

Elements of Active Listening Skills

Active listening is the most essential listening skill. It involves trying to understand what the other person is wanting, thinking, or feeling, and we are active in how we check our understanding of their message before we respond with our own new message. This is a skill that involves self-awareness, questioning techniques, and helpful phrases.

Be present

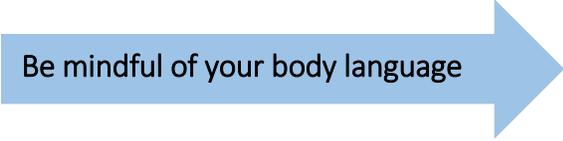
- Put aside distracting thoughts. Don't mentally prepare a rebuttal.
- Avoid being distracted by environmental factors, like listening to side conversations.

Listen to understand

- Listen to understand, don't listen to respond.
- Stop what you are doing and prepare to listen.
- Do not answer on someone else's behalf or finish off what is being said.
- Listen without judging or reacting in the moment to what is being said.
- Listen without interrupting.

Be aware of cultural differences

- Pay attention to the other person's facial expressions, eye contact and speech rate; follow their cues if possible.
- Be aware of how certain differences (such as gender, race, age, authority, language) between you and the other person might impact how each is perceived by the other, or how each person might perceive the other.
- Assess whether your assumptions about the other person's tone, use of silence, non-verbal communication are actually accurate.
- Use more than one way to explain or to ask.

**Be mindful of your body language**

- Show your attentiveness through facial expression and non-verbal behaviors (nodding, attentive body posture, etc.).
- Make sure your body language aligns with your words and tone.
- Avoid defiant or defensive postures, like talking to people with your arms tightly folded in front of you, and aggressive gestures such as pointing at people.

Question Types for Active Listening**Guidelines for using Active Listening skills**

- ✓ Use open-ended questions, which are phrased so that the answers are not just 'Yes' or 'No'.
You can then follow up with more specific, closed, 'yes or no' questions.
- ✓ Focus on "what" and "how" rather than "why" to produce less defensiveness.
- ✓ Provide feedback on what you think you heard. Our personal filters, assumptions, judgments, and beliefs can distort what we hear. As a listener, your role is to understand what is being said.

Questions for Clarification

- "When you said _____, did you mean _____ or _____?"
- "I am not sure what you meant by _____. Could you say more?"
- "How do you see the situation?"
- "What is your understanding of the problem?"

Confirm Mutual Understanding

Paraphrase what you heard using your own words. Check with the speaker that you are capturing the message.

- "I heard you say _____"
- "From what you said, it sounds like you felt _____"
- "This is how I understood what you were saying _____"

Learning Aid for Active Listening

- "I may not be understanding you correctly, and I find myself taking what you said personally. What I thought you just said is _____; is that what you meant?"

Tip: *If you find yourself having a strong reaction to what someone said, say so and ask for more information.*

Acknowledge

Acknowledge (show you hear and understand) without necessarily agreeing or disagreeing.

- "I'm sorry to hear that."
- "This has obviously been a frustrating/difficult experience for you."
- "If I were in your position, I think I'd feel just as you do."

Gain More Information

Ask questions that draw out ideas, as well as information. Use questions that are positive and open-ended.

- "What seems to be your main obstacle? What is holding you back from _____?"
- "What do you think about doing _____ this way?"
- "What seems to be the problem?" (not: 'Why did this go wrong?')
- "What seems to be the trouble?"
- "What do you make of _____?"
- "How do you feel about _____?"
- "What concerns you the most about _____?"

Outcome Focused Questions

These questions can help resolve a conflict once the issues are understood.

- "How do you want _____ to turn out?"
- "What do you want? What is your desired outcome?"
- "What do you propose?"
- "What is your plan?"
- "If you do this, how will it affect ___?"
- "What else do you/we need to consider?"

Questions to Elicit Action

- "What will you do?"
- "When will you do it?"

- "How will I know you did it?"
- "What are your next steps?"
- "When will you talk to your team about this?"

Questions to Define a Risk, Issue, or Problem

- "What is the uncertainty?"
- "How uncertain are you?"
- "How much does it matter?"
- "What are your concerns and worries about this situation?"

Adapted from:

Zúñiga, X & Cytron-Walker, A, *Exploring Differences and Common Ground*, SJE, University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2003 and *Communicating with Employees*, Library Services Information, 2009.