What Is Active Listening?

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Are you a good listener at work? You might think you are because you put away distractions, stay quiet, and nod your head when someone is talking to you. You might even repeat back your conversation partner’s main points to demonstrate that you’ve heard and absorbed them. These are all smart things to do, but they can still leave the speaker feeling unheard or even dismissed.

Active listening involves mastering a whole host of other skills — from learning how to read subtle cues to controlling your own emotional response. It requires both empathy and self-awareness.

In this article, I’m going to explain what active listening looks and feels like, and how to improve this essential communication skill.

What Is Active Listening?

Active listening is when you not only hear what someone is saying, but also attune to their thoughts and feelings. It turns a conversation into an active, non-competitive, two-way interaction.

Robin Abrahams and Boris Groysberg from Harvard Business School describe active listening as having three aspects: cognitive, emotional, and behavioral. Here’s how they define each aspect in their article, "How to Become a Better Listener":

- **Cognitive**: Paying attention to all the information, both explicit and implicit, that you are receiving from the other person, comprehending, and integrating that information
• **Emotional:** Staying calm and compassionate during the conversation, including managing any emotional reactions (annoyance, boredom) you might experience

• **Behavioral:** Conveying interest and comprehension verbally and nonverbally

They go on to write, “Getting good at active listening is a lifetime endeavor. However, even minor improvements can make a big difference in your listening effectiveness.”

This metaphor from leadership consultants Jack Zenger and Joseph Folkman might also be helpful in understanding what active listening is: “You’re not a sponge merely absorbing information. Instead, think of yourself more like a trampoline that gives the speaker’s thoughts energy, acceleration, height, and amplification,” they write. Here’s how to become a so-called trampoline listener.

**How to Practice Active Listening**

1. **Understand your default listening style.**

One of the misconceptions around this soft skill is that there is one way to do it — you’re either listening or you’re not. But, as authors Rebecca Minehart, Benjamin Symon, and Laura Rock write, there are different styles that you need to be able to shift between, depending on the speaker’s needs.

First, it’s important to reflect and ask, “How do I usually listen?”

Minehart and her coauthors, in their work in the health care field, observed four distinct listening styles:

• **A task-oriented listener** is focused on efficiency, and shapes a
conversation around the transfer of important information.

- **An analytical listener** aims to analyze a problem from a neutral starting point.
- **A relational listener** seeks to build connection and understand and respond to the emotions underlying a message.
- **A critical listener** typically judges both the content of the conversation and the speaker themselves.

You may, out of habit, default to one of these modes in most situations. And that’s ok. The key is to develop the awareness to understand which mode you typically use.

Knowing your default style can help you make a conscious, deliberate choice about whether to use that style or choose a different mode that’s more appropriate for the specific situation.

2. **Make an active, conscious choice about how to best listen.**

To determine how to best listen in a particular conversation, ask yourself these questions:

**Why do I need to listen right now?**

Reflecting on the goals of each particular conversation — both what you want and what the other person needs — can help you determine the best way to listen at that moment. You may realize that a different mode (or combination of modes) would be better. Is a family member in need of emotional support or is a coworker hoping for an honest critique? Using empathy to think about what the other person might need from your conversation can provide clues as to how you can best listen at that particular moment.
Who is the focus of attention in the conversation?

Sharing your own personal stories can help establish connections and validation, but it’s important to avoid steering the conversation away from the speaker so they don’t feel unheard or dismissed. All too often, we prevent ourselves from truly being able to listen deeply because of our own insecurities or head-trips — like emotional discomfort or being worried about how confident or prepared we might seem to the other person. With practice, quieting that internal monologue will leave more space to hear what the other person is actually saying.

Why am I talking?

While we all sometimes start rehearsing our response while the other person is talking, it’s counterproductive to effective communication. This question reminds us to listen without an agenda so that we can process what the other person is saying. Remind yourself that you can form your thoughts once you’ve fully heard what they have to say.

