



Unit 4

Developing Active Listening Skills

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
- ✓ Be genuine in your communications
- ✓ Understand the communication process
- ✓ Ask questions, probe for information, and use paraphrasing techniques
- ✓ Build relationships to create an authentic communication experience
- ✓ Identify common listening problems and solutions

Unit 4

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.

- Ñ What are the speaker's facial expressions, hand gestures, and posture telling us?
- Ñ Is their voice loud or shaky?
- Ñ Are they stressing certain points?
- Ñ Are they mumbling or having difficulty finding the words they want to say?
- Ñ 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:

- N “Do you mean they were charging \$4.00 for just a cup of coffee?”
- N “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 most 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:

- Ñ Practice good listening skills, like focusing 100% on the other person and showing interest through your body language.
- Ñ 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?"
- Ñ 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."
- Ñ 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."
- Ñ 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.
- Ñ If appropriate and true, offer encouragement. Telling someone that they are handling a difficult situation well shows them that you are on their side.
- Ñ 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:

- Ñ Put others before yourself
- Ñ Check things out before jumping to conclusions, making assumptions, or reacting emotionally
- Ñ 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

- Ñ 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.
- Ñ 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.
- Ñ 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.

Notes

The Communication Process

Often, what the listener is saying isn't what we hear. Messages go through a complicated system of filters and outside influences.



As active listeners, we need to understand these possible influences, and to account for them.

The Ladder of Inference

One common and dangerous trap is what Chris Argyris calls a **ladder of inference**: a common mental pathway of increasing abstraction that often leads to assumptions and misguided beliefs.

For example, let's say that you are giving a presentation to your company's senior management. One manager (we'll call him Stephen) is checking his BlackBerry, answering messages, and clearly disengaged from your work. At the end of your comprehensive presentation, his only comment is to ask you for more detailed information, in a report sent via e-mail.

You know that if you do prepare that information, it's unlikely that Stephen will read it. Plus, all the details are in your presentation. As you start brooding over this, you remind yourself that Stephen has never shown any respect for you and that he did not want to hire you for this team. Clearly, Stephen doesn't know what he is doing, and by the time you take your seat at the table, you are thinking about Stephen as a big jerk. You've also decided you are not going to create a special report for him; you'll just send him a summary of your presentation, because he won't read it anyways.

In those few seconds before you take your seat, you have climbed all the way up the ladder! You did start out with observable data (Stephen is at the presentation), and then added his behavior (distracted by his BlackBerry and answering messages). But then you added some meaning of your own: that Stephen doesn't respect you and didn't want to hire you. Finally, you label Stephen as a jerk.

This process tends to take place very quickly, and most people aren't even aware that they climb the rungs of this ladder in their head. The only visible parts for anyone else are the observable events at the bottom of the ladder and anything that you demonstrate at the top, where you've made your decision about what to do. The discussion going on inside your mind (which you probably can't or won't verbalize) and your journey up the rungs of the ladder are not visible to anyone else.

We can climb these ladders of inference very easily. The more I believe that Stephen does not support me, the more likely it is that I am going to notice his unsupportive behavior in the future. This becomes a reflexive loop, where my beliefs will influence the data I am going to select the next time I see Stephen.

There is naturally also a reflexive loop here for Stephen, where he will react to my antagonism. He is quite likely working on some rungs on his own ladder, and before long, we could find it impossible to work together.

So how do we try to step off of the ladder? To start, consider that what you witnessed in the meeting was Stephen dealing with something else. Perhaps he was bored or distracted, or perhaps he was checking his BlackBerry because of an emergency he had to deal with. Maybe he was interested in your presentation, but the fact that you didn't print a copy off for everyone led to his request for something that he could look back on and refer to.

As a professional, it might have been best for you to find out if there really is a problem that you and Stephen need to work out. What would happen if you asked him about the meeting? What if you asked him for some feedback on your work and the efforts that you are putting in to your projects? Would you hear his answer?

Reflection: Using Your Own Experiences as a Resource

You can learn a great deal by increasing your awareness and giving some thought to situations where you are on both ends of the communication spectrum (as a communicator and as a listener). Try writing out an exchange with a co-worker, a troubling event, or even the scenario with Stephen above. Then, set it aside for a week before you look at it. This will give you the time and distance needed to review it clearly.

