











## Guidelines to increase your active Listening Skills?

Ten Tips to Improve YOUR Listening Skills				
Tip 1  <b>Stay Focused</b>	Tip 2  <b>Detect Emotions</b>	Tip 3  <b>Ask Questions</b>	Tip 4  <b>Don't Interrupt</b>	Tip 5  <b>Don't Pre-empt</b>
Tip 6  <b>Recap Key Facts</b>	Tip 7  <b>Pen and Paper at The Ready</b>	Tip 8  <b>Say it Again</b>	Tip 9  <b>Watch the Stereotypes</b>	Tip 10  <b>Be Aware of Listening Barriers</b>

### 1. Consider eye contact

Holding someone's gaze can feel like hitting a moving target: someone's talking to you, but you're looking around the room, checking your phone, or staring at your screen. In many cases, the speaker may only have a small part of your attention. You don't want to make the speaker have to ask you to look at them, as if you were a child.

However, for many people, we communicate by looking each other in the eye. That's not to suggest you can't converse across a room; but if it goes on for too long, one of you will get up and move in order to hear the other properly.

Turn to face your conversation partner out of politeness. Remove all papers, books, phones, and other distracting items. Look at your partner, even if they aren't looking at you. Shyness, uncertainty, embarrassment, guilt, or other feelings, as well as cultural taboos, can prohibit certain people from making eye contact in particular situations. You can forgive them – but for your part, stay attentive.

### 2. Be alert, but not intense

Now that you've made eye contact, relax into the conversation. You don't have to fix your eyes on the other person; in fact, being too attentive or intense can unsettle the speaker. Although, again, some people may need this regular contact to follow the conversation. Overall, it's useful to pay attention in a way that suits you.

You should try and consciously shut out background sounds and activities. Also, try not to focus too much on the speaker's accent or mannerisms, as they might be distracting. Try not to allow your personal sentiments, beliefs, or biases to get in the way.

### 3. Pay attention to nonverbal signs, such as body language and tone

Nonverbal communication, excluding email, accounts for the majority of direct communication. We can get a lot of information about one another without needing to say anything. The sound and tone of someone's voice, even over the phone, can convey almost as much about them as what they say.

An expression around the eyes, a twist of the mouth, or a raising of one's shoulders can indicate enthusiasm, boredom, or disapproval when you're face to face with someone. You can't afford to disregard these cues. Remember that words only convey part of the message.

Again, it's important to point out that body language can vary between cultures, and neurotypical people may find it easier to pick up on than some neurodiverse individuals.

#### **4. Make a mental image of what the speaker is saying**

Allow your brain to create a mental image of the information you're hearing. Your brain will do the work – whether it's a mental picture or the organisation of ideas – if you stay focused and your senses are fully engaged. When listening for long periods of time, concentrate on and remember key words and phrases.

Don't think about what you're going to say when it's your turn to listen; it's too difficult to mentally rehearse while listening. Pay complete attention to what the other person is saying. Finally, remember what is being said, even if it seems dull or unimportant. Make a conscious effort to refocus your thoughts when they begin to wander.

#### **5. Empathise with the speaker**

Effective listening is based on empathy and emotional intelligence. You're a good listener if you're sad when the person you're talking to displays sadness, glad when they express happiness, and fearful when they express their concerns. You can show this through your facial expressions and words.

To have empathy, you must put yourself in the other person's shoes and allow yourself to feel what it's like to be them at that moment. This is difficult to achieve and requires a great deal of effort and concentration. Regardless, it will enhance the quality of your interactions to no end.

#### **6. Provide feedback**

Reflect the speaker's emotions to demonstrate that you understand their point of view. If the speaker's emotions are masked or unclear, it's occasionally important to repeat their message to ensure you've understood. Simply nod and demonstrate your understanding with appropriate facial gestures and well-timed noises of assent.

