



Developing your skills



Listening Skills

Given all the listening we do, you would think we'd be good at it! In fact we're not. In fact, we remember a dismal 25-50% of what we hear. This means that when you're receiving information from students, you may not hear the whole message. You hope the important parts are captured in your 25- 50%, but what if its not? Clearly, listening is a skill that we can all benefit from improving. By becoming a better listener, you will improve your ability to influence, persuade and negotiate with students, while avoiding conflict and misunderstandings. Therefore, this section aims to help you understand listening skills and use them when engaging with potential students.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO REALLY LISTEN?

Active listening means thinking and acting in ways that connect you with the speaker. While active listening usually happens naturally when we are very interested in what someone is saying, we can also choose to listen actively whenever we want to maximise the quality of our listening, both in terms of the effect it has on us and the effect it has on those we are speaking to.

To enhance your listening skills, you need to let the other person know that you are listening to what he or she is saying. To understand the importance of this, 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 to continue speaking. It feels like talking to a brick wall and it's something you want to avoid. Acknowledgement can be something as simple as a nod of the head.

You aren't necessarily agreeing with the person, you are simply indicating that you are listening. Using body language and other signs to acknowledge you are listening also reminds you to pay attention and not let your mind wander.

You should also try to respond to the speaker in a way that will both encourage him or her to continue speaking, so that you can get the information you need. While nodding says you're interested, an occasional question or comment to recap what has been said communicates that you understand the message as well. Real listening is an active process that has three basic steps.

- Hearing: Hearing just means listening enough to catch what the speaker is saying.
- Understanding: The next part of listening happens when you take what you have heard and understand it in your own way.
- Judging: After you understand what the speaker has said, think about whether it makes sense. Do you believe what you have heard?

GOALS FOR THE CONVERSATION

Skilled listeners think about their purposes for having a conversation and make their choices based upon those purposes. Valid business purposes for a conversation include:

To exchange information

In most conversations with potential students, you will be talking about their needs and concern as well as providing them with all the information they require

To build working relationships

Developing and maintaining a positive personal relationship can be one of the most



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important components of your conversations with students.

To make you and the student feel good

Having an enjoyable and/or productive conversation can make you feel valuable, respected, and even liked.

KEY ELEMENTS OF ACTIVE LISTENING

There are several key elements of active listening. They all help you ensure that you hear the other person, and that the other person knows you are hearing what they are saying.

Pay attention

Give the speaker your undivided attention and acknowledge their message. Recognise that what is not said also speaks loudly.

- Look at the speaker directly.
- Put aside distracting thoughts.
- Avoid being distracted.
- "Listen" to the speaker's body language.
- Refrain from side conversations.

Give them time to explain

Wait until they finish making their points before you speak. Don't interrupt, even to agree with them, and don't jump in with your own suggestions before they explain what they have already done, plan to do, or have thought about doing. This includes being aware enough to stop yourself from doing any of the following:

- making critical or judgmental faces or sounds;
- trying to "fix" their problem with a quick suggestion;
- interrogating them to make them answer a question you have about their situation;
- criticising them for getting into their situation;
- telling them what you would do or would have done in the past.

All of these responses interrupt what they are saying or change the direction of the

conversation before they have an opportunity to get to their point. The first thing people bring up when they have something to say often ISN'T always the central point they will eventually make, whether they know it or not. Listening carefully for a while first gives the talker and the listener both a chance to develop an understanding about what exactly the issue is.

After you think they have reached a stopping point, you can ask something like "*may I make a suggestion?*" before you start to make sure they are ready to give up the floor.

Show that you are listening

Use your own body language and gestures to convey your attention.

- Nod occasionally.
- Smile and use other facial expressions.
- Make sure your posture is open and inviting.
- Encourage the speaker to continue with small verbal comments

Be aware of when to speak and when to listen

Unless you are listening to someone who is giving a speech, custom dictates that you take turns (not necessarily equal turns) talking and listening. There are a few rules of thumb when deciding whether to talk or listen.

- Never assume you should talk more: Although it's counterintuitive to many people, skilful listening is often more valuable than talking in relationship building.
- You can ask: If you aren't sure whether to talk or listen, you can always ask them which they would prefer, whether they would like to talk or listen to something you are ready to say.
- Make an effort to share the floor: If you think you have been talking too much, you can make an effort to give students a turn by asking them a question.



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- When the conversation lags, refocus: If they aren't talking, and you don't know what to say next, but your goals for the conversation haven't been reached yet, there are two safe ways to continue. First, you can simply ask the student what else they want to say about the topic being discussed. Second, you can propose to talk more about a relevant topic, and ask them if they want to talk with you about it.

Stop multitasking

Don't multi-task if you are supposed to be listening. You end up listening to only part of what someone says, or pretending to listen while you think about something else.

You also sacrifice important non-verbal cues and information about their intent, their confidence and their level of commitment. Even if you think that you can get enough of what people say while multi-tasking to serve your immediate purposes, you should assume as a general rule that people notice when you don't listen to them attentively.

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. This may require you to ask questions.

To be most effective, take a moment before you speak. You should have a mental outline of what you are going to say, including the point you are going to make and any background you need to fill in. Be aware of how much or how little do you need to say to accomplish the purposes of this conversation.

- Reflect 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...*" "*Is this what you mean?*"
- Summarize the speaker's comments periodically.

Defer judgment

Interrupting is a waste of time. It frustrates the speaker and limits full understanding of the message.

- Allow the speaker to finish.
- Don't interrupt with counterarguments

Respond Appropriately

Active listening is a model for respect and understanding. You are gaining information and perspective. You add nothing by attacking the speaker or otherwise putting him or her down.

- Be candid, open, and honest in your response.
- Assert your opinions respectfully.
- Treat the other person as you would want to be treated

Recap regularly

Very skilled listeners practice and become good at recapping both the facts and the level of importance in a few brief words. Metaphors can make a compelling way to sum up what someone has been saying. If you don't understand or aren't sure about a point they are trying to make, repeat a very brief portion of the part you didn't understand and ask them to tell you more about it to help you understand better.

HOW TO ASK QUESTIONS

Sometimes when listening you need to ask questions but don't want to "take over the conversation" from the talker. If you take over you not only risk showing the talker disrespect, but you may never find out what they know and were planning to say next!

Use non-leading questions

The simplest way to ask a question without derailing someone who is right in the middle of saying something is to restate what the talker just said, then make a non-leading request for more information. In each case, summarise briefly what was on the table and ask them to say more.



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*What do you think about?
What would you do about?
What's most important about?*

Situations where you need non-leading questions:

- the talker stops talking before you think they've really finished;
- the talker changes the subject;
- the talker keeps repeating themselves;
- the talker presents options without recommending one in particular;
- the talker doesn't offer, but you want their opinion;

Dealing with Buzz Phrases

When the person you are listening to uses a new or unfamiliar word or phrase, it's important get clarification quickly. Listening with clarity makes a difference both to your

understanding of what is being said and the talker's experience of being listened to.

Keep in mind that the talker is going to do a better job of presenting information, and have a more rewarding experience, if they sense they are being understood by you. However, when you seek clarification it's also important not to become defensive or otherwise sidetrack the talker. In this situation you can always try explaining: "*You know, I'm not familiar with that yet, could you please explain a little about it to catch me up?*"

FURTHER INFORMATION

- [Learn Direct](#)
- [Mind Tools](#)
- [Tools for Communication](#)