

How to Become a Better Listener

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It's never been more important — or more difficult — for leaders to be good listeners. Job switching is rampant, and remote work means we don't get the nonverbal cues we'd pick up from an in-person conversation. Employers who fail to listen and thoughtfully respond to their people's concerns will see greater turnover. And given that the highest rates of turnover are among top performers who can take clients and projects with them, and the frontline employees responsible for the customer experience, the risk is clear.

While listening is a skill universally lauded, it's rarely, if ever, explicitly taught as such, outside of training for therapists. A 2015 study showed that while 78% of accredited undergraduate business schools list “presenting” as a learning goal, only 11% identified “listening.”

Listening well is the kind of skill that benefits from not just teaching but coaching — ongoing, specialized instruction from someone who knows your personal strengths, weaknesses, and most importantly, habits. Reading this article won't turn you into a champion listener any more than reading an article on balance will turn you into Simone Biles. Our aims are to increase your understanding of what good listening is and offer research-backed advice to improve your listening skills.

Becoming a Better Listener

A participant in any conversation has two goals: first, to understand what the other person is communicating (both the overt meaning and the emotion behind it) and second, to convey interest, engagement, and caring to the other person. This second goal is not “merely” for the sake of kindness, which would be reason enough. If people do not feel listened to, they will cease to share information.

This is “active listening.” It has three aspects:

- **Cognitive:** Paying attention to all the information, both explicit and implicit, that you are receiving from the other person, comprehending, and integrating that information
- **Emotional:** Staying calm and compassionate during the conversation, including managing any emotional reactions (annoyance, boredom) you might experience
- **Behavioral:** Conveying interest and comprehension verbally and nonverbally

Getting good at active listening is a lifetime endeavor. However, even minor improvements can make a big difference in your listening effectiveness. Here's a “cheat sheet” with nine helpful tips:

1. Repeat people's last few words back to them.

If you remember nothing else, remember this simple practice that does so much. It makes the other person feel listened to, keeps you on track during the conversation, and provides a pause for both of you to gather thoughts or recover from an emotional reaction.

2. Don't "put it in your own words" unless you need to.

Multiple studies have shown that direct repetition works, even though it may feel unnatural. Rephrasing what your interlocutor has said, however, can increase both emotional friction and the mental load on both parties. Use this tool only when you need to check your own comprehension — and say, explicitly, "I'm going to put this in my own words to make sure I understand."

3. Offer nonverbal cues that you're listening — but only if it comes naturally to you.

Eye contact, attentive posture, nodding and other nonverbal cues are important, but it's hard to pay attention to someone's words when you're busy reminding yourself to make regular eye contact. If these sorts of behaviors would require a significant habit change, you can instead, let people know at the beginning of a conversation that you're on the non-reactive side, and ask for their patience and understanding.

4. Pay attention to nonverbal cues.

Remember that active listening means paying attention to both the explicit and implicit information that you're receiving in a conversation. Nonverbal cues, such as tone of voice, facial expression, and body language, are usually where the motivation and emotion behind the words is expressed.

5. Ask more questions than you think you need to.

This both improves the other person's experience of feeling listened to, ensures that you fully understand their message, and can serve as a prompt to make sure important details aren't overlooked.

6. Minimize distractions as much as possible.

You'll want to avoid noise, interruptions, and other external distractions, but it's important to minimize your internal distractions as well. If you are preoccupied with another topic, take time to re-center. If you know a conversation might be upsetting, calm yourself as much as possible before going in.

7. Acknowledge shortcomings.

If you know going into a conversation that you may be a subpar listener — because you're exhausted from a dozen intense conversations earlier that day, unfamiliar with the topic under discussion, or any other reason — let the other person know right

away. If you lose your footing during the conversation — a lapse of attention or comprehension — say you didn't quite get it and ask the person to repeat themselves.

8. Don't rehearse your response while the other person is talking.

Take a brief pause after they finish speaking to compose your thoughts. This will require conscious effort! People think about four times faster than other people talk, so you've got spare brainpower when you're a listener. Use it to stay focused and take in as much information as possible.

9. Monitor your emotions.

If you have an emotional reaction, slow the pace of the conversation. Do more repetition, pay attention to your breathing. You don't want to respond in a way that will cause the other person to disengage. Nor — and this is a subtler thing to avoid — do you want to fall into the easy defense mechanism of simply tuning out what you don't want to hear, or rushing to discount or argue it away.

The Skills Involved in Active Listening

Listening is a complex job, with many different subtasks, and it's possible to be good at some and bad at others. Rather than thinking of yourself as a "good listener" or a "bad listener," it can be useful to evaluate yourself on the subskills of active listening. Below is a breakdown of these subskills along with recommendations for what to do if you're struggling with any one of them.

