

Active Listening

The average person listens at only 25% efficiency. This means that only about 25% of information from the speaker is retained by the listener. This equates to a lot of missed information! One of the most critical skills for effective communication is active listening. Developing this skill will help you build and maintain relationships, solve problems, improve processes, and retain information.

Active listening is the ability to focus your attention on the speaker, absorb and process the message, and be able to respond thoughtfully. It also includes taking in verbal and nonverbal cues, as well.

Active listening tips:

- **Show that you're paying attention.** Set the tone of the conversation by devoting all your attention to the speaker. This means paying attention to what the speaker is saying and not to your own thoughts. Take the conversation seriously, put down the phone, turn off the TV, and close the laptop. If needed, move the conversation to a location where you won't be interrupted. Also, maintain eye contact and nod your head occasionally to show that you understand them.
- **Listen with empathy.** This can be difficult if you're listening to someone with strong opinions. Refrain from jumping-in and arguing your point. Remember the goal of active listening is to understand the speaker, not debate them. Active listening is not trying to prove you are right. Accepting the speaker's opinion is not synonymous with agreement.
- **Avoid interruption and judgment.** When listening to someone with a different viewpoint, show respect. Your respectful mannerisms are what matters, not your insight or unsolicited advice. If you jump to defending your point of view, all you are doing is telling the speaker that their opinion doesn't matter. When this occurs, it usually results in conflict. Successful active listeners are people who can receive what's being said without judging or responding with their own opinions.
- **Paraphrase and clarify.** Summarizing what you just heard not only sends a message to the speaker that you are listening, but also helps you understand and retain information. You can paraphrase by saying something like, "Sounds like you are saying...", or "If I'm hearing you correctly...". When the speaker hears that you are trying to understand them, it often deescalates conflict. Using clarifying questions respectfully deepens the connection between you and the speaker and can act as a vehicle for greater understanding.
- **Pay attention to the non-verbals.** As much as 65% of the speaker's communication is non-verbal. Paying attention to them can tell you a lot about the speaker and what they are trying to say. For example, talking fast might be a sign that the speaker is nervous and talking slow may suggest fatigue.

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