

# Listening

**Definition:** Listening is the ability to accurately receive and interpret messages in the communication process.

Are you a good listener? This is a highly valued soft skill sought by all employers. After all, people with this ability are more likely to understand tasks and projects, build strong relationships with co-workers, and also be able to solve problems and resolve conflicts.

Employers will look for you to demonstrate listening skills during job interviews. Discover why good listening skills are vital in the workplace. Also, learn how to build good listening habits while avoiding bad ones.

Types of Listening:

- **Active Listening:** It is the ability to focus completely on the speaker, comprehend and understand their information and respond effectively (either by verbal or non-verbal cues or action or execution).
- **Passive Listening:** It is an act of hearing a speaker without retaining their message.

## What is active listening?

Active listening is the ability to focus completely on a speaker, understand their message, comprehend the information and respond thoughtfully. Unlike passive listening, which is the act of hearing a speaker without retaining their message, this highly valued interpersonal communication skill ensures you're able to engage and later recall specific details without needing information repeated.

Active listeners use verbal and non-verbal techniques to show and keep their attention on the speaker. This not only supports your ability to focus, but also helps ensure the speaker can see that you are focused and engaged. Instead of thinking about and mentally rehearsing what you might say when the speaker is done, an active listener carefully considers the speaker's words and commits the information to memory.

## Active listening skills examples

Here are a variety of active listening exercises you can use to help improve your interpersonal communication skills.

Verbal active listening skills

- **Paraphrase.** Summarize the main point(s) of the message the speaker shared to show you fully understand their meaning. This will also give the speaker an opportunity to clarify vague information or expand their message.

**Example:** *"So what you're saying is, your current content management system no longer meets your teams' technical needs because it doesn't support large video files."*

- **Ask open-ended questions.** Ask questions that show you've gathered the essence of what they've shared, and guides them into sharing additional information. Make sure these questions cannot be answered with a simple "yes" or "no."

**Example:** *"You're right—the onboarding procedure could use some updating. What changes would you want to make to the process over the next six months?"*

- **Ask specific probing questions.** Ask direct questions that guide the reader to provide more details about the information they've shared or narrow down a broad subject or topic.

**Example:** *"Tell me more about your current workload. Which of these projects is the most time consuming?"*

- **Use short verbal affirmations.** Short, positive statements will help the speaker feel more comfortable and show you're engaged and able to process the information they're providing. Small verbal affirmations help you continue the conversation without interrupting the speaker or disrupting their flow.

**Example:** *"I understand." "I see." "Yes, that makes sense." "I agree."*

- **Display empathy.** Make sure the speaker understands you're able to recognize their emotions and share their feelings. By showing compassion, rather than just feeling it, you're able to connect with the speaker and begin establishing a sense of mutual trust.

**Example:** *"I'm so sorry you're dealing with this problem. Let's figure out some ways I can help."*

- **Share similar experiences.** Discussing comparable situations will not only show the speaker you've successfully interpreted their message, but it can also assist in building relationships. If the speaker has shared a problem, providing input from how you solved similar challenges is valuable to others.

**Example:** *"I had a tough time getting started with this program, too. But it gets much easier. After just a few weeks, I felt completely comfortable using all the features."*

- **Recall previously shared information.** Try to remember key concepts, ideas or other critical points the speaker has shared with you in the past. This demonstrates you're not only listening to what they're saying currently, but you're able to retain information and recall specific details.

**Example:** *"Last week you mentioned adding a more senior coordinator to help with this account, and I think that's a great idea."*

#### Non-verbal active listening skills

- **Nod.** Offering the speaker a few simple nods shows you understand what they're saying. A nod is a helpful, supportive cue, and doesn't necessarily communicate that you agree with the speaker—only that you're able to process the meaning of their message.
- **Smile.** Like a nod, a small smile encourages a speaker to continue. However, unlike a nod, it communicates you agree with their message or you're happy about what they have to say. A smile can take the place of a short verbal affirmation in helping to diffuse any tension and ensure the speaker feels comfortable.
- **Avoid distracted movements.** Being still can communicate focus. To do this, try and avoid movements like glancing at your watch or phone, audibly sighing, doodling or tapping a pen. You should also avoid exchanging verbal or non-verbal communications with others listening to the speaker. This can make the speaker feel frustrated and uncomfortable.

