

Active Listening Is Essential for Conversation

The Other Side of a Two-Way Street

BY DALLI SIMMONS

Ever felt ignored in a conversation? Wondered if what you were saying had any impact on a staff member, or whether your medical findings were clearly received by a patient? Your confusion may have been created by a lack of communication on the part of your listener.

When we think about good communication, we often only consider how we deliver information verbally. Rarely do we consider the other side of communication—listening.

Many individuals are surprised to discover that the quality of their interactions is determined by how others perceive them as listeners. When individuals are considered good listeners, they create a sense of connection, understanding and acceptance for the speaker. In turn, professional relationships with good listeners are desired, and these individuals are viewed as excellent resources for advice.

Hone Your Listening Skills

The best way to enhance your listening skills is to remember to employ the five key elements of active listening:

1. focus your attention;
2. maintain open body language;
3. appear engaged;
4. confirm what you have heard; and
5. clarify it.

The first step in active listening is to give the speaker your undivided attention. This can be accomplished by simply avoiding any suggestion of multitasking, which leaves the speaker feeling unimportant and dismissed. Providing the speaker your full attention will signal that your interest makes him or her feel respected and heard.

As you continue to listen to the speaker's presentation, use open body language (see "Open Body Language: Optimizing Your Nonverbal Communication," page 14)—keep your arms apart, direct your attention toward the speaker and use engaging facial expressions. This stance shows you are receptive to the topic of discussion, encouraging the speaker to continue communicating openly.

When a listener is unresponsive in a conversation, it is difficult for a speaker to participate comfortably. The speaker might wonder if the listener is misunderstanding, maybe even ignoring, what is being said. By engaging in direct eye contact, displaying slow affirming head nods and using encouraging phrases,

such as "I see ...," the listener shows the speaker that he or she is a participant in the conversation with a vested interest in continuing it.

Once the speaker has completed a thought, it is important for the listener not to respond too quickly. Asking a few open-ended questions can help you gain additional information and further clarify concepts shared by the speaker. At this point it is important to engage the speaker along the lines of, "Let me see if I understand, what you're saying is ...," to confirm your understanding. Such an inquiry should always end with, "Is that correct?" This will clarify for the speaker that you are simply confirming your understanding to avoid any misunderstanding or wrongful assumptions. When we take the time to clarify and confirm what we have heard as listeners, we ensure our conclusions are in alignment with the speaker's intent, ultimately keeping the conversation on track.

Any suggestion of multitasking on the part of the listener can leave the speaker feeling unimportant and dismissed.

When responding in a conversation, take special care to share your opinions candidly, openly and without judgment or criticism of what the speaker has shared. By avoiding a negative tone, you will prevent the speaker from becoming defensive or guarded, which can hinder communication.

Active Listening Pays Off

Good listening skills are essential for several reasons: They build strong relationships, they help avoid misunderstandings during communication and they lead to more productive conversations. By engaging in active listening skills, we not only hear the words spoken, we also gain a full understanding of the messages being communicated by the speaker.

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