## **Effective Listening**

**Listening is more than just hearing what someone else says; demonstrating active listening shows the speaker that their message is being both received and fully understood. These top tips provide useful advice on how to ensure you are an effective listener.**

Good listening means actively concentrating to absorb and understand the information you receive rather than passively 'hearing' what is being said. This includes:

* **decoding the language you hear,** as well as the language you see, i.e. body language
* being on the alert for any **hidden messages,** or a gap between what is said and what is genuinely felt by the speaker
* **asking questions** to clarify points you do not understand, and checking to see that you have received the message correctly
* following and supporting the speaker, by mirroring their body language subtly, or repeating key points in what they say to confirm that you have understood

These tips will help you to listen effectively.

### **Maintain attention**

It is important to keep your attention focused on the speaker to fully understand what they are saying to you. If you find it difficult to stay focused, you can train yourself to become better by:

* Giving the speaker your full attention and concentrating on his/her needs for the whole time you are interacting.
* **Being open** to what is being said - for example, if it is something you disagree with, let the other person speak without interruption and consider their points objectively.
* Looking for the points that may be **hidden** within what is said (sub-text).
* **Taking notes** of key points.
* **Pausing to think of questions,** rather than formulating them in your mind while the speaker is talking. Small pauses for thought can reassure your speaking partner that you are engaged by what they have said.
* **Asking questions.** Showing an interest by clarifying points and asking for further information will help you build a rapport with your speaking partner. This will ultimately make the exchange more engaging for you.

### **Use positive body language**

Responding to the speaker's body language by observing carefully and mirroring their postures subtly shows you are receptive to the speaker's message. You can do this by:

* making eye contact frequently
* adopting an open posture: for example, leaning forward towards the speaker demonstrates your interest
* not leaning back in your chair with your arms crossed in front of you as if to say 'Come on then, interest me'
* smiling

## **The Five Components of Active Listening**

**Communication is not a one-way process. It requires, at least, someone to give the message and someone to receive it. Demonstrating active listening shows the speaker that their message is being both received and understood. This article explains the five components of active listening and offers suggestions for demonstrating these in conversation.**

Active listening has five components:

* testing understanding
* questioning
* building
* feedback
* summarising

### **Testing understanding**

Testing your understanding by clarifying what the speaker has said ensures you have the correct facts and demonstrates that you have understood. Eliciting facts is one of the basics of active listening. A simple way of demonstrating this component in conversations is to rephrase or restate what has been said back to the speaker. Some useful ways of doing this are:

* Can I just clarify? You’re saying that …
* My understanding is that …
* Let me make sure I’ve got this right, you’re saying …

Do not just repeat what the person had said. Rephrase the highlights or key points of what has been said, but take care not to distort the meaning.

Testing your understanding in this way has some key advantages:

* It clarifies that someone has received the message correctly.
* The speaker knows that people have been listening, which can boost their confidence and morale by making them feel valued.

### **Questioning**

There will be occasions when clarification of what has been said is necessary to find out more as well as testing your understanding. More background information or other facts and figures may be necessary for decision-making purposes. Asking probing questions allows you to do this while also demonstrating that you have been listening to all that the speaker has said.

Questioning by group members also prevents the speaker going on too long without a break for information to be absorbed. Some people tend to give messages full of fascinating facts but much too detailed for a single sitting. Asking for clarification breaks this monotony and also enables the speaker to arrange the information into manageable chunks which people may find easier to digest. Examples of this include:

* And what were the details of those actions?
* Could you tell me some more about … ?

### **Building**

Building on someone’s proposal or idea is another component of active and effective listening. Listening is not about sitting back and waiting for the information to come to you, it is about adding to the speaker’s point of view with ideas of your own, whilst taking care not to hijack the original idea.

A simple way of building is to highlight those aspects or points you like about the information you have been given and to share any of your own associated ideas or facts. Examples of this are:

* What you said about … is really interesting. I think we should discuss this more.
* Your thoughts on … sparked off some ideas and I’d like to propose we …

### **Feedback**

Active listening also involves giving feedback to the speaker about how their message affected you. Reflecting back feelings and emotions enables you to check you have understood the speaker’s sentiments and allows you to empathise. It also gives the speaker a chance to correct any misconceptions that may have inadvertently been conveyed.

Feedback should follow the following five rules. It should be:

* non-judgemental
* clear
* honest
* immediate
* brief

### **Summarising**

Summarising is a critical skill for active listening. It clarifies and reinforces the message for both listener and speaker. It finishes off one subject, creating the opportunity to move onto another, and gives the speaker the chance to correct the listener if they summarise inaccurately. It may be appropriate to do this after each defined topic, especially when a decision has been taken. Alternatively, it is sometimes preferable to save the summarising to the very end of the conversation and then go over the notes to collate what has been said and agreed. A good way of beginning to summarise may be:

* So let’s recap on what has been said and agreed.
* OK, let me note down the key points we’ve discussed.