction in this lesson should result in students achieving the following objectives:

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

■ **Resources.** The following resources may be useful in teaching this lesson:

“Active Listening,” Mind Tools: Essential Skills for an Excellent Career. Accessed Oct. 21, 2008. <<http://www.mindtools.com/CommSkill/ActiveListening.htm>>.

“Active Listening Skills,” Taft Community College. Accessed Oct. 21, 2008. <<http://www.taft.cc.ca.us/lrc/class/assignments/actlisten.html>>.

“Dialogue vs. Debate,” Study Circles. Accessed Oct. 21, 2008. <<http://www.nald.ca/clr/study/scdvd.htm>>.

Kouzes, James M., and Barry Z. Posner. *Encouraging the Heart: A Leader's Guide to Rewarding and Recognizing Others*. Jossey-Bass, 2003.

Stone, Florence M., and Randi T. Sachs. *The High-Value Manager: Developing the Core Competencies Your Organization Demands* (pp. 43 to 46; 101). Amacom, 1996.

Van Fleet, James. *Lifetime Conversation Guide* (pp. 131 to 133; 271 to 280). Prentice Hall, 1984.



## ■ **Equipment, Tools, Supplies, and Facilities.**

- ✓ Overhead or PowerPoint projector
- ✓ Visual(s) from accompanying master(s)
- ✓ Copies of sample test, lab sheet(s), and/or other items designed for duplication
- ✓ Materials listed on duplicated items
- ✓ Computers with printers and Internet access
- ✓ Classroom resource and reference materials

## ■ **Key Terms.** The following terms are presented in this lesson (shown in bold italics):

- ▶ active listening
- ▶ clarification question
- ▶ customer relations
- ▶ debate-oriented feedback
- ▶ dialogue-oriented feedback
- ▶ discovery question
- ▶ empathy
- ▶ employee relations
- ▶ open system approach
- ▶ para verbal techniques
- ▶ summarizing statements

## ■ **Interest Approach.** Use an interest approach that will prepare the students for the lesson. Teachers often develop approaches for their unique class and student situation. A possible approach is included here.

*Have the students write about two experiences that involve listening. The first experience should be a time when they felt that another person was NOT listening to them adequately. The second experience should be a time when they felt that another person was listening to them very well.*

*Ask the students to pair up or to form small groups to discuss their experiences. Then ask each team to list the poor listening skills and the good listening skills they experienced on flip charts. One chart should be labeled “Poor Listening” and the other “Good Listening.” Next, lead a class discussion on the commonalities and differences between the two lists.*

# SUMMARY OF CONTENT AND TEACHING STRATEGIES

**Objective 1:** Explain active listening.

**Anticipated Problem:** What is active listening?

- I. **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.
  - A. Basic communication model
    1. Information is conveyed from one person to another. The information being conveyed is the message.
    2. The person communicating the message is the sender.
    3. The person listening to the message is the receiver.
  - B. Types of communication feedback
    1. Communication feedback can be considered on a continuum of how the receiver demonstrates that the message was successfully received.
      - a. With passive feedback, the receiver exhibits few behaviors to acknowledge receipt of the message.
      - b. With active feedback, the receiver exhibits many behaviors to acknowledge receipt of the message.
    2. Active listening refers to receiver techniques for giving feedback that the message was received and for proactively eliciting the message from the sender. Active listening techniques include:
      - a. Verbal techniques: The receiver may say, “Yes, I follow what you are saying.”
      - b. Para verbal techniques: The receiver may nod his or her head and maintain eye contact while listening.
  - C. Feedback
    1. **Debate-orientated feedback** occurs when the sender and listener are in competition with one another.
      - a. For example, the sender is stating that his or her message is better or that he or she has the most legitimate solution.
      - b. Assuming a debate mentality, the receiver may be considering how to dispel or disprove the sender’s message or how to articulate more effectively than the sender.
      - c. The underlying objective of debate-oriented feedback is to invalidate the sender’s message.

2. **Dialogue-oriented feedback** occurs when the sender and receiver collaborate to build meaning through passing a message back and forth.
  - a. For example, the receiver intends to nurture, evolve, and discover new meaning in a message.
  - b. The underlying objective of dialogue-oriented feedback is to validate the sender's message.

