

IN SIGHT for Oregon Lawyers and Judges

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF YOUR PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL LIFE

ACTIVE LISTENING: HEAR WHAT PEOPLE ARE REALLY SAYING

Listening is one of the most important skills you can have. How well you listen has a major impact on your effectiveness at work and on the quality of your relationships.

Given all the listening we do, you would think we'd be good at it! In fact, we're not. Studies have found that we remember a dismal 25-50% of what we hear. That means that when you talk to your boss, colleagues, clients, or spouse/partner for 10 minutes, they only really hear 2½-5 minutes of the conversation. When you are receiving directions or being presented with information, you aren't hearing the whole message either. You hope the important parts are captured in your 25-50%, but what if they're not?

Clearly, listening is a skill that we can all benefit from improving. By becoming a better listener, you will improve your productivity, as well as your ability to influence, persuade, and negotiate. You'll lessen conflict and misunderstandings and be able to better manage those that do arise.

To understand the importance of this, ask yourself if you've ever been engaged in a conversation when you wondered whether the other person was really listening to what you were saying. You may have wondered whether your message was getting across, or even whether it was worthwhile to continue speaking.

Good communication skills require self-awareness. The way to become a better listener is to practice "active listening," in which you make a conscious effort

to hear not only the words that another person is saying but, more importantly, the total message being sent.

Barriers to listening and understanding include becoming distracted by what else may be going on around you, forming counter arguments that you'll make when the other person stops speaking, and losing focus on what the other person is saying. Our personal filters, assumptions, judgments, and beliefs can also distort what we hear.

Becoming an Active Listener

There are five key elements of active listening. They all help you ensure that you hear the other person, and that the other person knows you are hearing what they are saying.

Pay attention. Give the speaker your undivided attention and acknowledge the message. Recognize that what is not said also speaks loudly.

- Look at the speaker directly.
- Don't mentally prepare a rebuttal!
- Avoid being distracted by environmental factors.
- Notice the speaker's body language.
- Refrain from side conversations when listening in a group setting.

Tip: If you're finding it difficult to concentrate on what someone is saying, repeat their words to yourself – this will reinforce their message and help you control mind drift.

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Show that you are listening. Use your own body language and gestures to convey your attention.

- Nod occasionally.
- Smile and use other facial expressions.
- Note your posture and make sure it is open and inviting.
- Encourage the speaker to continue with small verbal comments like yes, and uh huh.

Provide feedback. This may require you to reflect what is being said and ask questions.

- Reflect what has been said by paraphrasing. “What I’m hearing is...” and “Sounds like you are saying...” are great ways to reflect back.
- Ask questions to clarify certain points. “What do you mean when you say...” “Is this what you mean?”
- Summarize the speaker’s comments periodically.

Tip: If you find yourself responding emotionally to what someone said, say so and ask for more information: “I may not be understanding you correctly, and I find myself taking what you said personally. What I thought you just said is _____; is that what you meant?”

Defer judgment. Interrupting frustrates the speaker and limits full understanding of the message.

- Allow the speaker to finish.
- Don’t interrupt with counterarguments.

Respond appropriately. Show respect, even if you disagree with what the speaker is saying. You gain nothing by attacking the speaker.

- Be candid, open, and honest in your response.
- Assert your opinions respectfully.

It takes concentration and determination to be an active listener. Be deliberate with your listening, and remind yourself that your goal is to truly hear what the other person is saying. Start using active listening today to become a better communicator and improve your workplace effectiveness and relationships.

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