First, let's start with what we call the "picking-up skills," the skills that allow you to gather the information you need.

1. Hearing

If you have hearing loss, be honest about it. For whatever reason, people will boast about their poor vision but hide hearing loss. Help break that stigma. Ask for what you need — e.g., for people to face you when talking, or give you written materials in advance. Let others know, so that they will be alert to indications that you may have missed something.

2. Auditory processing

This refers to how well the brain makes sense of the sound cues. If you're struggling to understand someone, ask questions to clarify. If it's helpful, from time to time recap your understanding of both the subject and the other person's reason for bringing it up — and ask them to validate or refine it. (Make it clear that you are doing this for your own understanding.)

3. Reading body language, tone of voice, or social cues accurately

The advice for auditory processing applies here. Asking a trusted colleague to be your nonverbal communication translator may be helpful in situations where accurate listening is important, but confidentiality is not.

The next two skills involve staying mentally present in the conversational moment.

4. Maintaining attention

If you often find yourself distracted when trying to listen to someone, control your environment as much as possible. Before you begin, set an intention by taking a moment to deliberately focus on *this* person, in *this* moment, in a conversation that will be about *this* topic. If appropriate, use a written agenda or in-the-moment whiteboarding to keep yourself and the other person aligned. If you do have a lapse in attention, admit it, apologize, and ask the person to repeat what they said. (Yes, it's embarrassing, but it happens to everyone occasionally and to some of us frequently.) Arrive a few minutes early to acclimate yourself if you are having a meeting in a new place.

5. Regulating your emotional response

Meditation has both immediate and short-term benefits for relaxation and emotional control, regardless of the particular practice. The key is to do it twice a day for 10 to 20 minutes, focusing on a mental image or repeating a phrase and dismissing other thoughts as they come.

In the moment, focus on your breathing and do a “grounding exercise” if you feel agitated. These are simple psychological practices that work to pull people back to the present moment by directing attention to the immediate environment. Typical exercises include naming five colored objects that you can see (e.g., green couch, black dog, gold lamp, white door, red rug) or identifying four things that you are hearing, seeing, feeling, and smelling (e.g., hearing birdsong, seeing chair, feeling chenille upholstery, smelling neighbors' cooking).

Finally, the active listener has to pull the entire package — receiving the message and acknowledging its receipt — together, in the moment. It can be challenging!

6. Integrating multiple sources of information.

At the very least, you are both listening to words and watching body language. You may also be listening to multiple people at once, communicating on multiple platforms simultaneously, or listening while also taking in visual information, such as building plans or sales projections. Figure out what helps you listen best. Do you need information in advance? A “processing break”? A chance to circle back and confirm everyone's understanding? This is another situation where it can be helpful to have

another person taking in the same information, who can fill you in on what you might have missed.

7. “Performing” active listening (e.g., eye contact, nodding, appropriate facial expressions).

If you have a natural poker face or find it easier to pay attention to people’s words if you don’t make eye contact, share that information with your conversation partner, and thank them for accommodating you. Do extra repetition to make up for the lack of nonverbal communication. You may want to practice better performativity skills, but don’t add that mental burden to important conversations. Ask a five-year-old to tell you about their favorite superhero, then practice acting like you’re listening.

Please note: This list is not intended to be diagnostic instrument, but if any of the skills listed above seem truly difficult to you, you may want to consult your doctor. Scientific understanding of these processes, from the sensory organs to the brain, has expanded greatly in the past years. Many successful adults have discovered mid-career that they have undiagnosed sensory, attention, information-processing, or other disorders than can impair listening ability.

For each of these subskills, there is also a range of natural ability, and your life experience may have enhanced or muted this potential. We know, for example, that music training improves auditory processing skills, and acting or improvisation training improves your ability to “read” people and perform the role of an active listener. Having power, by contrast, decreases your ability to read others and accurately grasp their message — don’t let this happen to you!

Listening is vitally important, sadly undertaught, physically and mentally taxing, and in the aftermath of Covid-19 has never been more difficult. As we close in on a third year of unprecedented upheaval in work and life, employees and managers alike have more questions than ever — concerns that they may find it difficult to articulate for a variety of reasons, from mental fog to the sheer novelty of the situation.

When this happens, take a moment to listen closely. Consider the questioner, not simply the question. Now is the time for leaders to really listen, understand the context, resist the temptation to respond with generic answers, and recognize your own listening limitations — and improve on them. Have compassion for yourself — you can’t scream at your own brain like a drill sergeant and whip that raw grey matter into shape. What you can do is recognize your weak points and make the necessary adjustments.