

Overcoming barriers to active listening

If you want to gain respect and have people trust you, being an active listener is a good start. Active listening is a combination of body language and utterances to confirm with the speaker that you are interested in what they have to say and summarising what they have said either as a statement or combination of statement and questions.

Different degrees of summarising result in different levels of active listening as perceived by the speaker.

A listener may simply repeat what they hear. This is the lowest level of active listening and is generally not very effective.

A listener may paraphrase using many of the same words and same sentence structure. This demonstrates at least some internal reasoning about the subject matter. Listeners who paraphrase are likely to be seen as engaged by the speaker.

A listener who reflects on what the speaker says and the emotions which the speaker displayed and uses their own words and own sentence structure, sometimes in the form of questions, demonstrates total engagement. That perceived high level of engagement earns them trust from the speaker.

Active listening is a good thing to do when we want to communicate well with people and earn their trust and respect. From the foregoing, it is also a simple thing to do. Then why do so few people do it? Why are so many people poor at listening?

What are the barriers to being an active listener?

Barriers to active listening

Barriers to active listening are generally different kinds of noise. Some specific examples of noise in the office are:

- Ringing phone
- Difficult customers or co-workers
- Traffic

The more you know about noise, the more you can learn about how to eliminate it. There are five main types of noise that can easily prevent active listening. These are:

1. External Distractions

- Physical distractions or things in your work environment that divert your attention away from the person with whom you're communicating.

2. Speaker Distractions

- Any speaker peculiarities or distinctive characteristics that get in the way of hearing the speaker's message. These may include perceptions by the listener of the speaker such as culture, gender, age, communication style and job role. For example, a technical person who is very left-brained may be difficult for a marketing person who is also very right-brained to listen to.

3. Message Intent/Semantics

- Any phrases and words that can be misinterpreted or have different meanings depending on who is using them or who is receiving them. Acronyms are a classic example. However, often people do not speak in full sentences or if they do, do not give context to a complex message. People seemingly refrain from telling the whole story.

4. Emotional Language

- Phrases that generate emotion and, as a result, inhibit understanding. Use of extreme language such as "you always", "we never", "you must" or "we are forever" make it difficult for people to listen to a speaker.

5. Personal Perspective

- Priorities or personal "baggage" that people carry with them, affecting the communication process. This may include preformed solutions in the mind of the listener which occupy their mind when the speaker talks about a problem. The compulsion to solution find is great and can effectively stop us from listening.

Overcoming these barriers of noise can be difficult. Practising some simple techniques will take away the difficulty and the rewards for doing so are great.

Techniques to practise

1. External Distractions

- This is the simplest of all barriers to overcome. Find a quiet area and sit with your back to windows and away from traffic, both vehicular and people.

2. Speaker Distractions

- This is one of the more difficult barriers to overcome. The first step is to be self-aware that the speaker is distracting you. The trick if you find the speaker is distracting you is to paraphrase or reflect often. Don't allow the distraction to build to a point where you stop listening.

3. Message Intent/Semantics

- This is reasonably simple to deal with by asking questions of clarification. Never let an acronym go unchallenged and use “What...?” questions when the context is ambiguous. “What do you mean by..?” is the simplest form. “Under what circumstances do you see that affecting/being important/occurring...?” is another useful form (Read the article: [“The Power of “What...?”](#) to learn more).

4. Emotional Language

- Another difficult one for those of us not in control of our own emotions. Whilst it may not seem intuitive given that we are talking about being able to paraphrase and reflect what the speaker is saying, this is the time to stop the speaker and call them out for the emotional/extreme language. Inform them that you really want to listen to what they have to say and really want to engage, but it is very difficult to have a conversation when one person is using very emotional or extreme language.

5. Personal Perspective

- Personal baggage when listening is, to my mind, the most difficult noise to overcome. This is because the baggage usually triggers emotions which put us in a place where we are not in full control of ourselves. The technique is to watch for emotional triggers. Are you already not listening? Have you gone flush in the face? Are you thinking more about what you are going to say rather than concentrating on what the speaker is saying? If you can recognise that you are reacting poorly and if you cannot immediately recover your active listening capacity, then ask for a short break. Clear your head and focus on what was your goal of being an active listener. Start the conversation again with a steely determination to focus on what you want to achieve through being an active listener. If you find that you cannot recover your active listening capacity, you can either defer the conversation or ask someone else less likely to be impacted as you are to join the conversation, after providing them an appropriate briefing.

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