

SIX ELEMENTS FOR ACTIVE LISTENING

David Hartl

INTRODUCTION

In communication, listening is the most important and least well-practiced part of positive human interaction. Listening is often misunderstood as a passive process rather than the energized and active process that effective listening truly is. Here are six elements that will help you practice the focused, intentional technique of active listening.

I. Provide positive verbal and non-verbal feedback

Verbal feedback: “uh-huh”, I see, got it, I got that, OK, yes, all right, right, I understand, etc. (Verbal feedback is especially necessary when on the telephone and non-verbal feedback cannot be provided.) Verbal feedback keeps the speaker going, keeps the information flowing, encourages more sharing, and helps the speaker to feel they are being listened to actively.

Non-verbal: eye contact, smile, various facial expressions (acceptance, surprise, sadness, delight, purse lips considering, etc.), slow head nods, hand gestures, shoulder gestures, etc. Body language signals your attention, your interest, your concentration on the speaker.

II. Ask clarifying questions

Whenever the speaker uses words, allusions, examples, etc., that are unclear to you, ask for clarification by using such questions as these:

What exactly do you mean when you say...?

When you refer to that (allusion), what do you mean by that?

What is it about your example that you particularly want me to understand?

When asking clarifying questions, be sure to use a neutral and interested voice tone; avoid sounding critical, suspicious, or challenging. Adopt the attitude that you just want to be sure you understand them clearly; you are neither agreeing nor disagreeing with what they are saying by asking the clarifying questions.

III. Paraphrase the speaker's statements

Check the accuracy of your understanding what the speaker is saying by paraphrasing back to them what they just said using your own words. Introduce your paraphrase with such comments as:

So, if I understand you right, you're saying ...*(repeat what they just said in your own words)* ...

Do I have it right?

Let me see if I get what you mean. You're suggesting that... Is that it?

OK, your point is that... Correct?

Use your paraphrasing to separate factual content from feelings by saying something like: The factual situation is ... *(repeat their facts)* ... and the way you feel about that is... *(empathetically describe how you think they feel)*. Is that right?

IV. Avoid interrupting

Our thoughts speed through our minds much faster than speakers can say their words. Because we are thinking faster than they are talking, there is a natural tendency to think ahead of the speaker and guess at what their points are. As soon as we think we know what they are saying, we feel a nearly irresistible urge to jump into the conversation, interrupting their flow of talk, and take what we think is a short cut to their point. As a listener, we often think this interruption helps to save time for both the speaker and the listener. It never does! Avoid interrupting.

Instead, remain nearly silent throughout the speaker's talking adding only verbal and non-verbal feedback cues that indicate they have your full attention and you are following their conversation completely. Focus on what they are saying and wait until they are completely finished. Perhaps ask, if appropriate, "Is there anything else you want to add?" or ask a clarifying question or two. When they are done, proceed with your responses in the knowledge that you have fully heard their perspective and information accurately and they know they have been listened to with care. Regard what they are saying as if it were a pile of information gathering on a desk or table you're sitting at. Avoid taking what they are saying into yourself as a personal burden – leave it "out there" in the pile on the table. When they're finished, sort the information into logical parts and then proceed, in a problem-solving fashion, to deal with whatever issues need to be handled. Avoid reacting to their emotions. Instead, focus on the content and logic of the information to help them cope with their situation effectively.

V. Respect time limits

Check to see if they have limited time for the conversation and stay within their limits for the conversation. If your conversation must be fit into a specific time limit because of your own schedule, be sure that you let the person you are listening to know what the boundary is before they begin talking. Say something like, "I want to hear everything you have to say, but I must tell you that, no matter where we are in the conversation, I will have to leave at (specify the time)." Arrange for the conversation to continue at a specified time in the future when it can be completed. Avoid going beyond the time limits. When conversations get pressured because time limits are being exceeded, more mistakes happen, misunderstandings are more likely to occur, and hard feelings are often created because of the rush and stress.

VI. Adopt a non-judgmental, accepting attitude

When listening, express neither agreement nor disagreement with the speaker's points; simply acknowledge what they are saying in a manner that indicates you are hearing them and are understanding what they are saying. Use phrases like, "I see," "I understand," or "I get what you're saying." Avoid using words and phrases like "good," "OK," "bad idea," "shouldn't have," "should have," or other indications of approval, disapproval, agreement, or disagreement. Avoid using these words and phrases even when you actually agree or disagree with the speaker's points. In your role as a listener, it is more important to clearly understand what the speaker's issues and points are than to register whether or not you agree or disagree with them. In fact, if you communicate approval or disapproval of their ideas, they may get the idea that they can't trust you to openly and honestly hear what they are saying and may try to shape their talk to win more of your approval. A non-judgmental listener usually gets more of their truth in a more efficient manner. Once their truth is known and shared, you can get on with solving problems and taking positive action.