- **Maintain eye contact.** Always keep your eyes on the speaker and avoid looking at other people or objects in the room. Just be sure to keep your gaze natural, using nods and smiles to ensure you're encouraging them rather than making the speaker feel intimidated or uneasy.

By implementing the above verbal and non-verbal techniques into future conversations, you can work toward developing stronger relationships and retaining more information from your workplace interactions. Active listening takes practice to improve and maintain. The more you use these techniques, the more natural they'll feel.

### **Why is active listening important in the workplace?**

Whether you're seeking a new job opportunity, striving to earn a promotion or working to improve in your current role, improving your active listening skills will help you succeed. Much like critical thinking and conflict resolution, this soft skill will help increase your value as an employee.

Here are several benefits of being an active listener:

#### **It helps you build connections.**

Active listening helps others feel comfortable sharing information with you. When you demonstrate your ability to sincerely listen to what others have to say, people will be more interested in communicating with you on a regular basis. This can help open up opportunities to collaborate with others, get work done quickly or start new projects. All of these things can help lead you to success in your career.

#### **It helps you build trust.**

When people know they can speak freely to you without interruptions, judgment or unwelcome interjections, they'll be more likely to confide in you. This is especially helpful when meeting a new customer or business contact with whom you want to develop a long-term working relationship.

#### **It helps you identify and solve problems.**

Actively listening to others will help you detect challenges and difficulties others are facing, or problems within projects. The more quickly you're able to spot these issues, the sooner you can find a solution or create a plan to address it.

#### **It helps you increase your knowledge and understanding of various topics.**

Great employees are always striving to learn something new and grow their knowledge base. Because active listening helps you retain information, it will also help you better understand new topics and remember what you've learned so you can apply it in the future.

#### **It helps you avoid missing critical information.**

Because active listeners are highly engaged with the speaker, they're able to recall specific details. This is especially important when the speaker is providing instructions, training you on a new process or delivering a message you're responsible for passing along to others. The Listening Process

Listening within the work context is the process by which you gain an understanding of the needs, demands, and preferences of your stakeholders through direct interaction. A stakeholder could

be anyone from your boss, a client, customer, co-worker, subordinate, upper management, board member, interviewer, or job candidate.

There are two components to active listening in the workplace: attention and reflection.

- **Active listening** involves holding eye contact, nodding, having good posture, and mirroring the speaker's body language to show genuine interest in what they're saying. In addition to these nonverbal cues, you must also allow the speaker to finish their thought in its entirety.
- **Reflection** is the repeating and paraphrasing of what the speaker has said to show that you truly understand what they're telling you.

### What Makes a Good Listener

Good listeners always strive to fully understand what others want to communicate, particularly when the statement lacks clarity. Listening demands the attempt to decode and interpret verbal messages and nonverbal cues, like tone of voice, facial expressions, and physical posture.

Active listeners also show their curiosity by asking questions. Do this, and you will make a great impression.

Through body language and other cues, good listeners subtly communicate to the speaker that they're listening. Additionally, they encourage and welcome the thoughts, opinions, and feelings of others.

One way to demonstrate active listening is to allow the interviewer to complete each question and statement before responding. Do not interrupt and be sure that your responses genuinely answers the question. Remember that it's perfectly fine to take a few moments to frame the right response. Doing so shows that you've fully absorbed the speaker's words and are considerate enough to formulate the best answer.

### What Makes a Bad Listener

Interrupting indicates that your listening skills are underdeveloped. Likewise, responding in a way that fails to answer the question will reflect poorly on your listening skills, especially in a job interview.

Talking too much is also problematic, as proper conversations should be well balanced, with parties getting equal time to speak. Monopolizing a conversation prevents you from listening and the other party from fully expressing what they want to say. In the end, this will lead to you making a poor impression.

Looking distracted is also a quality of a poor listener. This could involve anything from avoiding eye contact to checking your phone or watch while someone else is talking.

### Steps to Effective Listening:

In today's high-tech, high-speed, high-stress world, communication is more important than ever, yet we seem to devote less and less time to really listening to one another. Genuine listening has become a rare gift—the gift of time. It helps build relationships, solve problems, ensure understanding, resolve conflicts, and improve accuracy. At work, effective listening means fewer errors and less wasted time. At home, it helps develop resourceful, self-reliant kids who can solve their own problems. Listening builds friendships and career. It saves money and marriages.