Display VM–A and VM–B. Then have the students read the following Web site material: <http://www.mindtools.com/CommSkill/ActiveListening.htm> and <http://www.nald.ca/clar/study/scdvd.htm>. Next, have students role play scenarios involving active listening, debate-oriented listening, and dialogue-oriented listening. Discuss the results as a class.

**Objective 2:** Identify and demonstrate active listening techniques.

**Anticipated Problem:** What are active listening techniques?

II. Active listening techniques

A. Showing engagement in the conversation

1. **Empathy** occurs when the receiver wishes to vicariously feel what the sender is feeling, thinking, or experiencing. It involves being sensitive to and aware of other peoples' situations.
  - a. The receiver wishes to give feedback to the sender and convey that, "I know how you must feel."
  - b. Empathy is the underlying quality of active listening and of dialogue.
  - c. The listener establishes that he or she cares about the sender and the message.
2. Verbal active listening techniques include summarizing statements in addition to clarification and discovery questions.
  - a. **Summarizing statements** allow the receiver to show that he or she comprehends the message by restating it to the sender. For example, a summarizing statement might begin with, "I hear you saying that ..." or "Let's make sure I understand what you have said ..."
  - b. The **clarification question** is a technique used to improve meaning in ambiguous or confusing messages. For example, a clarification question might begin with, "Could you tell me more about what you meant when you said...?"
  - c. 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." or "When did you first have this thought?" or "When did you first discover that?"
3. **Para verbal** (body language) **techniques** refer to non-verbal techniques used to demonstrate that the receiver is attentive. Para verbal techniques used by

the receiver include facing, leaning toward, and/or maintaining adequate eye contact with the sender. Other techniques include exhibiting a facial expression of curiosity and interest as well as nodding.

B. Barriers to active listening

1. A wandering mind is when the receiver is thinking about something other than the sender's message. This lack of attentiveness may cause the listener to not fully comprehend the message.
  - a. One active listening technique to help overcome a receiver's wandering mind is for the receiver to mentally summarize the speaker's message as it is conveyed.
  - b. For example, the receiver keeps his or her mind tuned into the sender's message by repeating the message or parts of the message internally.
2. Pre-judging a speaker's message involves the listener thinking he or she understands the sender's message before the sender has finished; or, the listener may have a preconceived value judgment of the speaker's message. In both cases, the receiver becomes impatient with the sender's message and interrupts the sender or appears judgmental in the feedback given to the sender.
  - a. One active listening technique to help overcome pre-judging and interrupting the sender is for the listener to give himself or herself a subtle physical reminder to have patience and to show empathy.
  - b. For example, the listener might press a fingernail against his or her palm, press a toe against the floor, lightly bite the tip of the tongue—something that is not noticed by the sender but physically reminds the listener to demonstrate care and to use active listening techniques to fully understand the message.
3. Assuming a confrontational, debate mentality can cause the listener to intentionally disprove or 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.
  - a. One active listening technique to overcome a debate mentality is for the receiver to think as a professional learner: Each time he or she actively listens to a customer or an employee, something new will be learned, which could benefit the organization.
  - b. The receiver's job is to siphon new meaning out of messages, not to debate messages.

*Use VM–C, VM–D, <http://www.taft.cc.ca.us/lrc/class/assignments/actlisten.htm>, and the Lifetime Conversation Guide (in the Resource section) to introduce and illustrate the various active listening techniques, as well as barriers and how to overcome them.*

**Objective 3:** Describe ways in which active listening techniques benefit an organization.

**Anticipated Problem:** How does an organization benefit from active listening?

III. Benefits of active listening

A. Customer benefits

1. **Customer relations** is a key area in which active listening techniques help facilitate the external customers' feelings of being respected and understood. Customer service representatives who convey empathy for and an understanding of the customer through summarizing statements create a bonding experience that helps promote a service-oriented reputation for the organization and improves customer loyalty.
2. Through active listening techniques (e.g., clarification and discovery questioning), customer service representatives are able to comprehend problems accurately and prescribe effective solutions for customers. This level of accuracy creates an organizational reputation of providing excellent customer service to external customers.
3. An **open system approach** to organizational development assumes that the organization wants to learn ways to improve or develop products and services from customers' ideas. Customer ideas are gleaned through the use of active listening techniques, such as asking discovery questions in concert with receiving messages from customers.

