

listening

*to take notice of and act on what someone says;
respond to advice or a request*

Listening is one of the most important skills you can have. How well you listen has a major impact on your job effectiveness, and on the quality of your relationships with others. For instance:

*We listen to obtain information. *We listen to understand. *We listen for enjoyment. *We listen to learn.

Given all the listening that we do, you would think we'd be good at it! In fact, most of us are not, and research suggests that we only remember between 25 percent and 50 percent of what we hear, as described by Edgar Dale's Cone of Experience. That means that when you talk to your boss, colleagues, customers, or spouse for 10 minutes, they pay attention to less than half of the conversation. Turn it around and it reveals that when you are receiving directions or being presented with information, you aren't hearing the whole message either. You hope the important parts are captured in your 25-50 percent, but what if they're not?

Clearly, listening is a skill that we can all benefit from improving. By becoming a better listener, you can improve your productivity, as well as your ability to influence, persuade and negotiate. What's more, you'll avoid conflict and misunderstandings. All of these are necessary for workplace success!

Active listening. The way to improve your listening skills is to practice "active listening." This is when you make a conscious effort to hear not only the words that another person is saying but, more importantly, the complete message being communicated. In order to do this you must pay attention to the other person very carefully.

To enhance your listening skills, you need to let the other person know that you are listening to what she is saying. Ask yourself if you've ever been engaged in a conversation when you wondered if the other person was listening to what you were saying. You wonder if your message is getting across, or if it's even worthwhile continuing to speak. It feels like talking to a brick wall and it's something you want to avoid.

There are five key active listening techniques you can use to help you become a more effective listener:

Pay Attention Give the speaker your undivided attention, and acknowledge the message. Recognize that non-verbal communication also "speaks" loudly. Look at the speaker directly. Don't mentally prepare a rebuttal!

Show That You're Listening Use your own body language and gestures to show that you are engaged. Nod occasionally. Smile and use other facial expressions. Make sure that your posture is open and interested. Encourage the speaker to continue with small verbal comments like yes, and "uh huh."

Provide Feedback Our personal filters, assumptions, judgments, and beliefs can distort what we hear. As a listener, your role is to understand what is being said. Reflect on what has been said by paraphrasing. "What I'm hearing is... ." and "Sounds like you are saying... ." are great ways to reflect back. Ask questions to clarify certain points. "What do you mean when you say... ." Summarize the speaker's comments periodically.

*Tip: If you find yourself responding emotionally to what someone said, say so.
"What I thought you just said is XXX. Is that what you meant?"*

Defer Judgment Interrupting is a waste of time. It frustrates the speaker and limits full understanding of the message. Allow the speaker to finish each point before asking questions. Don't interrupt with counter arguments.

Respond Appropriately Active listening is designed to encourage respect and understanding. You are gaining information and perspective. You add nothing by attacking the speaker or otherwise putting her down. Be candid, open and honest in your response. Assert your opinions respectfully. Treat the other person in a way that you think she would want to be treated.

Tip: Good communication skills require a high level of self-awareness. Understanding and adapting your own personal style of communicating will go a long way toward helping you to create good and lasting impressions with others.



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