

Active listening

Active listening is a communication technique used in counselling, training and conflict resolution, which requires the listener to feed back what they hear to the speaker, by way of re-stating or paraphrasing what they have heard in their own words, to confirm what they have heard and moreover, to confirm the understanding of both parties.

1 Comprehending

Comprehension is “shared meaning between parties in a communication transaction”. This is the first step in the listening process. The second challenge is being able to discern breaks

2 Retaining

Retaining is the second step in the listening process. Memory is essential to the listening process because the information we retain when involved in the listening process is how we create meaning from words. We depend on our memory to fill in the blanks when we're listening. Because everyone has different memories, the speaker and the listener may attach different meanings to the same statement. However, our memories are fallible and we can't remember everything that we've ever listened to. There are many reasons why we forget some information that we've received. The first is cramming. When you cram there is a lot of information entered into your short term memory cache. Shortly after cramming, when you don't need the information anymore, it is purged from your brain before it can be transferred into your long term memory. The second reason is that you aren't paying attention when you receive the information. Alternatively, when you receive the information you may not attach importance to it, so it loses its meaning. A fourth reason is at the time the information was received you lacked motivation to listen carefully to better remember it. Using information immediately after receiving it enhances information retention and lessens the forgetting curve (the rate at which we no longer retain information in our memory). Retention is lessened when we engage in mindless listening, where little effort is made to listen to a speaker's message. Mindful listening is active listening.

3 Responding

Listening is an interaction between speaker and listener. It adds action to a normally passive process.

4 Tactic

Active listening involves the listener observing the speaker's behavior and body language. Having the ability to interpret a person's body language lets the listener develop a more accurate understanding of the speaker's message.^[1] Having heard, the listener may then paraphrase the speaker's words. It is important to note that the listener is not necessarily agreeing with the speaker—simply stating what was said.

Individuals in conflict often contradict each other. Am-bushing occurs when one listens to someone else's argument for its weaknesses and ignore its strengths.^[2] This may include a distortion of the speaker's argument to gain a competitive advantage. On the other hand, if one finds that the other party understands, an atmosphere of cooperation can be created.^[3]

In the book *Leader Effectiveness Training*, Thomas Gordon, who coined the term “active listening,”^[4] states “Active listening is certainly not complex. Listeners need only restate, in their own language, their impression of the expression of the sender. ... Still, learning to do Active Listening well is a rather difficult task ...”^[5]

5 Use

Active listening is used in a wide variety of situations, including public interest advocacy, community organizing, tutoring,^[6] medical workers talking to patients,^[7] HIV counseling,^[8] helping suicidal persons,^[9] management,^[10] counseling and journalistic settings. In groups it may aid in reaching consensus. It may also be used in casual conversation or small talk to build understanding, though this can be interpreted as condescending.

A listener can use several degrees of active listening, each resulting in a different quality of communication.

The proper use of active listening results in getting people to open up, avoiding misunderstandings, resolving conflict, and building trust.^[11] In a medical context, benefits

may include increased patient satisfaction,^[7] improved cross-cultural communication,^[12] improved outcomes,^[7] or decreased litigation.^[13]

Active listening can be lifted by the active listening observation scale.^[14]

6 Barriers to active listening

Barriers to active listening are those which create hindrance in effective communication between the speaker and listener. Some of the barriers are due to hunger or fatigue of the listener due to which a listener gets irritated and doesn't want to listen to the speaker. Sometime it is due to the language which is used by the speaker (use of high sounding and bombastic words) which can lead to ambiguity and finally it affects the active listening. Such barriers include distractions, trigger words, vocabulary, and limited attention span.^[15]

Listening barriers may be psychological (e.g. emotions) or physical (e.g. noise and visual distraction).

6.1 Shift response

The first of these is the shift response which is the general tendency in a conversation to affix the attention to you. This is a type of **conversational narcissism**; the tendency of listeners to turn the topic of conversations to themselves without showing sustained interest in others listening.^[16] A support response is the opposite of a shift response; it is an attention giving method and a cooperative effort to focus the conversational attention on the other person. Instead of being me-oriented like shift response, it is we-oriented.^[17] It is the response most likely to be used by a competent communicator^[2]

6.2 Understanding of Non-verbal cues

Ineffective listeners are unaware of non-verbal cues, although they dramatically affect how people listen. To a certain extent, it is also a perceptual barrier. As much as 93 percent of people's attitudes are formed by non-verbal cues. This should help one to avoid undue influence from non-verbal communication. In most cases, the listener does not understand the non-verbal cues which the speaker is using. A person may show fingers to emphasize a point, but this may be perceived as an intent by the speaker to place their fingers in the listener's eyes. Overuse of non-verbal cues also creates distortion, and as a result listeners may be confused and forget the correct meaning.^[18]

7 Overcoming listening barriers

To use the active listening technique to improve interpersonal communication, one puts personal emotions aside during the conversation, asks questions and paraphrases back to the speaker to clarify understanding, and one also tries to overcome all types of environment distractions. Judging or arguing prematurely is a result of holding onto a strict personal opinion.^[19] This hinders the ability to be able to listen closely to what is being said. Eye contact and appropriate body languages are seen as important components to active listening. The stress and intonation may also keep them active and away from distractions.

8 Misconceptions about listening

There are several misconceptions about listening. We have no control over what we hear. Listening on the other hand is an active process that constructs meaning from both verbal and nonverbal messages.^[2]

9 Active listening in music

Active Listening has been developed as a concept in music and technology by François Pachet, researcher at Sony Computer Science Laboratory, Paris. Active listening in music refers to the idea that listeners can be given some degree of control on the music they listen to, by means of technological applications mainly based on **artificial intelligence** and **information theory** techniques, by opposition to traditional listening, in which the musical media is played passively by some neutral device^{[20][21][22]}

10 Criticism

A Munich-based **marital therapy** study conducted by Dr. Kurt Hahlweg and associates found that even after employing active listening techniques in the context of couple's therapy, the typical couple was still distressed.^[23] Active listening was criticized by John Gottman's *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work* as being of limited usefulness: "Active listening asks couples to perform emotional Olympic-level emotional gymnastics when their relationship can barely walk. . . . After studying some 650 couples and tracking the fate of their marriages for up to fourteen years, we now understand that this approach to counseling doesn't work, *not just* because it's nearly impossible for most couples to do well, but more importantly because *successful conflict resolution isn't what makes marriages succeed*. One of the most startling findings of our research is that most couples who have maintained happy marriages rarely do anything that even partly resembles active listening when they're

upset.”^[24]

Robert F. Scuka defends active listening by arguing that “a careful reading of the Hahlweg et al. (1984) study reveals that Gottman cites only certain (one-sided) results from the study. He also overlooks several important considerations that call into question his implied dismissal of the RE model as a legitimate therapeutic intervention for distressed couples.”^[25]

11 See also

- Appreciative listening
- Auditory processing disorder
- Four-sides model
- Informational listening
- Nonviolent Communication
- Reflective listening
- Workplace listening

12 References

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13 External links

- Listening is powerful medicine, *National Public Radio*, February 2009
- Active Listening International Online Training Program On Intractable Conflict: Conflict Research Consortium, University of Colorado, USA
- Empathic listening skills How to listen so others feel heard, or listening first aid (University of California). Download a one hour seminar on empathic listening and attending skills.
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