B. Employee benefits

1. **Employee relations** is another key area where 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.
2. Employee satisfaction contributes to a positive and fulfilling work environment that helps maintain a positive work culture.
3. An open system approach assumes that the organization wants to learn ways to improve or develop work designs and processes by soliciting employees' ideas. Employee ideas are gleaned through the use of active listening techniques, such as asking discovery questions.

*Display VM–E and use Web sites listed in the Resource section to explore the dynamics between active listening and the empowerment of customers and employees in an organization.*

■ **Review/Summary.** Use the student learning objectives to summarize the lesson. Have students explain the content associated with each objective. Student responses can be used in determining which objectives need to be reviewed or taught from a different angle.

- **Application.** Use the included visual masters and lab sheet to apply the information presented in the lesson. You may also wish to introduce students to reading sections and Web sites listed in the resources and quiz them over some of the content.
- **Evaluation.** Evaluation should focus on student achievement of the objectives for the lesson. Various techniques can be used, such as student performance on the application activities. A sample written test is provided.
- **Answers to Sample Test:**

### Part One: Matching

1. b
2. d
3. e
4. c
5. a

### Part Two: Short Answer

1. Answers will vary but should include two of the following: improves customer service experience, improves reputation as a service-oriented organization, improves customer loyalty, and collects ideas for improving products and services.
2. Answers will vary but should include two of the following: enhances employee job satisfaction, improves overall work culture, and collects ideas for improving work designs and processes.

### Part Three: True/False

1. F
2. T
3. F
4. F
5. T



# Active Listening Techniques

## ► Part One: Matching

**Instructions:** Match the term with the correct definition.

- a. para verbal techniques
- b. open system approach
- c. discovery question
- d. clarification question
- e. summarizing statements

- \_\_\_\_ 1. A philosophy used to collect new ideas from customers and employees
- \_\_\_\_ 2. A technique used to improve meaning in ambiguous or confusing messages
- \_\_\_\_ 3. Verbalizations that allow the receiver to show that he or she comprehends the message by restating it to the sender
- \_\_\_\_ 4. A technique used to expand the meaning of a message
- \_\_\_\_ 5. Non-verbal techniques used to demonstrate that the receiver is attentive

## ► Part Two: Short Answer

**Instructions:** Answer the following.

1. List two ways that active listening techniques can improve customer relations in an organization.





2. List two ways that active listening techniques can improve employee relations in an organization.

### ► Part Three: True/False

**Instructions:** Write *T* for true or *F* for false.

- \_\_\_ 1. Debate-oriented listening has the purpose of supporting the sender's message.
- \_\_\_ 2. Dialogue-oriented listening tries to build more meaning into the message.
- \_\_\_ 3. Empathy is the underlying emotion of debate-oriented listening.
- \_\_\_ 4. Disproving the sender's message is the mentality of dialogue-oriented listening.
- \_\_\_ 5. Validating an employee's idea generally makes the employee more satisfied with the organization.

