

Active Listening

"The most basic of all human needs is the need to understand and be understood.
The best way to understand people is to listen to them." *Ralph Nichols*

Reality Check

I am on track if:

- I remove distractions and make a commitment to actively listen to others
- I notice what is said – both verbally and non-verbally
- I paraphrase, summarise and check my understanding

Warning signs are if:

- I do more talking than listening!
- I 'pretend' I am listening when I am really thinking about something else!
- I forget what people have told me or have to ask them to repeat themselves

What the experts say about active listening...

Listening is not the same as hearing! Hearing is the *physical* process, listening is the *interpretative* process. Listening involves attention, interpretation and understanding. *Active listening is listening with a purpose.* Julie Starr, author of 'The Coaching Manual' says that listening can be considered 'a gift we give to others'. This is because it requires effort on the part of the listener to put themselves aside for a while and focus on someone else.

Listening serves two broad purposes in the communication process.

- As a sender of a message, listening to your receiver's answer provides feedback on how the other person has interpreted your message.
- As a receiver of a message, listening to the information from the other person allows you to understand the meaning.

Different Levels of Listening

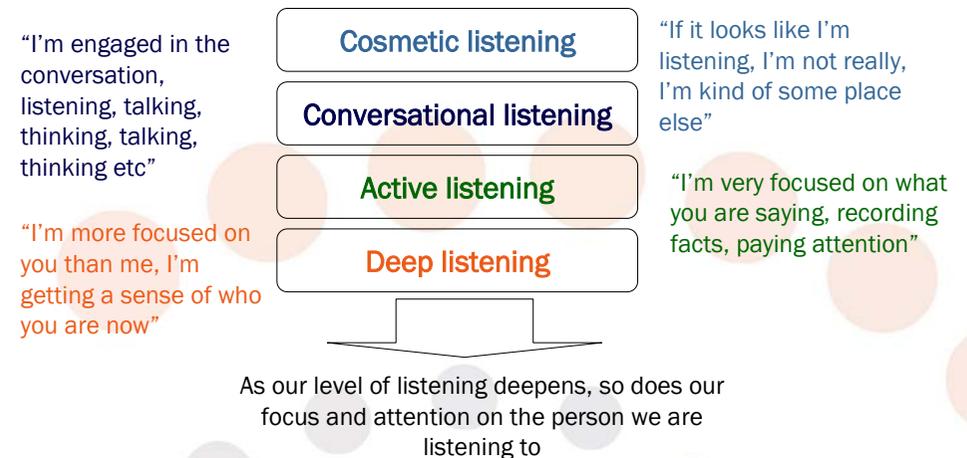


Fig. 5.3 Levels of listening, Julie Starr, The Coaching Manual, 2003

There are many different levels of listening. Look at the graphic on the right of the page. Usually we are pretty good at the first two levels of listening; *cosmetic* and *conversational*. *Cosmetic* listening is something many husbands and wives are guilty of!! 'It looks like I am listening to you, but I am not really. I am really tuned into something else (like the football score...).' *Conversational* listening is the type of listening we do most of the time. This is the type of listening when we *each play* a role. I listen, I talk, I think ... and so does the person you are speaking with. In some situations, however, you need to move to a **deeper level of listening**, where you are really tuned in and focused, so you can understand and interpret what is *actually* going on.

Active listening requires an **intention** to focus on the person you are listening to. **When you are demonstrating active listening, this is what often is occurring¹:**

- The person listening is **making more effort to listen** and process information than speak themselves
- The listener has the **intention of staying focused** on what the other person is saying, so that they can fully *understand* what the speaker is saying

¹ Adapted from The Coaching Manual, Julie Starr, Pearson Education Limited, 2003

- The listener is **mentally taking notes** and registering facts and data, which they may potentially use later in the conversation
- The listener **lets the speaker know they are still listening**, by making appropriate sounds, gestures or comments
- The listener will **actively seek to understand** what the speaker is telling them, by asking clarifying **questions**, **repeating** information back or **offering observations, conclusions or ideas**.

Things I can do to improve my active listening skills:

- **Make a personal commitment to actively listen in the situation that has presented to you.** Active listening requires an **intention** to focus on the person you are listening to. Make a choice – is this a conversation where you want to practice active listening? If yes, then ...
- **Remove distractions.** Shut the door, turn off your phone, turn off your email notifications. Show your intention to pay attention by minimising the chance of interruptions or things that might distract either of you
- **Face the person speaking.** Turn your body towards them, or sit up straight or lean forward slightly to show your attentiveness through your body language. Maintain an appropriate distance.
- **Maintain eye contact.** Don't stare at them, but keep a level of eye contact that you both find comfortable. Shift your gaze and look away from time to time, but aim to maintaining eye contact by focusing your eyes softly on the speaker.
- **Respond appropriately to show that you understand.** Do this with the odd “uh-huh” and nod your head. Smile. Raise your eyebrows. Keep an open posture. Say words such as “really,” “that is interesting,” as well as ask clarifying questions, such as “What did you do then?” and “What did she say?,” “And then what happened?”
- **Try not to think too hard about what you are going to say next.** Focus on what the speaker is saying. This can be difficult, but rest assured that the conversation will have a logical flow once the speaker has been able to make their point. (If necessary, jot key words down to jog your memory at a later time)

