

The Power of Active Listening

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Typically when people decide to enhance their professional communication skills, they often solely focus on improving their speaking skills when interacting with customers or colleagues. However, in order to truly enhance our communication skills, it is equally as important to focus on improving our ability to effectively listen to what others are telling us as well.

Effectively listening to our customers allows us to fully understand their needs, concerns, and other issues that are of importance to them. This is a key component to having happy and satisfied customers. Unfortunately, due to the many distractions and other challenges that occur in an average work day, we sometimes fail to listen as well as we should.

Listen to the Statistics

Studies have shown that on average we only remember 25-50% of what we hear during a conversation. This means that when you talk to your manager, your co-workers or customers for 10 minutes, they really only hear 2 1/2—5 minutes of the conversation. Turn it around, and it reveals that during an average conversation with our customers, we likely aren't listening to the whole message either. We hope that the important points are captured in the 25-50% of the conversation that we actually listened to, but what if that's not the case? This is not something that is best left to chance. Being a poor listener can not only have a damaging effect on how we are perceived as professionals, but also on our ability to provide quality patient care and service. The good news is that this can be fixed by using a skill known as *active listening*.

Hearing vs. Active Listening

Hearing and active listening are terms that are often confused. Hearing is described as a function of biology, while active listening is a function of intentional behavior. Active listening is something that we choose to do, and as such, we need to build skill in order to be effective at it. Active listening is a process of communication which involves a conscious effort from the listener to understand, interpret, and evaluate what was heard. This is much more involved than simply hearing words—instead, the listener becomes an active member in the communication process without having to say a word.

5 Ways to Become an Active Listener

There are five key elements of active listening. They all help to ensure that you are listening to the other person, and that the other person knows that you are listening to what they are saying as well.

1) Pay Attention

Paying attention to the speaker and the messages that they are communicating is a great way to activate active listening. It's important during any form of conversation or presentation, not to get distracted by surroundings or to focus too much on any resonating words and phrases. Active listeners give the speaker their undivided attention in order to acknowledge the unspoken messages which are being communicated.

2) Show That You're Listening

Use body language and encouraging gestures to show the speaker that you are listening to what they are saying, and more importantly are interested in what they are saying. An active listener maintains eye contact with the speaker and pays atten-

tion to the non-verbal cues such as tone of voice and emotion, which are sometimes missed.

3) Provide Feedback

As an active listener, it is often necessary to provide feedback to clarify meanings and expand your understanding. Feedback is also a way of showing the speaker that you understand what is being said to you by using paraphrasing techniques. Examples of this could be: "What I'm hearing is..." or "It sounds like you are saying..." By paraphrasing what you have heard, you acknowledge your own understanding of the subject and provide the chance for any miscommunication to be corrected.

4) Hold Judgment

During any conversation, it is best to suspend your personal beliefs and judgments to ensure that the full message is being heard and understood. If during the conversation, you begin to think, "Wow, I can't believe he said that! What a jerk!" that could hinder your ability to actively listen. When possible, avoid making biased evaluations of the person you're speaking with.

5) Give Appropriate Responses

Nothing can be gained by interrupting and verbally attacking the people that are communicating with you. Any responses during a conversation must be appropriate and relevant to the situation. Inappropriate responses only block the flow of information and encourage misunderstanding.

It takes determination to be an active listener. But if we are all willing to make the effort, we can create an environment where our patients are not merely heard, but actually listened to as well. ▶

How Well Do You Actively Listen?

Take a moment to complete the *Active Listening Self-Assessment* by rating yourself on the following ten elements of active listening. Fill in the bubble that most accurately represents your feelings about each statement. Do your best to be objective and answer honestly! For an even deeper assessment, ask someone whom you speak with often to *rate you* on the following 10 elements. You might be surprised by the results!

Active Listening Self-Assessment

Statement 1: I consciously clear my mind of personal worries and other concerns before entering the conversation.

Never Infrequently Sometimes Frequently Always

Statement 2: I stay tuned-in even when the person is overly detailed or verbose.

Never Infrequently Sometimes Frequently Always

Statement 3: I remain focused on the other person's conversation even when I do not think it is relevant to the topic at hand.

Never Infrequently Sometimes Frequently Always

Statement 4: I wait for the other person to finish before thinking about my response.

Never Infrequently Sometimes Frequently Always

Statement 5: I am comfortable with silence and allow space for the other person to think.

Never Infrequently Sometimes Frequently Always

Statement 6: If I don't understand, I ask the other person to repeat or clarify what he or she said.

Never Infrequently Sometimes Frequently Always

Statement 7: I don't finish the other person's sentences for them.

Never Infrequently Sometimes Frequently Always

Statement 8: I don't interrupt, even if I think I know what the other person is saying. I let them finish.

Never Infrequently Sometimes Frequently Always

Statement 9: I don't multi-task—all of my attention is on the other person.

Never Infrequently Sometimes Frequently Always

Statement 10: I can continue to listen, even if the other person presents information that is disagreeable to me.

Never Infrequently Sometimes Frequently Always

Results:

If you answered *Always* or *Frequently* to most of the questions, then you are likely a very good active listener!

Barriers to Effective Listening

Becoming an effective active listener requires concentration, dedication, and practice until it becomes second nature. Just as it is important to learn what to do when listening to someone, it is also important to know what activities to avoid as well. Review the list below and determine if you have ever experienced any of these barriers when listening to someone else speak during a conversation:

- ☹️ Your attention drifts to other things running around in your head while another person is speaking.
- ☹️ You spend most of the conversation eagerly waiting for your turn to speak.
- ☹️ You rehearse your response while the other person is speaking.
- ☹️ You undertake some other activity while the other person is speaking (e.g., working on the computer, searching for files, reading paperwork, etc.).
- ☹️ Your emotional response (becoming angry, upset, frustrated, etc.) distracts you from what the other person is trying to say.
- ☹️ You interrupt frequently and don't allow the other person to finish his/her thought.