# BASIC COMMUNICATION MODEL

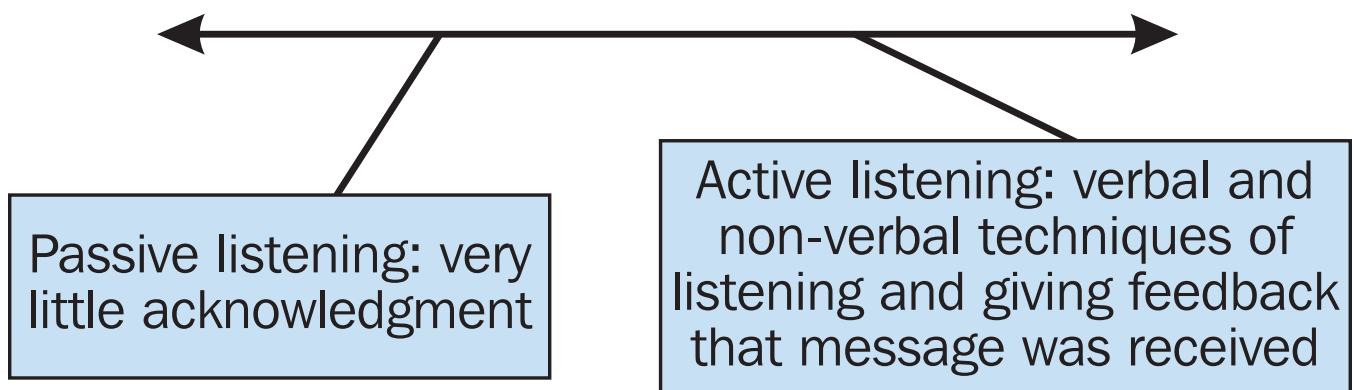
## 1 Basic Communication Model



## 2 Communication Feedback



## 3 Continuum of Listening



# DEBATE- AND DIALOGUE-ORIENTED LEARNING

Debate-Oriented Listening		Dialogue-Oriented Listening
To have a better message than the sender	<b>Purpose</b>	To support the sender's message
To disprove or invalidate the sender's message	<b>Mentality</b>	To validate and to help build more meaning into the sender's message
Receiver wants to take control of the message from the sender	<b>Control</b>	Receiver wants to help the sender maintain control of the message
Receiver is thinking about what he or she will say next and how to best point out flaws in the sender's message	<b>What is happening in the receiver's mind?</b>	Receiver is focused on empathizing with the sender's message and how to give feedback showing that the message is understood and appreciated

- ◆ Active listening is dialogue-oriented.
- ◆ Empathy (wanting to understand the feelings of others) is the underlying emotion that drives dialogue-oriented listening.

# VERBAL AND PARA VERBAL ACTIVE LISTENING TECHNIQUES

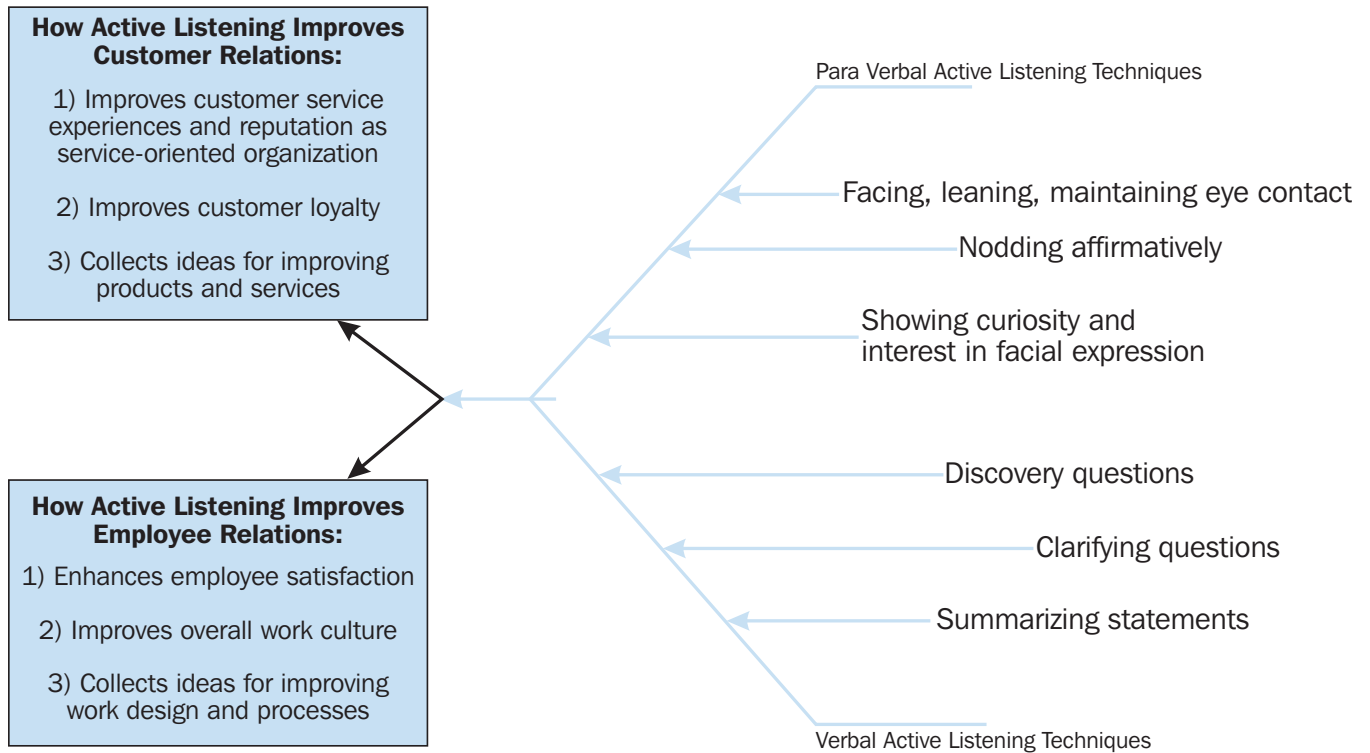
Verbal Active Listening Techniques	Para Verbal Active Listening Techniques
Summarizing statements 1. "I hear you saying that ..." 2. "Let's make sure I have understood what you are saying ..." 	Face the sender. Lean toward the sender.
Clarification questions 1. "Could you tell me more about what you meant when you said ..." 2. "Could you say that differently?"	Maintain adequate eye contact. Nod your head as the sender speaks.
Discovery questions 1. "Could you speak more about that idea?" 2. "When did you first have this thought?"	Show a facial expression of curiosity. Show a facial expression of interest.

