



Unit 1

The Basics of Active Listening

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

- ✓ Define active listening and its key components
- ✓ Identify ways to become a better listener
- ✓ Use body language to reflect a positive listening attitude
- ✓ Understand the difference between sympathy and empathy, and when each is appropriate
- ✓ Create a listening mindset using framing, positive intent, and focus

Unit 1

The Basics of Active Listening

What is Active Listening?

Active listening means that we try to understand things from the speaker's point of view. It includes letting the speaker know that we are listening and that we have understood what was said. This is not the same as **hearing**, which is a physical process, where sound enters the eardrum and messages are passed to the brain. Active listening can be described as an attitude that leads to listening for shared understanding.

When we make a decision to listen for total meaning, we listen for the content of what is being said as well as the attitude behind what is being said. Is the speaker happy, angry, excited, sad...or something else entirely?

Responding to Feelings

The content (the words spoken) is one thing, but the way that people feel really gives full value to the message. Responding to the speaker's feelings adds an extra dimension of listening. Are they disgusted and angry or in love and excited? Perhaps they are ambivalent! These are all feelings that you can reply to in your part of the conversation.

Reading Cues

Active listening means that we are also very conscious of the non-verbal aspects of the conversation.

- What are the speaker's facial expressions, hand gestures, and posture telling us?
- Is their voice loud or shaky?
- Are they stressing certain points?
- Are they mumbling or having difficulty finding the words they want to say?
- Does their body language indicate that they are uncomfortable or feeling like their message is not being heard?

Active listeners watch for these cues and adjust their approach accordingly. Sometimes just taking one step back, or ceasing talking and getting the other person to talk to you instead, will be all it takes to ease the tension.

Demonstrating Listening

When you are listening to someone, these techniques will show a speaker that you are paying attention, providing you are genuine in using them.

Physical indicators include making eye contact, nodding your head from time to time, and leaning into the conversation.

You can also give **verbal cues** or use phrases such as “Uh-huh,” “Go on,” “Really!” and, “Then what?”

You can ask **questions** for clarification or use **summarizing statements**. Examples:

- “Do you mean they were charging \$4.00 for just a cup of coffee?”
- “So after you got a cab, got to the store, and found the right sales clerk, what happened then?”

Identifying Good Listeners

Write down the names of three people that you consider good listeners.

Do any of the three people fit into one of these categories?

| Name of Person | Someone That You Like | Someone That You Love | Someone That You Respect |
|-----------------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| | | | |
| | | | |
| | | | |

If you wish to be liked, loved, or respected, how is it that you need to behave?

Tips for Becoming a Better Listener

Review the list of listening tips below. Then, rank the list from one to seven, with one representing the least useful tip and seven representing the least useful tip.

| Active Listening Tip | Rating |
|---|--------|
| <p>Make a decision to listen. Close your mind to clutter and noise and look at the person speaking with you. Give them your undivided attention.</p> | |
| <p>Don't interrupt people. Make it a habit to let them finish what they are saying. Respect that they have thoughts they are processing and speaking about, and wait to ask questions or make comments until they have finished.</p> | |
| <p>Keep your eyes focused on the speaker and your ears tuned to their voice. Don't let your eyes wander around the room, just in case your attention does too.</p> | |
| <p>Carry a notebook or start a conversation file on your computer. Write down all the discussions that you have in a day. Capture the subject, who spoke more (were you listening or doing a lot of the talking?), what you learned in the discussion, as well as the who, what, when, where, why, and how aspects of it. Once you have conducted this exercise eight to ten times, you will be able to see at what level your listening skills are.</p> | |
| <p>Don't be afraid to ask the other person what they want from the conversation. Are they looking for advice, validation, an opinion, or just an opportunity to vent? Knowing what they want will help you structure your listening approach to effectively communicate with them.</p> | |
| <p>Ask a few questions throughout the conversation. When you ask, people will know that you are listening to them, and that you are interested in what they have to say. Your ability to summarize and paraphrase will also demonstrate that you heard them.</p> | |
| <p>When you demonstrate good listening skills, they tend to be infectious. If you want others to communicate well, you have to set a high example.</p> | |

Pre-Assignment Review

Based on this inventory, where do you think you are strongest in terms of active listening?

Based on this inventory, where do you think you are weakest in terms of active listening?

What is one thing that you could do to improve your listening skills?

Body Language Basics

When you are listening to others, it's important that you pay attention to what your body is saying and ensure that it reflects a positive listening attitude. Do you lean forward slightly to indicate that you are listening? Do you avoid the temptation to roll your eyes or make other negative gestures?

In significant (though often misinterpreted) research, **Albert Mehrabian** found that when it came to discussing emotions, only 7% of the speaker's message was communicated by words, and that tone of

voice was responsible for about 38% of the meaning and body language about 55%. This means that the words themselves played only a very small part in conveying meaning. In other conversations (not the ones about emotions), we know that tone of voice and body language have a large impact on those messages, too.

(Source: *Silent Messages* by Albert Mehrabian)

Test your knowledge

List some examples of what positive body language looks like.

What are some things that might ruin a conversation that is proceeding nicely?

Attitude is Everything!

Understanding Sympathy and Empathy

As active listeners, we want to show others that we are listening while they are speaking. In the last session, we talked about how our body language can help (or hinder) us in sending the right message. Our attitude is another important part of a positive listening attitude.

