

## The Art of Active Listening (CDE #16069)

By Candice Solie, Minnesota Chapter

Listening is an integral part of effective communication; however, few are ever taught how to listen effectively. For most, hearing what was said is synonymous with listening to what was said. In reality, they are distinctly different. Hearing is a physical act defined as “the process, function or power of perceiving sound.” Listening is an intellectual act defined as “hearing sounds with thoughtful intention.” Therefore, unlike hearing, which for most is a natural function, listening is a skill that improves through training and practice in the art of active listening.

Active listening involves demonstrating an interest and understanding in what is being said through staying focused, asking questions, listening for the main point(s) and listening for the rationale behind what is being said. As with any skill, you learn active listening through the recognition and application of basic techniques: in this case, nonverbal attending, open-ended questions, paraphrasing and reflecting feelings.

### Nonverbal Attending

Nonverbal attending is signaling physically that you are listening. The use of nonverbal attending sets a comfortable tone, encourages the speaker to keep talking and demonstrates your concern and interest. It also signals the speaker that you are interested in what he or she has to say and are following the conversation.

Examples of nonverbal attending include maintaining eye contact, leaning slightly forward, allowing pauses, raising eyebrows, smiling, nodding and sending brief verbal messages (e.g., “Umm-humm,” “Oh, I see.”).

Non-verbal attending helps you stay focused on what is being said so you don’t miss key points. It tells your mind, “Don’t wander. This is important. Stay tuned.”

Telecommunicators must communicate effectively without the benefit of face-to-face interaction with callers. However, even in this situation they can use non-verbal attending, not as a means of communicating physically with callers, but to help them remain focused and project a tone and manner of speech of interest in the caller. For instance, to project a more pleasant tone, smile. To feel more focused and in control, particularly in challenging situations, stand up.

### Open-Ended Questions

Open-ended questions can’t be answered “yes” or “no.” They require the responding person to provide more information. Open-ended questions include phrases like “tell me about,” “why,” “how,” “describe” and “explain.”

Use open-ended questions to encourage speakers to open up, let them expand on a subject in a free-ranging and comprehensive way and assure speakers their thoughts matter to you. These questions can loosen up quiet or reticent people and help them vent anger or negative emotions.

#### **Examples:**

*Speaker:* “Bringing in this new CAD system was the worst mistake we’ve ever made!”

*Open-ended question response:* “What makes you say that?”

*Speaker:* “I think we’ll have problems changing to 12-hour shifts.”

*Open-ended response:* “Tell me what your concerns are.”

Open-ended questions help you remain clear on what is being said and demonstrate your interest in the conversation.

Basic telecommunicator training includes instruction on the five Ws: where, when, what, who, why. The five Ws are open-ended questions designed to help telecommunicators obtain necessary information expeditiously and remain clear on what is being said. You can enhance these questions by applying the active-listening questioning techniques of paraphrasing and reflecting feelings.

### **Paraphrasing**

Paraphrasing is a brief rephrasing of information provided by the speaker. It provides a restatement of the essence of the information in your own words. The use of paraphrasing demonstrates you are listening and understand what the speaker is saying. It helps you make sure your interpretation or understanding is correct. It lets the speaker explore the issues, but does not suggest you agree, and encourages the speaker to analyze and discuss the subject matter more fully.

#### **Examples:**

*Speaker:* "I can't figure out what to do with this trainee. She can do the job, but it seems like she always wants to do things her way, as opposed to our way."

*Paraphrasing response:* "You see her as having difficulty following our policies and procedures?"

*Caller:* "... and he has a gun."

*Paraphrasing response:* "You say you saw a gun?"

Paraphrasing helps you listen for the main points. It is not uncommon for people to be somewhat vague or have trouble coming to the point when discussing sensitive issues. By restating the speaker's main points in your own words, you not only assist your own understanding, but also help the speaker to clarify his or her main points and concerns.

### **Reflecting Feelings**

Reflecting feelings is repeating in short, declarative statements the emotions or feelings the speaker is communicating directly or indirectly. It asserts your awareness and understanding of the speaker's feelings without indicating whether or not you agree. The use of reflecting feelings helps open communication channels and establish rapport, lets the speaker feel understood, gives the speaker freedom to explore the issue further and helps the speaker vent emotions or let off steam.

#### **Examples:**

*Speaker:* "Since I've become a shift supervisor, I'm not sure how I'm doing. I don't know if I'm really in control. Sometimes I think I made the wrong decision to accept the promotion."

*Reflecting-feelings response:* "You're afraid you won't make it in your new position?"

*Caller:* "Please help me. I don't know what to do."

*Reflecting-feelings response:* "I understand you're scared. I'll stay on the line with you until help arrives."

Reflecting feelings helps you listen for the rationale behind what the speaker is saying. It involves listening empathetically to help you understand where the speaker is coming from.

Active listening enhances your communications abilities in both your personal and professional lives. It helps you gain a better understanding of what everyone around you is really saying, so your relationships are improved and potential conflicts minimized. Active listening can be difficult to master. It may feel awkward at first, but if you practice it daily in a variety of situations, it will become natural and automatic. Then you will no longer just hear someone talk; you'll be listening to what they're saying.

**About the Author**

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