

Active listening: a guide

We are taught how to read and write, but not how to listen. We can enhance our relationships with others through effective listening. Here are 20 things you can do to enhance your listening skills



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Leave your own concerns to one side.

You can't focus on somebody else if you are also thinking about your problems, to do list or concerns. This leads onto

Allow yourself sufficient time. If you have to dash off to a meeting, you will want to go at a quicker pace to suit you, not the person who you are listening to.

Talk less than you listen. We have two ears and one mouth, so have your communication in the same proportion.

Use eye contact. It is hard for someone to continue to talk with someone who is not looking at them.

Show some non-verbal behaviour. Make use of nods of the heads and uh-huhs etc. All of these encourage the other person to say more. But don't just use them ad hoc when you are not really listening. It devalues them.

Demonstrate rapport. When you are truly listening and interested in the other person your body language will be congruent. There is a matching of posture, tone of voice etc. You can help by leaning forward in your chair, or by tilting your head to the side.

Summarise what the person has said. So they know you have heard them. This can be a good way to move the person forward. This is reflecting back content.

Reflect back feeling. Do you get a feeling that the person is sad, angry, etc? Let them know. "You sound a bit sad to me?"

Don't pretend. If your attention has wandered, be honest. Ask the person to repeat what they have said, rather than to guess. Your honesty will be appreciated.

Be patient. Sometimes people will be muddled, or verbose. You can help them to tell their story, but don't rush them at a pace too quick for them.

Avoid "Me too" comments. If you are paying attention to the other person and wanting to help them, avoid discussing how it affects you. Think! Will this help the other person? If not, leave it to another time. You risk hijacking the conversation.

Don't get defensive. If you are being given some feedback, listen to what the person is saying. Don't interrupt with reasons until you are very clear what the person is saying. They may have some helpful comments to make that you will miss if you interrupt their flow.

Don't formulate a response until the other person has finished speaking. You will miss out on some of the things they say.

If there is a silence, don't rush to fill it. Wait twice as long as feels comfortable for you. Give the other person time to think.

Put yourself in their shoes. Don't criticise or give advice, don't rush to fix it. See the issue from their perspective.

Be aware of your prejudices. Are there certain words (vulgar language) or people (background) that "get under your skin"? Think about what you can do to be less judgemental. Perhaps you could say that for the next 20 minutes you will concentrate on them and let e.g. their views on immigrants wash over you.

If you are listening to someone via a telephone you need to try even harder to demonstrate active listening skills. Make sure you are not typing, turning pages of a magazine, shuffling papers etc. All these things demonstrate that you are only half listening.

Eliminate external distraction. If you are in a location, which is hot, cold, noisy or uncomfortable, look to move to a different place. You can't concentrate if you are in a situation, which demands a lot of your attention.

Seek feedback on your own performance. You can improve your skills in this area through getting feedback from other people. Ask people to tell you if they felt heard. Seek out ways you can improve. It will not only be helpful with that person next time, but also when you are actively listening to other people.

Pay attention to other peoples listening skills. Notice in what ways other people make you feel listened to, and those people who don't. It will help you to choose how you can develop further.

Brought to you by Denise Taylor, Chartered Occupational Psychologist and Director of Amazing People. Denise is a careers expert who specialises in helping individuals achieve career satisfaction and to take a systematic approach to job search. To receive regular tips, direct to your inbox each month, sign up at

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