- ◆ Summarizing statements are used by the receiver to organize and restate main points of a message back to the sender.
- ◆ Clarification questions are used by the receiver to clear up any confusing parts of the message.
- ◆ Discovery questions are used by the receiver to gain more information from the sender. An open system approach to organizational development is a philosophy used to gather ideas from customers and employees.

# MANAGING BARRIERS TO ACTIVE LISTENING

Barriers to Active Learning	Suggested Remedy
<p>Wandering mind: thinking about things other than the sender and the message</p>	<p>Mental summarizing: receiver repeats the sender's words mentally in his or her mind as the sender speaks</p>
<p>Pre-judging and interrupting: believing you understand the message before the sender has completely communicated it</p>	<p>Physical cue: using subtle physical cues to help maintain concentration (e.g., squeeze your fingertip, bite the tip of your tongue, or press your toe against the floor)</p>
<p>Assuming a debate-oriented mentality: wanting to correct or discredit the sender's message</p>	<p>Professional learner: receiver reminds himself or herself that as part of an open system organization, he or she can always learn at least one thing by listening</p>

# HOW ACTIVE LISTENING CAN IMPROVE AN ORGANIZATION



# Active Listening Role Plays

## Purpose

The purpose of this activity is to demonstrate active listening techniques and to discuss how active listening techniques benefit business organizations.

## Objectives

1. Describe and demonstrate para verbal and verbal active listening techniques.
2. Identify para verbal and verbal active listening techniques.
3. Explain how active listening techniques benefit a business organization.

## Materials

- ◆ writing utensil
- ◆ paper
- ◆ computer with word processor (could be used instead of paper and writing utensil)

## Procedure

1. Pair up with another student. Designate person A and B. Person A should describe a time when he or she was shopping or dining out and received poor service (with an absence of active listening skills) from the staff. Person B should describe a time when he or she was shopping or dining out and received excellent service (with the presence of active listening skills). Note: If person A or B is employed, you may use an example of a time when you were interacting with an employer/supervisor and experienced poor or excellent use of active listening skills.
2. Create a short theatrical skit based on your two experiences. Plan for approximately two minutes per skit.
3. Perform the skits for the other students in your class.
4. Hold a brief discussion following the two skits. Allow your classmates to identify the presence (or absence) of active listening techniques that you demonstrated (or did not demonstrate) in your skits. Encourage your classmates to discuss how active listening skills might benefit the organizations in your skits.
5. Turn the two skit scripts in to your instructor.