Asking Questions

Active listening is a two-way communication process. Knowing what questions to ask, and how to ask them, is an essential skill for an active listener.

Closed questions can be answered with a single word or two or a simple yes or no. They can begin the closing process in a conversation, or provide confirmation of a detail, but they don't usually lead to gathering more information. Where most people need more practice is asking the **open question**, where the listener is given a chance to explain, describe how they feel about an issue, or offer suggestions.

Open questions give us more information because:

- Ñ They encourage other people to talk
- Ñ We get opinions and ideas from others
- Ñ They can help us determine if people have interpreted what we say correctly
- Ñ They can help us arrive at consensus much more readily

Open questions typically begin with a variation of the five W's (who, what, when, where, why) or ask how. Good open questions include:

- Ñ “What is your opinion?”
- Ñ “How do you think we should solve the problem?”
- Ñ “What would you do in my shoes?”
- Ñ “Tell me more about...”

Note: Be very careful about “**why**” questions. All too often these questions sound like accusations, and the listener immediately becomes defensive.

Some other good questions can include:

- Ñ What happened next?
- Ñ What do you think we can do about this?
- Ñ What would you like me to stop doing?
- Ñ What can I do to help you?
- Ñ Supposing we were to...?
- Ñ Can you help me understand where you're coming from?

Probing Techniques

Many people are better at presenting their own point of view than they are at drawing out information from others. **Probing techniques** can help you draw out information from the individual and help you understand their side of the conversation.

One of the most common ways of probing is to ask an **open question**, such as:

- Ñ “Can you describe that more clearly?”
- Ñ “Would you give me a specific example of what you mean?”
- Ñ “What do you think we should do?”

The difficulty here is that if you ask too many of these probing questions, the other person begins to feel like they are under interrogation. Be thoughtful about what and how you ask. Consider how many probes you really need to offer.

A second, very effective way of probing is a **pause**. Stop talking. Let the other person fill the silence.

A third way is to ask a **reflective, echoing, or mirroring question**. For example, let's say the person has just said, “What I really want is fairer vacation policies.” You may respond by just reflecting back to them, “Fairer?” The reflective question usually provides you with an expanded answer without you needing to ask more questions. Of course, it is best used in conjunction with a pause.

A fourth method that is particularly useful to make certain you are clear about what the individual has said is **paraphrasing** what has just been said, in your own words. (We'll discuss paraphrasing more in the next session.)

The last method, most often used as a conversation is winding down, is the **summary question**. Example: “You have tried ignoring the scent of your colleague’s cologne, you have talked with him about how it affects your allergies, and you have tried shutting your door to keep the scent from your workspace. None of these has worked and now you are asking me to intervene. Have I got it right?”

Paraphrasing Techniques

What is Paraphrasing?

Paraphrasing techniques can help you ensure that you’re getting the speaker’s message accurately and completely. Paraphrasing can also help build the relationship, since it shows the sender that you are trying to understand what they are saying.

Paraphrasing is not:

- Ñ Repeating everything that the person says
- Ñ Acting like a parrot and repeating everything verbatim
- Ñ An opportunity to express judgment (by speaking in a sarcastic tone, for example)

To paraphrase well, you should:

- Ñ Paraphrase only when you need clarification or confirmation
- Ñ Put the statement in your own words, rather than using the speaker’s words
- Ñ Use introductory statements like, “Do you mean...” or, “What I’m hearing is...”
- Ñ Refrain from making judgments, injecting your own thoughts, and offering your opinion

Echoing Techniques

Another excellent technique is echoing, also known as reflective or mirroring questions. (We discussed these types of questions briefly in the last session.) With this technique, you choose a word (or several words) from the person’s statement and repeat it. You can also use stems like:

- Ñ Really?
- Ñ Is it/are they?
- Ñ About...?
- Ñ What did she do?

Building Relationships

Building Common Ground

Setting the Stage

It can be difficult to have a meaningful conversation without a sense of mutual trust, respect, and an understanding of the relationship between the speaker and the listener. Understanding what rapport is, and how to create it, is the first step to creating an authentic conversation.

About Rapport

Rapport has been defined as a sense of mutual understanding, respect, and friendliness. It is the presence of a co-operative relationship based on trust and honesty.