At the same time, you don’t want to be distracted by your attempts to be present. As Abrahams and Groysberg write, “Eye contact, attentive posture, nodding and other nonverbal cues are important, but it’s hard to pay attention to someone’s words when you’re busy reminding yourself to make regular eye contact. If these sorts of behaviors would require a significant habit change, you can instead, let people know at the beginning of a conversation that you’re on the non-reactive side, and ask for their patience and understanding.”

At some point in the conversation, you’ll likely need to share your perspective but, for now, take in what they have to say. Avoid hijacking the interaction. It’s far better to ask questions — it makes the other person feel listened to and increases your comprehension. If you can stay present
without judgment or an agenda, you have a better chance of truly hearing what’s being said.

**Am I still listening?**

One of my worst listening habits is deciding that I understand what the person’s point is before they finish talking and tuning out. I might even give in to the temptation to multitask. My logic? I’ve already heard their main ideas, there’s no harm in checking my email real quick. Wrong! It’s not enough to put down obvious distractions (mobile phones) at the beginning of the conversation. You need to stay focused.

And, remember it’s not just devices or other external things that distract us. It might be your own thoughts or emotions. So if you find your mind wandering, bring your attention back. I find a mantra helpful: “I can deal with that later. Right now, I’m here.” [Meditation](https://hbr.org/2024/01/what-is-active-listening) can improve your ability to do this as well.

If you do find your attention pulled away, and you missed something the other person said, don’t try to forge ahead as if you know what they’re talking about (another bad habit of mine). It’s ok to interrupt them and say: “I think I missed what you just said. Could you repeat your last point?”

**What am I missing?**

Remember, active listening is much more than nodding, saying “Mm-hmm,” and parroting back the person’s points. Speaking up and [asking good questions](https://hbr.org/2024/01/what-is-active-listening) tells the other person that you’ve not only heard what they have to say, but you understood it well enough to want additional information.

It can also profoundly change the conversation if you pay attention to verbal and nonverbal cues that might reveal whether the speaker is saying more
than what appears at face value. They may be uncertain about being vulnerable or not even realize they are expressing unexamined emotions. Asking questions based on what may have been left unsaid can make the other person feel supported and lead to insight for both of you.

Here's an example.

An employee says, "I'm worried about my presentation for the board meeting."

You might naturally try to reassure and relate by saying, "Oh you're doing great. It took me years before I could present without being nervous."

Unfortunately, while you're attempting to make a connection here, this response dismisses their concern without inviting more details. It switches the focus to you and ignores what might be a much more important underlying issue behind their statement.

To show that you're listening in a deeper way, you could say, "I was nervous when I started presenting, too. What's worrying you?"

Big difference, right?

The Imperative for Senior Leaders

If you're a senior leader, where much more is at stake for the organization, it's wise to ask one additional question when approaching a conversation, "Am I in an information bubble?"

Many leaders find themselves trapped in such a "bubble" because employees are afraid of questioning, challenging, second-guessing or disappointing them. They may spin information in a positive light to avoid tough conversations about problems in the organization. As Keven Sharer,
former CEO and chairman of Amgen said, in this article about how leaders can become better listeners, “If you walk around and see a bunch of smiling faces and say, ‘Gee, everybody looks happy to me,’ you’re not listening.”

Leaders must develop the discipline to listen purely for comprehension — without an agenda, distraction, or judgment — and actively seek input from all levels and ranks. Also, creating an atmosphere that prioritizes trust over hierarchy means that ideally anyone can feel comfortable sharing information — good or bad. Signals of danger or opportunity can come from unexpected places, so you have to create opportunities and channels for feedback, make sure people feel comfortable speaking up, and be present and available to hear what they have to say.

... By asking the above questions anytime you enter a conversation that requires listening (and let's face it, every conversation does!), you’ll improve the chances that not only will you hear and glean valuable information but that the other person will feel heard. Research shows that those who engage in active listening are seen as more competent, likable, and trustworthy by others.

But it’s not just good for you and the other person, research has shown that it also benefits the organization. Active listening behaviors have been positively related to employees’ perceptions of support from their managers, which in turn predicts higher levels of job satisfaction and organizational commitment.

With all of these upsides, it’s clear that the investment of time and effort in improving your listening skills will pay off.