You need to show the speaker that you are following their train of thought rather than daydreaming while they are speaking to you. Always double-check your understanding of instructions in task situations, whether at work or at home.

#### **7. Keep an open mind**

Listen without casting judgement or mentally evaluating what the other person is saying. Feel free to be uncomfortable if what they say makes you uncomfortable, but don't engage in internal discourse, such as formulating a riposte or comparing the speaker to others. As soon as you indulge in judgemental thinking, you've diminished your value as a listener.

Listen without jumping to conclusions. Keep in mind that the speaker is expressing their inner thoughts and feelings through words. You have no idea what those feelings and ideas are; the only way to learn is to listen.

#### **Using mindfulness to improve listening skills**

We can be more aware of obstacles to good listening while remaining open to the speaker's thoughts and messages if we listen mindfully. Mindfulness can help you to enhance your listening abilities.

#### **What is mindful listening?**

Mindfulness is the act of paying attention in a specific way – purposefully, in the present moment, and without judgement. It is a particularly useful skill for improving romantic relationships, where we are more likely to react reflexively and emotionally.

Mindfulness teaches you to be present in the moment and to let go of distractions as well as monitor your physical and emotional responses to what others say to you. A lack of mindfulness will leave you vulnerable to your own prejudices and can distract you from truly hearing what other people are doing and saying.

Just a few minutes after a lecture, the average person can recall only 25 per cent of what was said. The purpose of mindful listening is to drown out your own internal chatter so that you can truly understand what the other is saying.

### **How to listen mindfully?**

The following tips will help you to bring mindfulness to your own daily interactions and so improve your relationships with others.

#### ➤ **Listen with intent**

We frequently engage in activities and interact with others without giving it much thought. Mindful listening is a process of “waking up” from that state of unconsciousness.

Mindfulness requires you to be “in the moment”, meaning you should completely focus on the person you’re listening to. There are several ways to go about this:

- **Allow yourself time.** Before meeting with someone, take a minute or two to clear your head. Before the conversation, practise a technique such as scanning down through your body and releasing tension.
- **Meditate.** Meditation is a mindfulness technique that can assist you in learning to focus on the present moment. When you clear your mind of mental clutter, you can make room for other people’s perspectives. Meditation is similar to many other exercises in that the more you do it, the easier it gets. Meditation may be difficult to incorporate into a busy schedule, but even five or ten minutes each day can help.
- **Simplify your surroundings.** Phones, computers, printers, and other technological devices are common workplace distractions. Keep your workspace neat and your devices turned off.
- **Pay attention to your own “cues”**

When we’re worried or irritated, our cues are the emotional and physical reactions we have that might shut out ideas and viewpoints that we don’t like. Mindful listening can help us maintain awareness of our cues and choose not to let them prevent us from communicating.

#### ➤ **Listen empathetically**

We frequently view the world through the prism of previous experiences and prejudices. When you’re empathic, you may see things from another person’s perspective. You can, for example, legitimise the other person’s viewpoint by acknowledging their point of view. You don’t need to agree with them; it simply means you recognise that they have a different viewpoint to you.

#### ➤ **Final thoughts**

All of the techniques outlined above can be applied to both personal and professional situations. Some may be more relevant at certain times, but if you put them into practice, you will find that you are more attentive and that people find you easier to talk to.

## **STAGES OF LISTENING PROCESS**

### **1. Receiving**

The first stage in the process of listening is receiving the speaker's message, which involves isolating the message from all other sounds and interpreting what's been said. Attending to the message is perhaps the most important part of the receiving stage because sounds have no meaning to them until they're given context. During this stage, try to avoid thinking about other things while the speaker is talking to ensure no information is missed.

In the case of internal business communication, a manager practicing effective listening skills will hear all of an employee's concerns and will be able to take appropriate action to solve an issue immediately. In external business communication, a salesperson will be able to understand all their client's concerns or desires regarding a project, such as the anticipated budget.

