

Active Listening across Cultures

Why cross-cultural sensitivity is important for effective listening

Listening skills are essential in any kind of interpersonal interaction but when we are faced with language and cultural challenges, the need to pay full attention to what is really being said becomes paramount. We may need to work harder to understand different accents, speech patterns and use of language; and to dispel our usual interpretations of silence, interruptions or body language. We may make assumptions about the meanings of certain words and phrases and don't always realize that they can have slightly different meanings or connotations.

The importance of cross-cultural sensitivity becomes important when looking to create an atmosphere of trust in order to relay the desired response to the sender and to avoid miscommunication, or even insult. In cross-cultural interactions there are certain discrepancies of how to create such an atmosphere of trust and what is considered as appropriate behavior in active listening, depending on the culture(s) one is interacting with.

Essentially, there tends to be a certain etiquette associated with trust building and listening in different parts of the world. Since active listening is about understanding the complete message respectfully, it is even more essential to do so in a culturally sensitive manner.

Listen beyond words

A key to understanding communication is not only listening to what is said, but also to what is *not* said. The ability to read between the lines and tune in to non-verbal signals, such as facial expressions and body language, can help significantly.

This is demonstrated in how some cultures and parts of the world greatly value 'saving face': the desire to maintain and preserve one's dignity, respect, and reputation. Therefore, saying 'no' particularly to someone in authority can be very difficult. If you really want to hear the 'yes' you need to listen for the subtext and tune into the speaker's body language.

Silence is also a powerful tool for both speaker and listener. In some East Asian cultures, for example, silence is a sign of respect for what has been said and it would seem rude to immediately speak after the other person has finished. It's also important to remember colleagues who speak your language as their second or even third language sometimes need longer to formulate their thoughts. Pausing is thinking time rather than a signal for you to start talking.

"There is a voice that doesn't use words. Listen." --- Rumi

Let's take another example where silence has a different role in another part of the world - in Lebanon, people are said to be both active listeners and active talkers. In practice, this means that intense eye contact, hand gestures and frequent interruptions while standing rather close to the speaker are considered acceptable. In fact, remaining silent can be interpreted as an unsure sort of agreement, so the more involved one is while listening through gestures, interruptions and eye contact, the better as he/ she is then seen as engaged and actively listening.

These examples are rather simplistic as human beings are actually much more complex and influenced by various other elements that transcend national culture and make us all unique. However, national culture does have some overarching and unifying elements (such as the impact of a country's historical past) which help explain why a large number of people behave and communicate the way they do.

How to improve my cross-cultural active listening

The implications of not being listened to go deeper than the frustrations of miscommunication, having to repeat the message or issues not being fully addressed. When we sense we haven't been listened to we can lose rapport and trust. Furthermore, we may feel that we or our views and ideas are not valued.

This can result in frustration and misunderstanding, which could escalate into conflict – on the other hand, actively listening and trying to understand the other's frustrations can help to diffuse any potential conflict.

The trick is to be sincerely interested in the target audience, and reading feedback will eventually clarify as to how one should demonstrate the art of active listening in that particular situation.

By taking a moment to be mindful and demonstrating culturally acceptable ways of showing empathy, respect, acceptance and attention to the speaker, one becomes a cross-cultural active listener, and essentially a culturally agile individual.

"The biggest communication problem is we do not listen to understand. We listen to reply."

---Stephen Covey

Adapted from:

[Active listening as an essential intercultural skill](#), The London School of Intercultural Communication

[Active Listening: Cross-Cultural Business Communication Skills](#), Commisceo Global