

2012

The Essentials of Active Listening

The Message is Important



Brenda Kelleher-Flight Ph.D.

GDP Consulting Inc

10/21/2012

Table of Contents

The Essentials of Active Listening	1
Introduction.....	1
What is Active Listening?	1
Why is Active Listening Important?	2
5 Elements of Active Listening	2
Blocks to Active Listening and How to Overcome Them	4
1. Daydreaming.....	4
2. Rehearsing	4
3. Filtering	4
4. Judging.....	4
5. Distraction.....	4
Self-Reflection.....	5
Final Comment.....	5

The Essentials of Active Listening

by Brenda Kelleher-Flight Ph.D.

Introduction

Most people think that they are good listeners. In reality, many people who think they are good listeners would rate poorly in that category. Research suggests that most people remember only 25 – 40% of what they hear in any given conversation. Most people spend the time they aren't talking in a conversation doing a number of activities other than listening. Four of the activities which affect a person's listening ability include formulating counterarguments or what they will say in response to what the other person is saying, daydreaming, gazing around the room or thinking about external distractions, or tuning out of the conversation.

It takes energy to focus on another person and listen to what they have to say. It takes even more energy to listen to the other person's intended message. However, with practice, any person can become a better listener. This article focuses on the elements of and blocks to active listening.

What is Active Listening?

Active listening is a process by which you make a conscious effort to not only hear what another person is saying but also make concerted attempts to understand the complete message the other person is sending.

In order to be an effective active listener one must pay very close attention to the other person. This requires paying attention to every aspect of what the other person is saying and not allowing yourself to be distracted. In short, it means refraining from activities such as daydreaming, formulating what you will say next, or by acting bored. These activities affect the effectiveness of the communication and can mean that the true messages are missed.

Why is Active Listening Important?

How well you listen has a major impact on how effective you are in your job, as well as on the quality of your relationships. You will do better if you listen well. There is no relationship that doesn't benefit from a person who understands the art of effective listening. People in general feel better about themselves and the state of their relationships if they feel they are heard and understood, and this is best accomplished through active listening.

5 Elements of Active Listening

There are five elements that are keys in active listening:

1. Pay attention

It is essential that you give the speaker your undivided attention. Most people know when they have your undivided their attention or when you are distracted. Likewise, they will notice when you are focused solely on them; this focus will lend a different feel to the conversation.

Ways you can indicate that you are paying full attention are:

- Make eye contact with the speaker
- Observe what the speaker's body language is saying as well. Body language can convey much about what the other person is feeling.
- Use your words or body movements to indicate you are focused on and engaged in the conversation
- Refrain from interrupting and preparing rebuttals, and paraphrase what the other person stated.

2. Ways to show you are listening

A great way to show you are listening is through your body language. For example,

- i. lean forward slightly to show interest.
- ii. nod occasionally or use facial expression to show you are following the conversation
- iii. Use comments that encourage the speaker, such as “yes” or “uh huh”
- iv. repeating what the speaker has said to clarify your understanding of what they are saying is another way to show you have been listening.

3. Provide feedback

Providing feedback can occur in various ways. One such way is through commenting or repeating what is heard to ensure you are following the speaker. Another way is by utilizing clarifying statements such as “So what I’m hearing you say is...” or “What I think you mean is...Is that right?” Utilizing these statements helps keep the focus on what the speaker is saying.

You can also provide feedback by giving advice. However, caution should be used when giving advice, because not all people who enter a conversation want solutions to their issues. You also don’t want to turn the conversation from something that is about the other person into your own agenda. You should always ask before giving advice.

4. Do not judge

Abstain from interrupting the speaker when he or she is talking. If you have questions, allow the speaker to finish his or her point before asking your question.

5. Respond with the appropriate respect and consideration

More than anything, active listening is about respecting the other person enough to take the time to listen to the message he is sending. Even if you don't agree with what he is saying, you must treat what he says with respect and refrain from putting him down or attacking him.

These skills are not easy. That is why there are so many blocks which affect each person's ability to engage in two-way open communication.

Blocks to Active Listening and How to Overcome Them

1. Daydreaming

When you daydream you allow your attention to wander to other events or people. During this time you stop listening and drift away into your own thoughts or issues.

2. Rehearsing

Rehearsing is when you are busy thinking about what you are going to say next and you never hear what the other person is saying to you.

3. Filtering

Filtering occurs when you only listen to certain parts of the conversation, but not all. You can miss key points if you filter based on your own pre-conceptions of what the person is thinking or about to say.

4. Judging

Judging happens when you have stopped listening to the other person because you have already placed labels, made assumptions about, or stereotyped the other person.

5. Distraction

Distraction occurs when your attention is divided by something internal, such as headaches, worry, or hunger, or external, such as traffic or others talking. When you are distracted be upfront and honest about your situation.

Self-Reflection

Important questions to ask yourself to help overcome daydreaming, rehearsing, filtering, judging, and distraction are:

- In what situations do I engage in this behavior?
- With whom am I talking when I tune out or interrupt?
- When I engage in the behavior, what is the conversation usually about?
- Do I engage in any of the behaviors when I feel negative about the other person?

Final Comment

When conversing, many people spend the time they aren't talking doing a number of activities other than listening. Some people formulate counterarguments or what they will say in response to what the other person is saying. Others daydream or gaze around the room, or act bored. There are ways you can become a better and more active listener though.

Key points to take away include:

Remember that it takes a lot of concentration and determination to become an active listener. It also takes practice. However, with desire and know-how, anyone can become an effective active listener. It may mean breaking old habits and adopting new ones.

You can be deliberate in how you listen. You can frequently remind yourself that the goal is to hear what the other person is saying. This means setting aside all other thoughts, distractions, and behaviors and focusing solely on the other person and his needs as well as the message he is sending.

You ask questions, reflect, and paraphrase to make sure you understand the message correctly. Practicing active listening skills leads to marked improvement in personal and professional relationships..