

# Tools, Tips and Techniques for Effective Listening

## LISTENING SKILLS

*We can all work on our listening skills and there's always room to improve those skills, by reflecting on how we come across to others, thinking about how we would have felt in their shoes and practising listening skills.*

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### Some Techniques (Various)

Remember you are there to listen and remind yourself of this, especially if you have a tendency to talk a lot yourself

- Focus on the train of thought of the person talking, avoid thinking about your response or other non-related things until after the person has finished speaking
  - If there's something that is preventing you listening (phone ringing, someone else in the room, something you have to do that minute) remove the distraction. Do this even if you have to put off the listening time till later, as long as you make a definite time for the conversation and stick to it.
  - If there are gaps in the conversation, don't rush in to fill them. The other person may well just be collecting their thoughts or trying to find a way to put across what they want to say.
  - Make little noises like "uh huh" or "I see" to indicate that you're listening
  - Maintain eye contact for as long as it seems appropriate - remember that some people are more comfortable with eye contact than others and that this varies with culture and geography
  - Paraphrase what the person you're talking to has just said to be sure you understand it correctly. Use this as the basis of questions.
  - Try to empathize with the person you're talking to. This does not mean you have to agree with them, but it helps understanding to see things for a moment from their point of view. If you are involved in a difficult or confrontational conversation, it can be useful to gently attempt to openly identify the areas of difficulty and seek the other person's help in trying to get past the impasse.
  - You might say something like "I think that we have some difficulty here because you are angry about what happened yesterday - can we talk about how that made you feel first?"
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### Eye Contact

The meaning of eye contact varies culturally and geographically. For example:

- in the UK, people in the north of England and Scotland will make more eye contact than southerners,
- in some African cultures it is considered rude to maintain eye contact for a long time; and
- for some Asian cultures it is disrespectful to look in the eyes of someone who is your senior.

Fit the amount of eye contact to what you think your conversation partner is comfortable with - avoid staring matches that can appear confrontational.



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## Paraphrasing

This means repeating back or restating what the person said to check for understanding. You can say, "So what I heard you say was ..... Is this right?" It is best to rephrase what has been said rather than repeat it word for word – this shows even more clearly that you have been listening.

Paraphrasing is a very powerful technique for both making sure that you have understood correctly and for letting the other person know that you have heard what they are saying. Paraphrasing does not mean that you necessarily agree with what they say, just that you've heard it.

Use phrases like "So, in your case:." or "You think that" to tell the person that you are paraphrasing.

Use paraphrasing as a way of giving you time to think about what the person has said, and as a basis for questions. Paraphrasing can also be useful for truly understanding what they are saying, by translating it into terms that fit better with your own frame of reference. However, be careful that you do not lose their meaning by fitting your own version on top of it.

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## Reflective Listening

Reflective Listening shows the other person that you are paying attention to them and understand what they are saying.

### *Strategies:*

- Do not interrupt. Let the person finish what they are saying.
  - Paraphrase (See above)
  - Perception Checking - This is an effort to understand the feelings behind the words. Simply describe what you think the other person is feeling. For example, you can say, "It sounds like that made you really angry".
  - Ask Questions - Ask open-ended questions (this is a question that cannot be answered with just a yes or no response. It requires the person to give more details). Ask for additional details, examples and impressions.
  - Approval - Take advantages to express your approval or give praise. It will encourage further communication.
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## Active Listening

There is a real distinction between merely *hearing the words* and really *listening for the message*. When we listen effectively we understand what the person is thinking and/or feeling from the other person's own perspective. It is as if we were standing in the other person's shoes, seeing through his/her eyes and listening through the person's ears. Our own viewpoint may be different and we may not necessarily agree with the person, but as we listen, we understand from the other's perspective. To listen effectively, we must be actively involved in the communication process, and not just listening passively.

We all act and respond on the basis of our understanding, and too often there is a misunderstanding that neither of us is aware of. With active listening, if a



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misunderstanding has occurred, it will be known immediately, and the communication can be clarified before any further misunderstanding occurs.

