



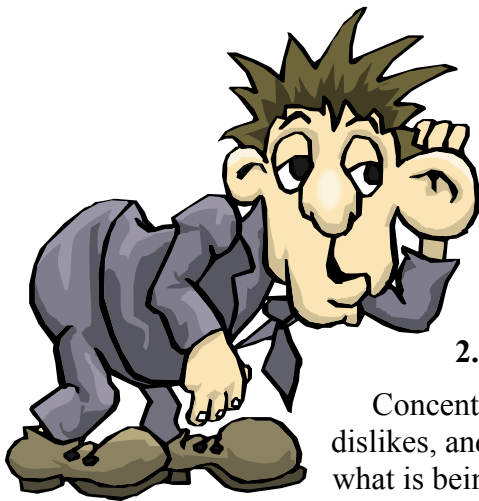
On Being a Good Listener

Good listening is as important to communication as effective sending. Often we spend a great deal of effort trying to communicate a message, only to find that despite all good intention, the message was not received.

Effective listening is much more than passively hearing another person's words. To truly hear, understand, and be able to respond to a speaker, the listener must be able to practice the art of active listening. Active listening is a process in which the listener interacts with the speaker, taking an *active role* in the communication. It requires the use of a variety of mental and verbal tools, along with paying attention to nonverbal clues like tone, gestures and facial expressions. Research suggests that the actual words only represent 7% of the communication. The tone of voice accounts for 39% of the communication and how it is received, and body language represents 54% of what is said.

Listening is a Learned Skill

The success of a team or work group often depends on how often or how easily members are able to reach a common understanding of the issues. Listening to *understand* what people are trying to say is at the very heart of teamwork. Listening is also an important sign of respect. It encourages others to participate in the communication and shows that their opinions and ideas are valued.



Here are a couple of suggestions to keep in mind when being a good listener:

1. Be fully accessible to the sender

Keep your mind and attention fully focused on the sender. Resist distractions and preoccupations which lessen your chances of hearing and understanding effectively.

2. Be open to the ideas of others

Concentrate on understanding the speaker. Emotions such as anger, dislikes, and defensiveness are natural, but they cause us not to hear what is being said - and sometimes to hear things that were not said.

Accept that the speaker's views, opinions, and values may be different than yours - and might even be better.

3. Demonstrate that you are listening

Incorporate some of the techniques of active listening to show the speaker you are receiving their message. Ask questions, clarify understandings, acknowledge your attention, use eye contact, paraphrase comments of the sender.

Barriers to Listening

To become a better listener it is helpful to first look at some of the barriers to effective listening. Some of these barriers are based on the personal emotions, feelings and attitudes of the listener. Others involve physical barriers to listening.

Physical Barriers. There are a variety of physical barriers which can block listening. Too much noise, too many distractions, too many interruptions (telephone), or lack of privacy can all make understanding the speaker all but impossible. Also be sensitive if either the sender or receiver have any hearing loss that might contribute poor listening.

Faulty Assumptions. There are several assumptions inadvertently made in advance which can be barriers. They include: assuming in advance that the subject is uninteresting or unimportant; assuming what the speaker is going to say next and not paying attention; allowing preconceptions about the speaker to affect the willingness of the receiver to hear some or all of the message.

Internal Blocks. A listening barrier can occur when the listener focuses on an emotional response triggered by the message or the speaker, and therefore misses or distorts the true meaning of the message. Internal blocks also occur when the listener is preoccupied with something other than the subject at hand and is not able to comprehend or retain what is being said.

Message Overload. Receiving too many messages at once, or overloading ourselves with messages can block the listener from effectively understanding the message being sent. Conversely, humans are able to think much faster than we can speak. This can cause the listener to lose interest or misinterpret the message as their thoughts race ahead or jump to another subject.

Balance of Power. A listener may perceive that the speaker is of lesser power or presents no obvious advantage to them, and therefore may not pay attention to the message. The listener, for example, may give more attention to a superior and dismiss messages from a co-worker.

Communication Stoppers. Responses employed by the receiver can inadvertently block understanding of the message being sent. Some of the responses to watch out for include:

- ❖ *Giving Advice* - Rarely does a speaker want advice. It may make the receiver feel good to give it, but it can often be a put-down to the speaker. Give advice only when asked and only at the conclusion of the conversation when all other options have been explored.

