

# Sharpen Your Active Listening Skills<sup>1</sup>

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As adults, we do not usually question our ability to listen. After all, haven't we been listening all of our lives? We have two ears. They receive sounds. Before we could talk, we were listening. Without even paying attention, we listen. Every moment of every day, we listen without even thinking. But, here's the point: listening without thinking is not *ACTIVE* Listening.

Active Listening is careful, concentrated, and focused listening. It is not automatic. It is a skill that is developed and sharpened. It takes practice—a great deal of practice.

The more effectively you listen to a customer, the more successful you will be. The more you understand your customer—what he or she is saying, what he or she is implying, what he or she is feeling, what he or she wants and hopes and wishes for—the more you understand your customer, the more you will be successful. And such understanding requires skilled listening.

A half a century ago, Dr. Thomas Gordon, author of *Parent Effectiveness Training*,<sup>2</sup> referred to skilled listening as "Active Listening," which he described as listening *with* instead of listening *to* another person. This means that you are an active participant with the other person when you are listening. You are in a relaxed but alert stance. You pay attention. You concentrate. You establish good eye contact. You watch expressions, movements, and actions. You hear tones of voice. You use every sense at your disposal to perceive and understand what the other person is saying. And you let the other person know that he or she has been heard by giving that person feedback.

The most effective Active Listening takes place when you are in a problem-solving mode, when you are being strictly logical, unfettered by your emotional and judgmental filters. While in this state, you also are more capable of seeing around the other person's filters. You see him or her with more clarity. You are receptive. You are analytical. You are more likely to understand the link between what the other person is feeling and the words being said.

What steps can we take to learn how to Actively Listen? How do we go about developing such a skill?

- ◆ **The first step is to *stop talking*.** The hardest thing for most of us to learn is to stop talking. How can you Actively Listen to someone when you are busy talking?



We tend to talk too much because we are nervous. Most of us are a little nervous in social situations, particularly when we are meeting people for the first time. When they are not speaking, the silence seems to go on for a long time. We get anxious. Over the years, we have learned to deal with that anxiety by talking—we kind of "fill in the silent spaces." With such a life-long habit, it's no wonder we find it hard to stop talking and just listen.

- ◆ **The second step is to *pay attention*.** This means many things. Concentrate on what the other person is saying. Don't fidget. Don't look around at people passing by. Don't glance at your watch, stare at the ceiling, or all other such distractive behaviors.

Consider that the number of words we think per minute is well over twice the number we speak per minute. This means that our minds need less than half the time to listen to what the other person is saying—during the rest of the time, our thoughts



<sup>1</sup> Take a moment and explore some of my other Timely Tips: <http://www.arniedahlke.com/timelytips.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Gordon, Thomas. (1970). *Parent Effectiveness Training: The Proven Program for Raising Responsible Children*. New York, NY: Three Rivers Press.

wonder. We think about the other person, about something we did this morning, about what we need to do later, and so on. Compared to our thinking, the other person is speaking in slow motion. It's no wonder we have difficulty paying attention and staying focused.

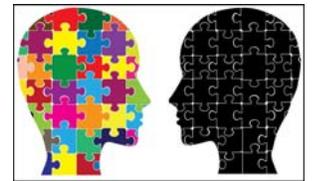
- ◆ **The third step is to *listen objectively*.** Communication between two people passes through a number of "filters", such as our beliefs, the critical judgments we make, and the way we feel about the person speaking or what is being said. At times, those filters are so strong that we hear something other than what is being said or we even fail to hear anything all.

The most effective listening is done while in what psychologists call the "Adult ego state." This is when you are in a problem-solving mode, when you are being strictly logical, unfettered by your emotional and judgmental filters. While in this state, you also are more capable of seeing around the other person's filters. You see that person with more clarity. You are receptive. You are analytical. You are more likely to understand the link between what he or she is feeling and the words being said.



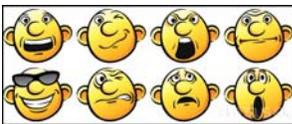
To listen objectively you must be in your Adult ego state, so you can process what you hear without weighting it down with evaluative judgments. Well known psychologist Carl Rogers asserted that our tendency to evaluate is the biggest barrier to effective communication. It is impossible to hear objectively when you are making critical judgments about the speaker.

- ◆ **The fourth step is to *listen analytically*.** Sometimes people appear to be unorganized or fuzzy-minded when they describe something to you. They tend to ramble or talk in circles and you have a hard time following them. You can listen more effectively by listening analytically—identify themes and organize what is being said around a few key ideas.



Organize what you hear as you go along. Mentally review. Listen for details. Fill in with supporting facts. As the listener, the burden is on you to make sense out of what the other person is saying.

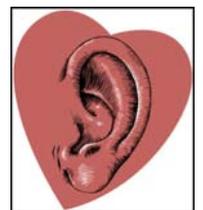
- ◆ **The fifth step is to *observe nonverbal messages*.** A fleeting expression. A tightening of muscles. A change in body posture. All of these actions communicate something.



It is easier for people to choose what words they use when talking than it is for them to control their physical reactions. Often what someone says is contradicted by how he or she acts. Even the size of the pupils of his eyes is affected by feelings—when surprised or afraid, pupils dilate; when calculating, they contract.

- ◆ **The sixth step is to *listen with empathy*.** The word "empathy" comes from a German word (einführung) which means "feeling into." Examples of you listening with empathy is when you find yourself choking up as you watch someone who is crying over the loss of a loved one or when you lean forward in your seat, all tensed up, as you watch a hero struggling through a tough situation in an adventure movie.

The empathic listener tries to feel the world as the speaker feels it. In other words, the empathic listener feels the world from the speaker's point of view. At the same time, however, the most *effective*, empathic listeners do not lose their own objectivity or personal point of view as they put themselves into the speaker's internal way of feeling things.



And there is a special side effect of empathy. The more you are able to listen with empathy, the more you will put a person at ease. The more you put the person at ease, the more he or she will open up to you, the more you will learn about that person, and the more successful will be the communication between the two of you.

To summarize, simply listening to someone is not enough. **Active Listening** is a special skill that is developed with practice.