### **2. Understanding**



During the understanding stage of listening, we attempt to comprehend the message's meaning. It's during this stage that incorrect meaning can be applied to a message. Asking questions to fill any information gaps is the best way to better understand a message. To ensure information is understood correctly in the workplace, repeat any instructions or messages to the speaker.

### **3. Evaluating**



Through the evaluating stage of listening, information is qualitatively and quantitatively assessed before a response is formed. To effectively evaluate the message, there should be no additional ambiguities or time spent sorting out insignificant points. According to Lumen Learning, this is the stage in which you determine if the information from

the speaker is well constructed or disorganized, biased or unbiased, and valid. Try to determine if the speaker's supporting points are valid, and then mentally review and summarize what's been said.

#### **4. Responding**



The responding, or feedback, stage is when the listener indicates their involvement in the conversation through either verbal or non-verbal cues. This stage is based on both short- and long-term memories, and it creates action in what would otherwise be a passive procedure. During this stage, the listener may ask questions, nod, take notes, give applause or simply sit in silence. The key is to give the speaker regular feedback to display interest.

#### **5. Remembering**



If the listener is unable to remember what the speaker was saying, chances are they were not effectively listening. While complex messages that contain many details require developed listening skills, some messages can be misinterpreted because of a small distraction, in which the listener misses out on information before they focus on listening again.

Remembering all the pieces of information is crucial to moving forward in the conversation and with any future actions. According to Harvard Business Review, we tend to forget up to half of what we've heard within the first eight hours of listening to it. Some of the ways to improve memory is to use the information gained immediately, or to relate the information to what was learned in previous conversations for a wider context. Grasping onto the whole idea of the conversation rather than just the facts will also improve memory.

#### **BARRIERS TO ACTIVE LISTENING**

Barriers to active listening are generally different kinds of noise. Some specific examples of noise in the office are:

- Ringing phone
- Difficult customers or co-workers
- Traffic

The more you know about noise, the more you can learn about how to eliminate it. There are five main types of noise that can easily prevent active listening. These are:

**1. External Distractions-** Physical distractions or things in your work environment that divert your attention away from the person with whom you're communicating.

**2. Speaker Distractions-** Any speaker peculiarities or distinctive characteristics that get in the way of hearing the speaker's message. These may include perceptions by the listener of the speaker such as culture, gender, age, communication style and job role. For example, a technical person who is very left-brained may be difficult for a marketing person who is also very right-brained to listen to.

**3. Message Intent/Semantics-** Any phrases and words that can be misinterpreted or have different meanings depending on who is using them or who is receiving them. Acronyms are a classic example. However, often people do not speak in full sentences or if they do, do not give context to a complex message. People seemingly refrain from telling the whole story.

**4. Emotional Language-** Phrases that generate emotion and, as a result, inhibit understanding. Use of extreme language such as "you always", "we never", "you must" or "we are forever" make it difficult for people to listen to a speaker.

**5. Personal Perspective-** Priorities or personal "baggage" that people carry with them, affecting the communication process. This may include preformed solutions in the mind of the listener which occupy their mind when the speaker talks about a problem. The compulsion to solution find is great and can effectively stop us from listening. Overcoming these barriers of noise can be difficult. Practising some simple techniques will take away the difficulty and the rewards for doing so are great.

Techniques to Practice:

**1. External Distractions-** This is the simplest of all barriers to overcome. Find a quiet area and sit with your back to windows and away from traffic, both vehicular and people.

**2. Speaker Distractions-** This is one of the more difficult barriers to overcome. The first step is to be self-aware that the speaker is distracting you. The trick if you find the speaker is distracting you is to paraphrase or reflect often. Don't allow the distraction to build to a point where you stop listening.

**3. Message Intent/Semantics-** This is reasonably simple to deal with by asking questions of clarification. Never let an acronym go unchallenged and use "What...?" questions when the context is ambiguous. "What do you mean by..?" is the simplest form. "Under what circumstances do you see that affecting/being important/occurring..." is another useful form (Read the article: "The Power of "What...?" to learn more).