It's important to show respect and empathy while the other person is speaking. **Empathy** means understanding the other person's feelings and recognizing what those feelings mean, including their context. (Have you ever heard the metaphor that in order to understand someone fully, you need to walk a mile in their shoes?)

Empathy is different from **sympathy**, which means feeling sorrow or pity for someone. While in some situations sympathy is appropriate (for example, when someone is discussing the loss of a loved one), it can often mean that you are judging the other person, which interferes with receiving the listener's message.

So how can we show empathy to others? Try to:

- Practice good listening skills, like focusing 100% on the other person and showing interest through your body language.
- Use open questions rather than closed questions or statements. For example, instead of saying, "That must make you feel really sad," try asking, "How did that make you feel?"
- If appropriate and true, agree with what the other person is saying. For example, you might say, "I can understand why you would feel hurt."
- If you can't agree with what they are saying, or understand where they are coming from, try to validate their statement with a response like, "I am sure that others would feel the same way."
- Let them know that you support them. Ask how you can help them or what they would like you to do. If they just want you to listen, respect their wishes and refrain from giving them advice.
- If appropriate and true, offer encouragement. Telling someone that they are handling a difficult situation well shows them that you are on their side.
- Avoid saying, "I know exactly how you feel." A more appropriate way to express this feeling might be to say, "I can empathize with how difficult it is to lose someone. My mother passed away just last month."

Creating the Right Mindset

Establishing Your Frame of Reference

A frame of reference is a way in which we judge other people. We all make judgments about people but in order to really get the meaning of what's going on, we need to be able to suspend those judgments and let meanings come to us unfettered. A listener's ability to suspend their frame of reference is a critical and important skill because it can build their credibility and make them a more effective communicator.

Your frame of reference is made up of your beliefs, assumptions, values, feeling, judgments, emotions, advice, moods, thoughts, biases, and stress levels at any given moment. Because your frame of reference

is so personal and so deeply embedded, it is very difficult to practice suspending it on a regular basis. We all often interpret reality from our own vantage point and react in a self-serving manner.

Reframing the Situation

We have to learn to take others' points of view and feelings, as well as our own, into consideration. This is what we refer to as **reframing**: seeing things from a different point of view.

How can we do this? Try to:

- Put others before yourself
- Check things out before jumping to conclusions, making assumptions, or reacting emotionally
- Give others the benefit of the doubt

Suspension of belief is especially appropriate when others need to be understood in order for their tension or stress to be defused.

Establishing Positive Intent

When you are listening to others, it's always best to do so with what we call **positive intent**. Positive intent includes the idea that you have good reason for what you are saying and doing, and so do other people. This can help you suspend judgment, listen fairly, and get the real meaning behind the message that you're hearing. In order to demonstrate your positive intent, avoid making negative assumptions and statements, and focus on the future instead of the past.

Another aspect of positive intent, which also relates to reframing, is to accept **that not everyone is like you**. People have strengths, and they also have limitations. Using empathy to connect with others can help you see the situation from their point of view and suspend judgment.

Maintaining Focus

In today's fast-paced world, it can be hard to give someone our undivided attention. Luckily, active listening techniques can help us develop our focus.

To help you maintain your focus, **use paraphrasing techniques and probing**. These tools will also help you make sure that you're understanding the speaker correctly and receiving the intended message.

In addition, when someone is speaking to you, make a point of **focusing on what they are saying**. Ask questions to make sure that they know you are listening and to keep you engaged. If possible, turn away from distractions like telephones and computer screens. You may even want to put your cell phone on vibrate and stow it in your purse, pocket, or briefcase.

Being Genuine

Being genuine is an essential part of active listening, authentic relationships, and good communication. **Genuine is being real**; not pretending to be someone or something else. For example, although it's important to try to empathize with others, sometimes you just won't get where people are coming from. If you agree with everything that they say, and it's clear that you don't actually feel that way, your credibility will be lost and your relationship with the other person will be damaged.

So how do you be genuine while being tactful and respectful? One easy technique is to frame validation statements in a general way. Instead of saying, "I can see where you're coming from," you might say, "I'm sure a lot of people would feel the same way." With a general statement, you're providing support and empathy without compromising your position on the issue.

Your strategy also depends on your relationship with the other person. If the person who is speaking is a close friend, you can be a bit more challenging and direct than you would be with an acquaintance. For example, let's say that you are listening to someone talk about how they were disciplined at work for handing in an incomplete report. The fault is on everyone else: the accounting person who was late delivering the figures, the manager who didn't give them enough time, and even their slow, outdated computer.

If this person is a colleague whom you are not close with, your best approach may be to use active listening techniques and general validation statements. If it is someone that you are close with, you may want to ask challenging questions and encourage them to think about their role in the situation. Remember, we described active listening as an attitude that leads to listening for shared understanding. Gently challenging the speaker can lead to a deeper, more thought-provoking discussion – if that is what the speaker is looking for.

Test your knowledge

Role Plays

- Your best friend has been in a relationship for five years. This relationship has been on and off, with a lot of ugly fights and dramatic behavior, but neither person wants to end the relationship. Your friend is now knocking on your door after the latest argument. Your friend is quite upset.
- You are part of a team of four people. Your newest member, Riley, is a superstar. She has exceeded all of her goals and even picked up some extra work for other team members. However, Riley has just received a poor performance review and is looking for advice.
- A customer calls you with a complaint about the VacuuBot 3000. The product is supposed to have an eight-hour battery life but the customer is only getting four hours from each charge.

