

Active listening is a way of relating and responding to another person that assures the communication is not only received but understood. Often when people talk to each other, they are distracted, half listening, or busy formulating a response to what is being said. Active listeners are capable of temporarily setting their agendas aside in order to understand the deeper meaning behind the speaker's communication. Practitioners adopt a specific "active listening mindset" and leverage five unique approaches that evoke information, demonstrate understanding, express empathy, elicit clarification, and summarize key themes. Active listening ("seeking first to understand") minimizes misunderstandings, helps manage conflict, and builds trust. Active listening does not replace casual conversation or other forms of dialogue. Rather, it is a specific practice engaged intentionally in appropriate contexts to supplement and optimize interpersonal communication.

ACTIVE LISTENING GUIDELINES

	PURPOSE	DESCRIPTION	EXAMPLE
Adopt an Active Listening Mindset	Establishes the intention to "seek to understand." Primes the listener for open and effective communication. Demonstrates goodwill and helps the listener to gain the speaker's trust.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Listen without deciding – do not anticipate what the speaker will say or become preoccupied with who is right. Avoid listening autobiographically – suspend your own frame of reference. Give undivided attention, focus fully on the speaker, and express a sincere interest in understanding. Use a neutral tone of voice rather than an agitated or confrontational one. Maintain eye contact and a relaxed posture. 	"I'm very interested in your perspective and would like to have a conversation to better understand where you're coming from."
Questioning	Demonstrates the intention to understand, invites the speaker to elaborate, and expands context for understanding.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ask open ended questions – yes or no questions often feel interrogatory and shut down the conversation. Go through the doors that they open by asking follow-up questions only to topics that the speaker has introduced. 	"What's your thinking on this?" "Tell me more about..." "What happened next?"
Reflecting	Ensures understanding by confirming to the speaker that the communication has been accurately received.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Restate the basic ideas and facts to demonstrate to the speaker that you understand what they are saying. Remain impartial – don't agree or disagree – just reflect the content as you have understood it. 	"So you're taking a conservative approach to this change?" "What I'm hearing you say is..." "If I understand you correctly..."
Empathizing	Acknowledges the speaker's right to their feelings, expresses support regardless of agreement, reduces defensiveness, and promotes cooperation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Suspend judgment. Try to discern how the speaker feels without evaluating or trying to change how they feel. Seek to understand how they feel and why they feel that way. If possible, try to identify with their emotions by connecting with a time in your life when you felt something similar. (Resist the temptation to share about your similar feelings or experience.) 	"You seem upset about..." "I sense your disappointment about..."
Clarifying	Elicits additional information from the speaker and brings into focus any points of the communication that are still unclear.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bring unclear points into focus and/or uncover additional detail by asking follow up questions. (Who, what, when, why, and how questions are useful.) Asking the speaker to give examples that illustrate their point is also helpful. Confirm accurate understanding of the nuances of the communication. 	"That last part was a bit unclear to me – would you explain further?" "Can you give me an example to illustrate what you mean?"
Summarizing	Ensures that the speaker feels the conversation has come full circle, that their perspectives have been addressed, and that trust is carried forward into the future.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Periodically summarize to make sure you are tracking the key themes the speaker is trying to articulate. At the end of the conversation, summarize the main message(s) and get closure by asking if there is anything else that needs to be conveyed. 	"The key theme of what you're sharing with me seems to be..." "Is there anything else you'd like me to know?"