

Brilliant

BRILLIANT COMMUNICATION SKILLS

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brilliant communication skills



Every person I work with knows something better than me. My job is to listen long enough to find it and use it.

Jack Nicholson

Active listening

What, do you think, is the difference between listening and hearing? Are they the same thing?

If you hear something, you are simply *aware* of sound. Hearing is a *passive* process; you don't have to make any effort to receive the sounds. And the sounds you hear have no significance until you give them some meaning.

Listening, on the other hand, is an *active* process, requiring you to pay attention, interpret and derive meaning from the messages you hear and see.

Active listening takes things one step further. It is a communication technique, a structured form of listening and responding that focuses attention on the speaker with the aim of developing mutual empathy and understanding.

Active listening is a technique used in professional situations such as counselling, mediating, managing and mentoring. But the principles are useful for all of us in a variety of situations,

whether it's discussing ideas at work, interacting with your children or making small talk in the supermarket queue.

The way to become a better listener is to learn and practise active listening.

How to be an active listener

Active listening is certainly not complicated. You simply need a positive, engaged attitude and lots of practice!

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There are two elements to active listening: acceptance and acknowledgement. They both help you to experience interest and understanding in what the other person is saying. Acceptance and acknowl-

edgement also ensure that the other person *knows* you are interested and understand what they are saying.

Acceptance is a *passive* act; it is the ability to listen without attempting to negate what the other person is saying by, for example, interrupting, judging or dismissing. Communicating acceptance between you creates feelings of confidence and trust.

Acknowledgement is an *active* process; it happens in communication when you respond with recognition and consideration of what the other person has expressed.

Both acceptance and acknowledgement are conveyed using verbal and non-verbal communication.

Non-verbal responses

Non-verbal acceptance and acknowledgement can be as simple as making eye contact, a nod of the head, a smile or a touch on the arm. It can also be profound: holding someone, a sympathetic look or a gentle touch can reach out in ways that words cannot. Using facial expressions that reflect the feelings and

content of what the other person is saying is also an effective way to show that you are engaged with what they are saying.

When someone is talking to you, they will (usually unintentionally) look for verbal and non-verbal responses to know whether or not they are being listened to. Non-verbal responses do not necessarily have to convey that you agree with the other person; you are simply showing that you are listening.



brilliant tip

The next time you talk to someone, be aware of *their* non-verbal responses. What do you notice they do to convey non-verbal acceptance and acknowledgement?

Verbal and paraverbal responses

Helpful responses facilitate communication by helping the speaker to feel understood. The brilliant impact box below sets out some of the key listening techniques, their purpose and examples. They are techniques for you to use when you are communicating with and listening to other people. You will be familiar with all of them – they're not difficult to recognise or understand – but the challenge lies in using them effectively in your relationships with other people. You'll need practice and patience!



brilliant impact

Listening technique	Purpose	Examples
Utterances	To show you are listening and are interested To encourage the speaker to continue	Uh-huh I see Uh? Really? Yes Oh



Listening technique	Purpose	Examples
Reflecting, paraphrasing, summarising	To check meaning To show you are listening and attempting to understand. Helps develop empathy	So, as I understand it ... What I think you're saying is ... Am I right? You think that ...? You feel that ...?
Clarifying	To avoid any misunderstanding and be clear	I just want to make sure I understand you. Can I clarify? Can I ask ...? Can you tell me ...? What did you mean by ...?

Verbal acknowledgement and acceptance shows that you have been listening; that you are paying attention and focusing on understanding what the other person is saying.

Utterances. By using small verbal comments like 'yes', 'uh-huh', 'go on' or 'I see', you are signalling your interest and encouraging the speaker to continue.

Reflecting, paraphrasing. This involves reflecting on what the listener has said but using your own words and phrases, interpretation and understanding – often a summary of what the other person has said – to check you've understood their sense and significance. This can be quite a challenge; while the other person is speaking, you, the listener, have to keep a mental note of their main points or message. (You may use your senses to help with this – visual communicators, for example, may visualise the main points the speaker is making.)

When reflecting and paraphrasing, you do not have to agree with the speaker; you only state what you think the speaker said and how you have interpreted what was said. This helps each of you to know whether or not you've understood. If you haven't understood what the speaker is trying to express, they can explain some more.

Active listening is possibly the most important communication skill that you could learn – it's the quickest route to developing rapport, empathy and understanding. It is a skill which counsellors, negotiators, managers, sales people and teachers use more

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than any other skill. Of course, professional situations are a structured, organised way of communicating. It would be unnatural to reflect and paraphrase every time someone spoke to you.

However, active listening can be used in a wide range of formal and informal situations; the trick is to listen *as if* you were going to reflect and paraphrase (whether you do so or not). This is why *active listening* is so powerful. It helps you to really listen.

So, practise active listening and remind yourself that your goal is to understand what the other person is saying.



brilliant example

Active listening

Lin: 'I had an argument with Max at work and we haven't spoken since then.'

Chris: 'Really?' (Utterance)

Lin: 'Yes. It's been two weeks and it's not just bothering me, it's also causing a real atmosphere in the office. Today Jan, who sits opposite me, told me that they'd all noticed something was wrong between me and Max.'

Chris: 'Hmmm, it's affecting you and everyone else.' (Paraphrasing)

Lin: 'Yes, I'm quite upset. It's going to have to be sorted out, otherwise it'll create big problems when we all go away to the annual conference in July. There's quite a bit of planning that needs to be done for the presentation our team are going to be giving – both Max and I are involved in contributing to that. And, of course, there will be a party on the last night



of the conference. That won't be much fun if we're still not talking. I really want to clear the air but he just makes me so angry, assuming that because I don't have children I can't possibly understand how hard it is for him to take on extra work. I have commitments too, you know.'

Chris: 'Let me get this right. You were angry because Max *thinks* you don't understand what it is like to have kids. Are you saying you're going to have to patch up your differences, otherwise it's going to make things difficult for planning and attending the conference?' (Reflecting, paraphrasing and clarifying)

Lin: 'Yes. Well, we don't *have* to sort it out, but things will be a lot easier for me, Max and everyone else if we do.'

Chris: 'What's the next step?' (Open question – see next section)

Lin: 'Maybe I should just tell him that I *do* understand it is hard, but that if we work closely on this, I'm happy to do some work this weekend so we can get ahead with the conference planning.'

Chris: 'Sounds good.'

Lin: 'Yes, that's what I think I will do.'

Actively listening makes the speaker feel understood and encourages open conversation.

Often, you'll find that you can interpret the speaker's words in terms of feelings. So, instead of just repeating what happened, you might add, 'It sounds like you felt *angry* when ... happened.' The speaker might agree or adjust their message, for example, by replying, 'Not really angry, just confused.'



When you are listening to somebody, completely, attentively, then you are listening not only to the words, but also to the feeling of what is being conveyed, to the whole of it, not part of it.

Jiddu Krishnamurti