

## Active Listening

*Most us assume we are good listeners, but recent research shows that poor listening habits and skills effect more than 70% of all employees, resulting in misunderstandings, errors, missed opportunities, arguments, stalled projects and damaged relationships.*

**L**istening is something that most of us do every day, so it would be reasonable to assume that we're all pretty good listeners, right? Well, most us assume we ARE good listeners, but few of us actually are. The average person who hasn't worked to develop good listening skills is likely to understand and retain only about 50% of any conversation, and that's IMMEDIATELY after the conversation - 48 hours later, average retention drops to less than 25%!

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### QUICK TIPS

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Limit your own talking.

Tune in to the other person.

Put yourself in the other person's shoes.

Don't jump to conclusions too soon.

Listen for ideas and emotions, not just facts.

Turn off your own concerns or worries.

Prepare questions in advance.

Recent research has shown that poor listening habits and skills effect more than 70% of all employees, resulting in misunderstandings, errors, missed opportunities, arguments, stalled projects and damaged relationships. But if all of these negatives result from ineffective listening, why don't we put more effort into becoming MORE effective listeners?

### 1. Effective listening isn't easy.

It's more than just keeping quiet. Medical studies show that someone who's truly putting mental energy into concentrating on another person and listening ACTIVELY actually has increased blood pressure, a higher pulse rate, and more perspiration. So Active listening is hard work - mentally AND physiologically.

### 2. Information overload is rampant.

In today's modern world, there's enormous competition for our attention from advertisements, radio, TV, movies, the internet, books, magazines, newspapers - and with all these incoming sources of information, we've learned to screen out irrelevant data, but in the process we sometimes also screen out things that SHOULD be important to us.

### 3. We think faster than we speak.

There is a considerable difference between speaking speed and thinking speed. The average person speaks at about 135 to 175 words a minute, but can listen up to 400 or 500 words a minute. So, when someone's talking, the impatient listener spends all that time between the listener's fast thinking speed and the speaker's slow talking speed on thoughts of what to say next, or in mentally arguing with the person who's talking, or just on daydreams. It can be like listening to two voices at the same time; the speaker's and your own internal dialogue.

#### 4. Listening isn't something we teach.

Lack of training is another contributor to poor listening skills and habits. Most of us, to do our jobs right, should be doing more listening than speaking, reading, or writing, yet they receive almost no formal education in listening.

#### The benefits of Active Listening

Listening well - listening ACTIVELY - is obviously important, and can provide HUGE benefits to most people: Active listening helps to identify deeper customer needs, it establishes a more comfortable relationship with the customer, reduces the likelihood of misunderstandings or tension, makes problem solving easier and ultimately - leads to increases sales and profits.

But what do we mean exactly by the term ACTIVE listening? And how is it different from just plain old listening? Active listeners take the art of listening to a whole new level of effectiveness. Active Listeners are not only paying attention to the CONTENT of a conversation, but also the other person's INTENT and the underlying EMOTIONS expressed. They listen for what's NOT being said, and they know that HOW a person expresses themselves can tell you as much as WHAT they say. Active Listeners ask great questions, and they follow up on the answers, drilling deeper with additional questions to make sure their understanding is clear, complete and mutual.

#### Improve your Active Listening ability.

- This may seem obvious, but LIMIT your own talking. You can't talk and listen at the same time. So no matter how much information you think you need to share with the other person, if you're going to be an active listener then most of the time your mouth should be closed.
- Tune in to the other person. Be genuinely interested and show it. Are you giving your full attention or is your mind wandering? Concentrate on shutting out any outside distractions. You have to be genuinely "engaged" in a conversation to encourage others to speak freely.
- Think like the other person. They have problems, needs, and opinions that are important. Put yourself in their shoes - what would YOU be thinking and feeling if you were on THEIR end of the selling relationship? You'll understand their needs better if you try to get to their point of view.
- Hold your fire. Don't jump to conclusions too soon. If someone makes a statement or asks a question or expresses a concern, respond only after you're certain you FULLY understand their perspective.

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#### QUICK TIPS

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Don't just pay attention to the CONTENT of a conversation, but also focus on the other person's INTENT.

Listen for the underlying EMOTIONS expressed.

Listen for what's NOT being said.

HOW a person expresses themselves can tell you as much as WHAT they say.

Ask good questions, and drill deeper with to make sure your understanding is clear, complete and mutual.

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- Listen for IDEAS and EMOTIONS, not just words. You want to get the comprehensive picture, not just isolated bits and pieces. And notice nonverbal language. A shrug, smile, laugh, gesture, facial expression, and other body movements often speak louder than words.
- Use interjections. An occasional "I see," or "uh uh," or "Is that so" shows the other person you're still there, still engaged - but don't overdo it - Don't use interjections as meaningless conversation filler. Just make sure that you're using interjections to let the other person know you're tracking with them.
- Turn off your own worries. Personal worries and problems not connected with the issue at hand can form a kind of "static" that keeps you from hearing the other person's message. So whatever else might be going on in your life - check those problems at the door.
- Take notes. This will help you remember important points. But be selective. Trying to take down everything that's said can result in being left far behind or retaining irrelevant details. But when an important point is made, make sure you write it down.
- Prepare in advance. You should have a PLAN for questioning prepared in advance - this frees your mind for ACTIVE LISTENING. A Questions "MAP" or checklist of items you want to discuss and clarify can help keep you on track and insure that your ACTIVE LISTENING effort pays off.
- Ask REFLECTIVE questions - If there are any issues you are uncertain about, or comments that aren't clear to you, repeat back what you just heard and ask if you understand correctly. This can often quick clear up miscommunication that stems from different interpretations of words and phrases.
- Listen for the other person's particular LANGUAGE and communication style; their words, phrases, ways of expressing themselves - and to the degree possible, without mimicking or obviously imitating them - use their language.

When you're communicating with an individual or a group, focus your attention on the person speaking, and only the person speaking. This means eliminating or ignoring internal distractions (your own thoughts), external disruptions (noise, television, telephone, etc.) and if possible, creating a receptive, distraction-free environment for the conversation.

Exercise emotional control - this means dealing successfully with highly charged subjects or sensitive words and statements in a manner that allows you to remain focused on the other person's most important issues. It helps to be aware of your own sensitivities, which might include disinterest in the subject under discussion, emotionally charged words, bad grammar, a limited vocabulary, or topics such as religion and politics. Being aware of sensitive areas helps you control, or preferably eliminate, YOUR emotional reactions, allowing you to concentrate on the other person's needs and issues.

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