Several other possible benefits occur with active listening:

- Sometimes a person just needs to be heard and acknowledged before the person is willing to consider an alternative or soften his /her position.
- It is often easier for a person to listen to and consider the other's position when that person knows the other is listening and considering his/her position.
- It helps people to spot the flaws in their reasoning when they hear it played back without criticism.
- It also helps identify areas of agreement so the areas of disagreement are put in perspective and are diminished rather than magnified.
- Reflecting back what we hear each other say helps give each a chance to become aware of the different levels that are going on below the surface. This helps to bring things into the open where they can be more readily resolved.
- If we accurately understand the other person's view, we can be more effective in helping the person see the flaws in his/her position.
- If we listen so we can accurately understand the other's view, we can also be more effective in discovering the flaws in our own position.

### Listening Tips

- Usually it is important to paraphrase and use your own words in verbalizing your understanding of the message. Parroting back the words verbatim is annoying and does not ensure accurate understanding of the message.
- Depending on the purpose of the interaction and your understanding of what is relevant, you could reflect back the other persons:
  - **Account of the facts.**
  - **Thoughts and beliefs.**
  - **Feelings and emotions.**
  - **Wants, needs or motivation.**
  - **Hopes and expectations.**
- Don't respond to just the meaning of the words, look for the feelings or intent beyond the words. The dictionary or surface meaning of the words or code used by the sender is not the message.
- Inhibit your impulse to immediately answer questions. The code may be in the form of a question. Sometimes people ask questions when they really want to express themselves and are not open to hearing an answer.
- Know when to quit using active listening. Once you accurately understand the sender's message, it may be appropriate to respond with your own message. Don't use active listening to hide and avoid revealing your own position.
- If you are confused and know you do not understand, either tell the person you don't understand and ask him/her to say it another way, or use your best guess. If you are incorrect, the person will realize it and will likely attempt to correct your misunderstanding.



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- Active listening is a very effective first response when the other person is angry, hurt or expressing difficult feelings toward you, especially in relationships that are important to you.
- Use eye contact and *listening* body language. Avoid looking at your watch or at other people or activities around the room. Face and lean toward the speaker and nod your head, as it is appropriate. Be careful about crossing your arms and appearing closed or critical.
- Be empathic and nonjudgmental. You can be accepting and respectful of the person and their feelings and beliefs without invalidating or giving up your own position, or without agreeing with the accuracy and validity of their view.

***Become a more effective listener. Practice the active listening technique and make it one of your communication skills.***

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### Useful Phrases for Active Listening

**Sample phrases for when you think your perceptions are accurate:**

- I understand the problem as...
- I see the situation as...
- I'm sensing...
- Could it be that...
- I wonder if...
- Correct me if I'm wrong. ...
- I get the impression that...
- Let me see if I understand. You ...
- As I hear it. You...
- You feel ...
- From your point of view ...
- It seems to you ...
- In your experience ...
- From where you stand ...
- As you see it ...
- So you think ...
- You believe ...
- What I hear you saying is that ....
- I'm picking up that you ...
- I really hear you saying that ...
- Where you're coming from ...
- You figure ...
- You mean...



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### Sample phrases to use when you have difficulty understanding:

- Could it be that ...
- I guess that you're ...
- What I guess I'm hearing is ...
- Is it possible that ...
- It seems that you ...
- Perhaps you're feeling ...
- It appears you ...
- Is it conceivable that ...
- Maybe you feel ...
- Maybe this is a long shot, but ...
- Do you feel a little ... ?
- As I hear it, you ...
- ...is that what you mean?
- I get the impression that ...
- ...is that the way it is?
- ...is that the way you feel?
- I wonder if ...
- Would you buy this idea ...
- Correct me if I'm wrong but ...
- Does it sound reasonable that you ...
- From where I stand you ...
- You appear to be feeling ...
- Is there any chance that you
- Maybe I'm out to lunch, but ...
- I'm not sure if I'm with you; do you mean
- Let me see if I understand you; you
- This is what I think I hear you saying ...
- Let me see if I'm with you; you
- Could this be what's going on, you ...
- I'm not certain I understand; you're feeling ... ?
- I'm not sure if I'm with you, but ...
- I somehow sense that maybe you feel ...

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### Listen

When I ask you to listen to me and you start giving advice you have not done what I asked.