Rapport means showing someone that you understand and respect them as a human being and that you support them. This doesn't mean that you have to agree with everything that they say, but you can understand where they are coming from and why they believe in particular things.

It is important to understand when it is appropriate to create rapport and how deeply you want it to go. Let's say that you are a telephone customer service representative. You probably want to create a good rapport to help the customer solve their problem, but since your interaction will be short, you don't need to get to a deeply personal level. And, if you are negotiating, you might need to break rapport in order to make the best decision.

Finding Common Ground

Whether you are in a customer service role or a manager about to have a conversation with one of your staff, finding common ground helps to establish rapport. Some of us really struggle with small talk, but you will find that it is a helpful skill in finding common ground – something you share with the other person.

In the customer example, if they call to tell you that a product has broken and they are frustrated, simply saying, "I understand. I don't like it when things break either. It's really annoying. Let me see how I can

help you," lets the person know that you get frustrated when things are broken. If you went to the same school, both love animals, or have the same favorite restaurant, these things help to establish common ground and provide a starting place for further conversations.

Using Humor

A funny anecdote or a joke can ease tensions, especially if the person is having difficulty expressing themselves. As well, shared laughter can go a long way towards building common ground. However, be sensitive when trying to lighten the mood. Never make fun of someone's problems or feelings. If you're second-guessing whether to tell a joke, you should probably keep it to yourself.

NLP Tips and Tricks

Neuro linguistic programming (NLP) concepts can help sensitize us to the speaker's state and build deeper relationships. NLP suggests that rather than simply making assumptions based on body language, we can use body language as cues to help us adjust our behavior to better connect with others and understand their thinking processes.

Let's look at some different states of mind and how we might recognize them.

Associated or Dissociated

Is the person you are communicating with involved in the conversation or somewhere else? Do they see themselves from an internal perspective or as if they were outside themselves?

People who are **associated** (tuned into things):

- Ñ Usually lean forward
- Ñ Are often animated, using gestures and imagery
- Ñ Might include more emotions in the conversation

People who are **dissociated** (tuned out of themselves or the conversation):

- Ñ Usually lean backwards
- Ñ Use fewer gestures and practical language
- Ñ Often have a more objective approach

Both of these states can be useful. If you are facilitating mediation between team staff members who are arguing, and where you must be neutral, a dissociated state might be useful. However, if you're actively listening to someone explain a problem, then an associated state will be more appropriate.

Towards or Away From

This state reflects whether we are looking towards what we want to achieve, or away from the goal and at a problem that we are facing. In the **Away From** state, we are often tense and negative, thinking of the challenges that we are facing. In a **Towards** state, people are typically more relaxed with positive body language.

Match/Mismatch

We all have a natural tendency towards antagonism or co-operation and friendliness. Those who naturally **match** the environment around them can also often easily create rapport. They might naturally fall into the same body language patterns as the person that they are communicating with. They almost always try to build up and support people.

People who try to find the differences in others usually fall into body language and speech patterns that are opposite of the person that they are communicating with. They might use expressions like:

- Ñ At odds with
- Ñ On the other hand
- Ñ Devil's advocate

This is referred to as a **mismatch** state.

Getting Over Listening Roadblocks

Problems and Solutions

On paper, active listening sounds quite simple. Give the speaker your undivided attention; use body language, cues, and questions to show that you are listening; and confirm understanding through additional questions, paraphrasing, echoing, and probing.

However, plenty of things can get in the way of active listening. Distractions, our mind wandering, the speaker getting off track, and our own judgments can interfere with the message that the speaker is sending and our active listening efforts.

Test your knowledge

For each problem, outline some solutions.

You get distracted during the conversation and start doing other things.

Your mind wanders and you realize you've missed everything that the other person has said.

You start judging the person and evaluating what they are saying.

You interrupt the speaker and offer your opinion or advice.

The speaker goes off on a tangent and you don't understand the point they are making.

Further Reading:

- ✓ *Bowden, Mark. Winning Body Language: Control the Conversation, Command Attention, and Convey the Right Message without Saying a Word. McGraw-Hill, 2010.*
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- ✓ *Petersen, James C. Why Don't We Listen Better? Communicating and Connecting Relationships. Petersen Publications, 2008.*
- ✓ *Stone, Douglas, Bruce Patton, and Sheila Heen. Difficult Conversations (10th Anniversary Edition). Penguin Books, 2010.*