

## How to be an active listener

'Listening' is not simply hearing the words that someone says to you. Listening certainly involves hearing, but it is a far more active process than that. It involves you as the listener being engaged and active. Active listeners participate in the communication. By participating you are:

- Hearing the words
- Understanding the meaning
- Providing feedback

We listen to understand, interpret, evaluate, respond and remember. The listening process also involves giving feedback both verbally and nonverbally.

Be receptive. Be objective and open, willing to hear what someone else has to say. Guard against preconceived notions based on race, gender, age or accent or any other prejudices you may have. Through active listening you build rapport with other people.

### Some strategies for active listening and building rapport

- Face the speaker and maintain your full attention on what the speaker is saying.
- Make sure it is not too noisy to hear what is being said.
- Keep regular eye contact with the speaker. This does not mean that you stare, as that would make the speaker feel uncomfortable. If you are truly focussed on what is being said then the eye contact will be natural and focussed, but not overly intense.
- Don't be too comfortable or relaxed; lean forwards a little or sit towards the edge of your seat.
- Use silence constructively, waiting until the speaker has completed their thought before you respond.

- Note the words used by the speaker and the feelings behind them.
- Give nonverbal cues such as nods of encouragement, 'mm' and 'uh-huh'.  
Once again this will happen naturally if you are truly listening.
- Make a mental note of key words and phrases (and use them in your response).
- Sometimes and for some people, it helps to visualise what the speaker is saying.

## Empathy

Being empathetic means being "in tune" with the thoughts and feelings of others. It means that you:

- Strive to understand, as though you were in the other person's shoes.
- Listen to what people are actually saying, not to what you think they should be saying.
- Listen to the words and the vocal tone and watch the body language, if you are having a face-to-face conversation.
- Accept the other person's ideas and feelings as valid.

In the wonderful novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Atticus tells Scout:

"You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view... Until you climb inside of his skin and walk around in it."

## Blocks to effective listening

We do not always listen effectively. Sometimes we become distracted or our minds wander. We allow our own interests or concerns to get in the way of concentrating on what the other person is saying. Typical blocks to effective listening are:

**Pre-planning:** working out in your own mind what you are going to say next and even mentally rehearsing this.

**Second-guessing:** anticipating what the other person is going to say next rather than focusing on what they are presently saying (and sometimes even finishing their sentences for them!).

**Daydreaming:** allowing what you hear to trigger your own thoughts, imaginings or daydreams and therefore not listening.

**Pre-judging** the person as not worth listening to or having certain feelings or ideas that you assume they have.

**Comparing** what the other person is saying with your own similar experience, sometimes filtering their experience through yours (and then telling them about it – “That reminds me of the time I...)

**Sabotaging:** changing the subject so that you talk about what you are interested in (and sometimes interrupting to do this!).

**Interrupting:** listening for a short time, then cutting in with advice, solutions, or ‘yes, but...’.

Being aware of your listening blocks is half way to overcoming them. Using active listening techniques will help even more.