- **Stay present! Keep a check on your ‘internal voice’.** If find yourself getting distracted remind yourself of your intention. Re-focus your attention on the speaker. Take mental notes. Listen for key words.
- **Try to keep an open mind.** It is tempting to try to ‘guess the end’ or recommend the ‘answer’. Try to wait until the speaker is finished before making up your mind. And try not to make assumptions about what the speaker is thinking. If in doubt, validate this by asking them a question.
- **Ask infrequent effective questions.** Ask open questions, with only one question at a time. Focus on asking a few effective questions, rather than lots of questions.
- **Give feedback to the speaker.** Share observations about what you are noticing – both the feelings and facts. Paraphrase what you have understood in your own words.
- **Offer attentive silence.** Listeners often talk too much! Don't worry about the pause. Let them fill the space. Use silence positively.
- **Try not to think you must solve things or offer your own opinion too quickly.** Quite often the answer/s lie within the speaker; then may just not know it yet! Draw it out with questions. Awareness can emerge within the speaker through the process of story telling. As good coaches know, active listening can facilitate that happening.

Some other tips and useful information about listening

- **Don't be afraid of silence in a conversation.** It can actually be a powerful technique in situations requiring active listening. Active listening encourages the person speaking to share their thoughts and ideas and “fill the space” created by the “silence”. Don't be tempted to fill it first...
- **Deliberately try to hold back from asking too many questions early on, especially if the ‘talker’ has begun to tell their story.** When we do most of the talking, we diminish our ability to draw information from others. We also have less ability to process the information and therefore respond to it. It can also set the tone for the conversation; is this a time to tell or time to ask & listen? If the latter, ‘bite your tongue’...
- **Even if the person is making a complaint about you, try to wait until the end until you respond.** This will allow the speaker to feel as though their point has been made, and you can know the whole argument before you decide how to respond.

- Some experts quote a 150/650 rule...use it to your advantage...that is, we can speak about 150 words per minute, but we can hear about 650 words per minute. Use the time when you are *not* talking to process the information and sort your thoughts and ideas.
- Be conscious of the potential negatives of the 150/650 rule too...listeners' minds can wander, you may day-dream, you may gain impatient and 'just want the guts of it'. You have to be careful not to let the 'internal voice' distract you. Remember your intention. How high is the 'care' factor in this conversation?
- Listen for key words. We are often taught how to ask questions, but we don't necessarily know what to do with the answers. Listen for 'beacon' words - these "flash" at you and suggest there is something further to explore (these are contextual words - typically around problems, opportunities, performance). Also listen for 'fog' words - which suggest there is something else there behind the "cloud", and perhaps you should delve further... (sometimes, maybe, often...). People may not go into detail until you prod a little more.

Things for your 'tool kit'

Listening self assessment

Complete the self assessment on the right of this page. Identify some opportunities for improvement for yourself. Then pull it out and do it again in a couple of months, after you have tried putting some of these things into practice. What has worked?



Are you "present" when you are listening?

After a conversation with a work colleague, stop to reflect on whether you were 'present' during the conversation...did your 'internal voice' pay you a visit?

Nearly always	Often	Sometimes	Almost Never	Listening Self Assessment
				Do you have an environment which has distractions which contribute to you not being able to always give your full attention? (eg telephone, open plan, noise?)
				Do you pretend you are listening when in fact your mind is thinking about something else?
				Do you continue to do other things while others are talking? (eg reading emails, typing?)
				Do you take notes when people are talking (when it is appropriate to do so?)
				Do you find you do more talking than listening?
				Do you interrupt others?
				Do you find you need to get speakers to repeat themselves?
				Do you suggest solutions before the problem is fully explained?
				Do you misinterpret people, causing them to correct you or leading to communication breakdowns or errors?
				Do you paraphrase, summarise or repeat back what others have said to you?
				Do you find your mind wanders or you forget what people have recently said?
				Do you give feedback or responses which give the speaker a sense that you are listening? (eg head nods, facial gestures, "mm-hmms")
				Do you maintain eye contact with people that are speaking to you?
				Do you "tune out" when you think you know what someone is going to say?
				Do you think about your response instead of listening to the speaker?
				Do you forget instructions / directions people give you?
				Do you notice when what is said verbally is different to what is "said" non-verbally?
				Do you maintain open posture and appropriate distance with the person you are conversing with?
				Do you encourage 'silence' in a conversation?
				Do you find you are the first to fill the silence?