Here are ten steps to help you develop effective listening skills:

**Step 1: Face the speaker and maintain eye contact.**

Talking to someone while they scan the room, study a computer screen, or gaze out the window is like trying to hit a moving target. Do your conversational partner the courtesy of turning to face them. Look at them, even if they don't look at you. Shyness, uncertainty, shame, guilt, or other emotions, along with cultural taboos, can inhibit eye contact in some people under some circumstances. Excuse the other person, but stay focused yourself.

**Step 2: Be attentive, but relaxed.**

Now that you've made eye contact, relax. You don't have to stare fixedly at the other person. You can look away now and then and carry on like a normal person. The important thing is to be attentive. You can be attentive by being present, giving attention, applying or directing yourself, and remaining ready to serve. Mentally screen out distraction, like background activity and noise. Finally, don't be distracted by your own thoughts, feelings, or biases.

**Step 3: Keep an open mind.**

Listen without judging the other person or mentally criticizing the things she tells you. If what someone says alarms you, go ahead and feel alarmed. As soon as you indulge in judgemental bemusements, you've compromised your effectiveness as a listener. Listen without jumping to conclusion. Don't be a sentence-grabber.

**Step 4: Listen to the words and try to picture what the speaker is saying.**

Allow your mind to create a mental model of the information being communicated. Whether a literal picture, or an arrangement of abstract concepts, your brain will do necessary work if you stay focused with senses fully alert. When listening to long stretches, concentrate on, and remember, key words and phrases.

**Step 5: Don't interrupt and don't impose your 'solution'.**

Since our childhood, we have been trained in a way not to interrupt. It is considered to be rude. Interruption sends a variety of messages. It says:

"I am more important than you are."

"I don't really care what you think."

"I don't have time for your opinion."

"This is not a conversation, it is a contest, and I am going to win."

**Step 6: Wait for the speaker to pause to ask clarifying questions.**

When you don't understand something, of course you should ask the speaker to explain it to you. But, rather than interrupt, wait until the speaker pauses.

**Step 7: Ask questions only to ensure understanding.**

A conversational affront happens all the time. Our questions lead people in directions that have nothing to do with where they thought they were going. Sometimes we work our way back to the original topic, but very often we don't. When you notice that your question has led the speaker astray, take responsibility for getting the conversation back on track.

### **Step 8: Try to feel what the speaker is feeling.**

Empathy is the heart and soul of good listening. To experience empathy, you have to put yourself in the person's place and allow yourself to feel what it is like to be that person at that moment. This is not an easy thing to do. It takes energy and concentration. But, it is generous and helpful thing to do, and it facilitates communication like nothing else does.

### **Step 9: Give the speaker regular feedback.**

Show that you understand where the speaker is coming from by reflecting the speaker's feelings. If the speaker's feelings are hidden or unclear, then occasionally paraphrase the content of the message, or just nod and show your understanding through appropriate facial expression. The idea is to give the speaker some proof that you are listening, and that you are following speaker's train of thought. In task situations, regardless of whether at work or home, always restate instructions and messages to be sure you understand correctly.

### **Step 10: Pay attention to what isn't said—to nonverbal cues.**

If you exclude e-mail, the majority of direct communication is probably nonverbal. We glean a great deal of information about each other without saying a word. Even over the telephone, you can learn almost as much about a person from the tone and cadence of the speaker's voice than from anything s/he says. While listening, remember that words convey only a fraction of the message.

### **Examples of Effective Listening**

- A job candidate shares her understanding of an unclear question during an interview and asks if she has it right.
- An interviewer notices that a candidate doesn't look her in the eye when asserting a key strength.
- A customer service worker repeats a patron's problem or complaint back to her to reassure her that she has been heard.
- A counsellor nods and says, "I hear you," to encourage a client to continue to talk about their traumatic experience.
- A meeting facilitator encourages a reticent group member to share her views about a proposal.
- An interviewer asks a follow-up question to gain further clarification on the ways in which a candidate has applied a critical skill in a past job.
- A manager summarizes what her team has said during a staff meeting and asks them if she has heard things correctly.
- At the end of a performance review, an employee restates the specific areas in which his supervisor asks he improve.
- At a client meeting, a salesperson asks an open-ended question like, "What can I do to serve you better?" and encourages his counterpart to express any concerns fully.
- A nurse informs a patient that she is aware of how scared they are about their upcoming surgery and says she is there for her.
- An employee pays careful attention to a speaker at a training session and asks clarifying questions on the information they are receiving.