

Tip Sheet: Practicing Listening Skills

Active Listening

Active listening is an art, a skill, and a discipline. Like other skills, it requires self-control. You must understand what is involved in listening and develop the necessary techniques to be silent and listen. You must ignore your own needs and focus attention on the person speaking. Hearing becomes listening only when you pay attention to what is said and follow it very closely.

Ways You Demonstrate that You Are Listening

- Your body language
- Making eye contact
- Keeping your body open
- Echoing words
- Nods of your head
- Leaning toward the speaker

You Listen in Order to...

- Show your support and help the other person(s) relax.
- Show you are accepting them and are open to them.
- Enable each one to speak and be heard.
- Be able to ask questions to clarify.
- Check assumptions.
- Clear up misperceptions.
- Restate or paraphrase.
- Find the key points or issues.
- Provide the silence necessary to encourage speech.
- Know when to bring to closure and when to test for agreements.

You need to show that you are listening carefully. This is called *attending*. Attending skills build rapport and help people feel at ease.

- Listen without interrupting.
- Pay attention.
- Use supportive body language.
- Paraphrase facts and feelings.

You also need to practice reacting and responding in positive ways. Using good responding skills help people understand the things you care about. It also helps you collect information about the situation.

- Ask clarifying questions.
- Ask probing questions.

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- Restate what the other person is saying, catching the essence but trying to take out the volatile phrases or language. This is called *laundrying* language and it can reduce friction.
- Summarize facts and feelings.
- Reframe issues. Focus on the interests, not positions.
- Try to always use "I" language instead of "you" language. For example, don't say, "When you do that, you make me feel..." Instead you can say, "When you do that I feel..."
- Try to communicate directly with the other person.
- Be forward thinking. Try to focus on the future.

Use *brainstorming* to find as many options or solutions as possible. The ground rules to brainstorming are that the people in the meeting are just throwing out ideas. At this point in the process, do not eliminate any ideas. The other ground rule is that mere mention of an idea does not mean that either person is agreeing to that idea. It's just an idea thrown out for purposes of the brainstorming session. Brainstorming helps turn good ideas into a plan of action. Look for points of agreement that the persons have in common and mention them.

You Listen by Paying Attention

Paying attention and listening without interruption allows the other person to "let off steam." Before any serious resolutions can occur, you need to let the other person know that you understand where they are coming from and you understand that they feel strongly about the issues you are discussing with them. Their intense emotions must be acknowledged and affirmed before serious solutions can be discussed. You should encourage the other person to let off steam and explain their concerns by using verbal cues such as

- "I see."
- "I understand."
- "That's a good point."
- "I can see that you feel strongly about that."
- "I can understand how you could see it like that."

These nonverbal actions also show the other person that you hear what they are saying:

- Squarely face the other person.
- Adopt an open posture.
- Lean discreetly, not threateningly, toward the other person.
- Maintain eye contact. Take cues from the other person as to the extent of eye contact with which he or she is comfortable.
- Try to relax as you interact with the other person.

Of course, for the other person to know that you are listening, you must make a response. The effectiveness of your listening will be determined by the style and quality of your response.

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Active Listening Exercise: The Travel Agent

Instructions: Team members pair up with a partner. One person is the talker and one person is the listener (the travel agent). The talker has to describe what they want from a vacation, but without mentioning a destination. The listener has to practice active listening skills – listening attentively to what is being said and what is not quite being said, and demonstrating their listening to the talker by their behavior. After 3-4 mins the listener has to summarize the three or four main issues or criteria that they have heard the talker express and then make a tentative sale of a suitable destination. Then, review how close the listener was to what the talker said and needed. Finally review how well the listener demonstrated active listening. Swap roles and repeat.