- ❖ *Ordering, Admonishing, Warning* - As in giving advice, avoid the temptation to direct the speaker on how they should feel or what they should do. This response can produce resentment, resistance, and rebellion. Help them think it through.
- ❖ *Topping* - When the receiver hogs the stage or employs one-upmanship on what the speaker said. Trying to top the story the speaker sent shift attention from the speaker and leaves them feeling unimportant.
- ❖ *Prying-Questioning* - Using an open questioning technique may help in the communication process, but be careful not to make the speaker feel “on-the-spot” or that they are being interrogated. In particular, why questions can be interpreted as a criticism of the speaker and should be avoided. Try how, who, when or what questions and stay sensitive to the responses.
- ❖ *Analyzing, Diagnosing* - Telling people how they feel or why they feel that way is a form of superiority and implies the listener has a better grasp of the situation than the speaker. It is insulting to the speaker and probably not accurate. Most people do not want to be told how to feel and would rather volunteer how they feel than have them exposed.
- ❖ *Defensive* - A common response in which the listener tends to personalize every comment no matter how innocent. Behind every statement of the speaker, the defensive listener hears an attack or criticism.
- ❖ *Devaluation* - The listener should recognize and be sensitive to the sender’s feelings and not try to take away those feelings or deny them to the owner. Insensitive listeners tend to be unable to grasp the meaning behind the message or appreciate the emotion of the sender. In our desire to alleviate emotional pain, we may apply bandages too soon and in the wrong places.

Active Listening Techniques

There are a number of simple techniques you can apply to become a good listener. Select the ones that work best for you and begin practicing them in every listening opportunity.

1. Prompting and Acknowledging

These are used to encourage the speaker to continue talking and to acknowledge that you are following what is being said. These include verbal clues such as “please go on” or “uh huh” to non verbal clues such as nodding your head or leaning closer to the speaker.

2. Validation

These are statements made by the listener to validate understanding and show support for the speaker. Statements help you connect with the speaker. “You sound upset.” “I see,” “This meant a lot to you” are all examples.

3. Reflecting

Used to show understanding of the speaker’s feelings. The listener reflects back the unspoken, underlying feelings in the sender’s message. Examples include: “What I hear from you is a lot of pain,” or “Seems like neither one brings you any joy.”

4. Asking Questions

The listener helps the sender explore their situation by asking open-ended, non-threatening questions which help clarify perceptions, assumptions, and intent. “What specifically concerns you,” “What are your objectives,” “What do you think,” “How did they get that perception?”

5. Clarifying or Reframing

This helps insure you have properly heard and understood the speaker’s message. By reframing the message you also assure the speaker that he or she has been understood. An example might be: “I want to be sure I understand ...”

6. Paraphrasing or Summarizing

The listener summarizes in his or her own words the content and feeling of the speaker’s message. It is important not to repeat word-for-word what the speaker said, but rather to put it in your own words to confirm your understanding. Some examples include: “So what I hear you saying,” “sounds like you’re pretty frustrated with,” “Let me see if I understand.”

Listening Skills Checklist

How would you rate yourself on this checklist:

Signs you ARE listening effectively

	Rarely	Sometimes	Often
❖ I restate what I think I heard other people say as a way to check for understanding	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
❖ I give my undivided attention to the speaker	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
❖ I listen with an open mind	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
❖ I ask people to slow down if they are speaking too fast	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
❖ I ask people to explain words or terms I don't understand	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Signs you ARE NOT listening

❖ I think about what to say next instead of listening	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
❖ I bring up ideas already suggested	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
❖ I ask questions that have already been answered	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
❖ I lose track of a discussion I am involved with	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
❖ I'm sure I know what people are going to say before they say it	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
❖ I interrupt other people	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
❖ I complete other people's sentences	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Eight Levels of Better Listening

Which level do you listen at? What are you going to do to move to the next level?

- 1.** There physically, but not mentally. Not paying attention at all.
- 2.** Hearing, but doing something else at the same time.
- 3.** Interrupting soon and frequently.
- 4.** Interrupting later and less often.
- 5.** Allowing the speaker to finish, but meanwhile thinking about a counter or a response.
- 6.** Allowing to finish while trying to understand what is being said, but then replying immediately.
- 7.** Allowing to finish, pausing, thoughtfully considering what has been said and then replying.
- 8.** Allowing to finish, pausing, summarizing what you think you heard, and only then replying.