

## Listening for communication

Active listening is a skill that can be acquired and developed with practice. However, active listening can be difficult to master and will, therefore, take time and patience to develop.

'Active listening' means, as its name suggests, actively listening. That is fully concentrating on what is being said rather than just passively 'hearing' the message of the speaker.

Active listening involves listening with all senses. As well as giving full attention to the speaker, it is important that the 'active listener' is also 'seen' to be listening - otherwise the speaker may conclude that what they are talking about is uninteresting to the listener.

Interest can be conveyed to the speaker by using both verbal and non-verbal messages such as maintaining eye contact, nodding your head and smiling, agreeing by saying 'Yes' or simply 'Mmm hmm' to encourage them to continue. By providing this 'feedback' the person speaking will usually feel more at ease and therefore communicate more easily, openly and honestly.

### **Listening is the most fundamental component of interpersonal communication skills.**

Listening is not something that just happens (that is hearing), listening is an active process in which a conscious decision is made to listen to and understand the messages of the speaker.

Listeners should remain neutral and non-judgmental, this means trying not to take sides or form opinions, especially early in the conversation. Active listening is also about patience - pauses and short periods of silence should be accepted.

Listeners should not be tempted to jump in with questions or comments every time there are a few seconds of silence. Active listening involves giving the other person time to explore their thoughts and feelings, they should, therefore, be given adequate time for that.

Verbal communication is the use of words to share information with other people. It can therefore include both spoken and written communication. However, many people use the term to describe only spoken communication. The verbal element of communication is all about the words that you choose, and how they are heard and interpreted.

Verbal communication is any communication that uses words to share information with others. These words may be both spoken and written.

### **Communication is a two-way process**

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Communication is about passing information from one person to another. This means that both the sending and the receiving of the message are equally important. Verbal communication therefore requires both a speaker (or writer) to transmit the message, and a listener (or reader) to make sense of the message. This page discusses both parts of the process.

There are a large number of different verbal communication skills. They range from the obvious (being able to speak clearly, or listening, for example), to the more subtle (such as

reflecting and clarifying). This page provides a summary of these skills, and shows where you can find out more.

It is important to remember that effective verbal communication cannot be fully isolated from non-verbal communication: your body language, tone of voice, and facial expressions

Active listening is an important skill. However, when we communicate, we tend to spend far more energy considering what we are going to say than listening to the other person.

Effective listening is vital for good verbal communication. There are a number of ways that you can ensure that you listen more effectively. These include:

- Be prepared to listen. Concentrate on the speaker, and not on how you are going to reply.
- Keep an open mind and avoid making judgements about the speaker.
- Concentrate on the main direction of the speaker's message. Try to understand broadly what they are trying to say overall, as well as the detail of the words that they are using.
- Avoid distractions if at all possible. For example, if there is a lot of background noise, you might suggest that you go somewhere else to talk.
- Be objective.
- Do not be trying to think of your next question while the other person is giving information.
- Do not dwell on one or two points at the expense of others. Try to use the overall picture and all the information that you have.
- Do not stereotype the speaker. Try not to let prejudices associated with, for example, gender, ethnicity, accent, social class, appearance or dress interfere with what is being said

### Why Ask Questions?

Although the following list is not exhaustive it outlines the main reasons questions are asked in common situations.

- To Obtain Information:

The primary function of a question is to gain information – ‘What time is it?’

- To help maintain control of a conversation

While you are asking questions you are in control of the conversation, assertive people are more likely to take control of conversations attempting to gain the information they need through questioning.

- Express an interest in the other person

Questioning allows us to find out more about the respondent, this can be useful when attempting to build rapport and show empathy or to simply get to know the other person better.

- To clarify a point

Questions are commonly used in communication to clarify something that the speaker has said. Questions used as clarification are essential in reducing misunderstanding and therefore more effective communication.

- To explore the personality and or difficulties the other person may have

Questions are used to explore the feelings, beliefs, opinions, ideas and attitudes of the person being questioned. They can also be used to better understand problems that another person maybe experiencing – like in the example of a doctor trying to diagnose a patient.

- To test knowledge

Questions are used in all sorts of quiz, test and exam situations to ascertain the knowledge of the respondent. ‘What is the capital of France?’ for example.

- To encourage further thought

Questions may be used to encourage people think about something more deeply. Questions can be worded in such a way as to get the person to think about a topic in a new way. ‘Why do you think Paris is the capital of France?’

- In group situations

Questioning in group situations can be very useful for a number of reasons, to include all members of the group, to encourage more discussion of a point, to keep attention by asking questions without advance warning. These examples can be easily related to a classroom of school children.

If you search ‘active listening’ online there are many sites, some offer free listening exercises which you can have a go at, and from those you can design your own.

Read more at: <https://www.skillsyouneed.com/ips/active-listening.html>