

Active listening

Active listening is a key skill in developing and maintaining healthy and trusting work relationships, and is therefore a core skill for people managers. This is a skill we can improve on through practice. We can ask for feedback on how we listen and we can develop our understanding of how active listening works more effectively. Some of us find it easier to talk than listen and therefore have to work harder at listening than others. Being a good listener takes skill, care and concentration as well as the ability to communicate to the other person that you have heard and understood what they are saying.

Active listening is a communication technique that requires the listener to feed back what s/he hears to the speaker, by way of re-stating or paraphrasing what s/he has heard in their own words, to confirm what s/he has heard and moreover, to confirm the understanding of both parties. The ability to listen actively demonstrates sincerity, and that nothing is being assumed or taken for granted. Done naturally, it improves personal relationships, reduces misunderstanding and conflicts, strengthens cooperation, and fosters understanding. It is proactive, accountable and professional.

Active listening consists of reflecting back, paraphrasing and summarising.

Reflecting back shows that we have really heard the other person and it encourages them to say more. It involves, nodding and/or saying ‘ah ha’ at key points and repeating one or two of the words that the person has used, usually focussing on feelings rather than content.

Paraphrasing shows that we have really understood what the person is saying and helps us to clarify anything that we are unsure of. It involves using our own words to feed back what has been said, e.g.: ‘so you feel that there are too many unnecessary rules’.

Useful paraphrasing phrases include:

‘As I understand it, what you have just said is that.....’

‘Do you mean that.....?’

‘So, your point is

‘Can I check that what you’re saying is...’

Summarising provides an overview of what someone has said. It is used at key stages to either slow someone down or move the conversation on. Useful phrases are:

'So, these are the main issues we have been discussing... (list). Is that right?'

'To summarise, the main issue seems to be that.....'

'To put the problem in a nutshell.....Is that right?'

Other key aspects of listening are:

Avoid interrupting - In addition to breaking the concentration or flow of the person who is speaking, it can leave a person feeling unheard, that maybe you do not value what they have to say.

Working with silence -Silence can be very powerful in conversation and communication. Some of us are very comfortable with silence and some are very uncomfortable and feel the need to fill it. Bear in mind that everyone has a different experience of silence. Some people will use it to connect with their thoughts and feelings or to absorb something that's just been said.

Silent Speech or Body Language

Our understanding of another person is based less on what they say, and more on how they speak (tone and energy) and on silent signals i.e. how they look and behave. Body language is central to effective conversation and can be culturally specific, so always be sensitive to this. Unconsciously misinterpreting silent signals can lead to miscommunication and even conflict. It is better to check out rather than act on assumptions about body language.