**4. Emotional Language-** Another difficult one for those of us not in control of our own emotions. Whilst it may not seem intuitive given that we are talking about being able to paraphrase and reflect what the speaker is saying, this is the time to stop the speaker and call them out for the emotional/extreme language. Inform them that you really want to listen to what they have to say and really want to engage, but it is very difficult to have a conversation when one person is using very emotional or extreme language.

**5. Personal Perspective-** Personal baggage when listening is, to my mind, the most difficult noise to overcome. This is because the baggage usually triggers emotions which put us in a place where we are not in full control of ourselves. The technique is to watch for emotional triggers. Are you already not listening? Have you gone flush in the face? Are you thinking more about what you are going to say rather than concentrating on what the speaker is saying? If you can recognise that you are reacting poorly and if you cannot immediately recover your active listening capacity, then ask for a short break.

**Here are seven different types of listening that can negatively impact our ability to effectively connect with and truly hear what others have to say.**

### **1. Evaluative listening.**

This listening behavior is on display when the person is either constantly agreeing or disagreeing with you. They evaluate everything you say from their perspective. The problem with this type of listening is that it is based on a selective perspective -- their own. Consequently, they may likely miss critical information that is offered by others. Their constant evaluation may end up turning the conversation into a sort of verbal jousting match where one person says something and the other person counters what he or she said. This then causes the first person to offer a counter argument to the person's response. Both parties get caught up in the process of disagreement rather than understanding one another.

### **2. Self-protective listening.**

This is the type of listening that I experienced with the person I was coaching. He was so filled with negative emotion and so focused on telling his story, that there was no room for anything else. When I tried to ask questions or offer alternative interpretations of his experience, he would simply return to the recitation of his negative experience. What was interesting was that as he retold his experience, his story picked up emotional intensity with each telling. These negative emotions seemed to further hijack rationality as he continued to protect his interpretation of the situation and the legitimacy of his feelings.

### **3. Assumptive listening.**

This is probably one of the most common and difficult forms of poor listening that all of us struggle to overcome. This type of listening occurs when we assume we know what the person will say or what they want. We try to figure out what the person is thinking or wanting rather than listening to what the person is actually saying. Setting aside our assumptions about people is challenging because of the past experience or history that we have with them. We may also be impatient or in a hurry to end the conversation and so try to prompt it to move faster by "helping" the other person along. In order to overcome this negative form of listening, we must set our thinking aside and give our full attention to the individual and their message, allowing them time to express their thoughts and feelings.

### **4. Judgmental listening.**

This type of listening takes the approach of criticizing all that the person says or does. You can tell when a person is engaged in this listening behavior because they disagree, condemn or criticize whatever someone else may offer. Unfortunately when someone responds this way, the other person becomes tired or afraid of being put down, so they quit speaking up and sharing their perspective. They withdraw and will eventually become completely disengaged.

### **5. Affirmative listening.**

A person who engages in this type of listening focuses solely on whether or not the person who is speaking agrees with their point of view. Consequently, they don't hear, nor do they explore, differing points of view. They like to be acknowledged, affirmed and validated, so they listen only from that perspective and miss valuable information.

## **6. Defensive listening.**

This listening behavior occurs when a person takes everything that another may say as a personal attack. Such an interpretation leads the individual to "yeah, but" everything the other person says. You might find such a person constantly justifying or defending everything they say or offer. This type of behavior prevents them from exploring or understanding differing views and experiences of others. They are only interested in defending their own perspective.

## **7. Authoritative listening.**

This type of listener always has to be right. It is also not uncommon for them to offer advice. They engage in far too much "should-ing" to people. These listeners imply that you may not have the ability to complete a task or figure something out on your own, so they tell you what you should or need to do. This is a strategy for controlling the situation and guaranteeing that the desired outcome will be what they want it to be.