When I ask you to listen to me and you begin to tell me why I shouldn't feel that way you are trampling on *my* feelings.

When I ask you to listen to me and you feel you have to do something to solve my problem you have failed me, strange as it may seem.

When you do something for me that I can and *need* to do *for myself* you contribute to my fear and weakness.

But when you accept as a simple fact that I do feel what I feel no matter how irrational, then I can stop trying to convince you and get about the business of understanding what's behind this irrational feeling.

And when that's clear, the answers are obvious and I don't need advice.

Irrational feelings make sense when we understand what's behind them.

So please, just listen and hear me. And if you want to talk, wait a minute for your turn: and I'll listen to you

**From the *Applied Psychologist* (Hartley & Branthwaite 2000)**



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## Barriers to Effective Listening

- **Not paying attention** – listeners may allow themselves to be distracted or to think of something else, also not wanting to listen may contribute to a lack of attention.
  - **Pseudo listening** – often people who are thinking about something else deliberately try and look as if they are listening. However, when the speaker states something important, the listener shows no reaction, which gives the wrong signals to the speaker.
  - **Listening but not hearing** – sometimes a person listens only to hear the facts or details or to the way they were presented and misses the real meaning.
  - **Rehearsing** – some people listen until they want to say something, then they stop listening, start rehearsing what they want to say, and wait for an opportunity to respond.
  - **Interrupting** – the listener does not wait until the complete meaning can be determined, but interrupts forcefully and causes the speaker to stop mid-sentence.
  - **Hearing what is expected** – people frequently think that they heard speakers say what they expected them to say. Or the refuse to hear what they do not want to hear.
  - **Feeling defensive** – the listener assumes that they know the speaker's intention or why something was said or, for various other reasons, they expect to be attacked.
  - **Listening for a point of disagreement** – some listeners seem to wait for the chance to attack someone; they listen intently for points on which they can disagree.
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## Strategic Questions

### A strategic question:

1. **Creates motion** – Gears to "How can we move?"
2. **Creates options** – Not "Why don't you ..?", but "Where would you ...?"
3. **Digs deeper** – "What needs to be changed?" "What is the meaning of this?"
4. **Avoids "why."**
5. **Avoids "yes" and "no" questions** – These leave the presenter in a passive or uncreative state.
6. **Empowers** – "What would you like to do?"
7. **Asks the unaskable questions.**

(from *Strategic Questioning* by Peavey, *In Context*, No. 40)



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## Examples of Powerful Questions to Ask:

- How important is this?
- Where do you feel stuck?
- What is the intent of what you're saying?
- What can we do for you?
- What do you think the problem is?
- What's your role in this issue?
- What have you tried so far? What worked? What didn't?
- Have you experienced anything like this before? (If so, what did you do?)
- What can you do for yourself?
- What do you hope for?
- What's preventing you from ..."
- What would you be willing to give up for that?
- If you could change one thing, what would it be?
- Imagine a point in the future where your issue is resolved. How did you get there?
- What would you like us to ask?
- What have you learned?



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### Effective Listening Skills

<b>10 KEYS TO EFFECTIVE LISTENING</b>	<b>THE GOOD LISTENER</b>	<b>THE BAD LISTENER</b>
1. Find areas of interest.	Asks, "What's in it for me?"	Tunes out dry subjects.
2. Judge content, not delivery.	Judges content, skips over delivery errors.	Tunes out if delivery is poor.
3. Hold your comments.	Doesn't judge until all info has been gathered	Tends to enter into arguments.
4. Listen for ideas.	Listens for central themes.	Listens for facts.
5. Be flexible.	Keeps mind open to all possibilities.	Takes intensive notes to compare own ideas.
6. Concentrate on listening possibilities.	Exhibits by maintaining eye contact and other positive body language	Shows no energy, interest, attention is faked.
7. Resist distractions.	Avoids distractions, stays focused	Distracted easily.
8. Keep your mind open.	Interprets "hot topics" and sensitive information.	Reacts to emotional words or "hot topics".
9. Capitalize on thought speed-we think faster than we speak	Challenges, anticipates, mentally summarizes, weighs the evidence, listens for hidden messages or agendas.	Tends to daydream with slow speakers

