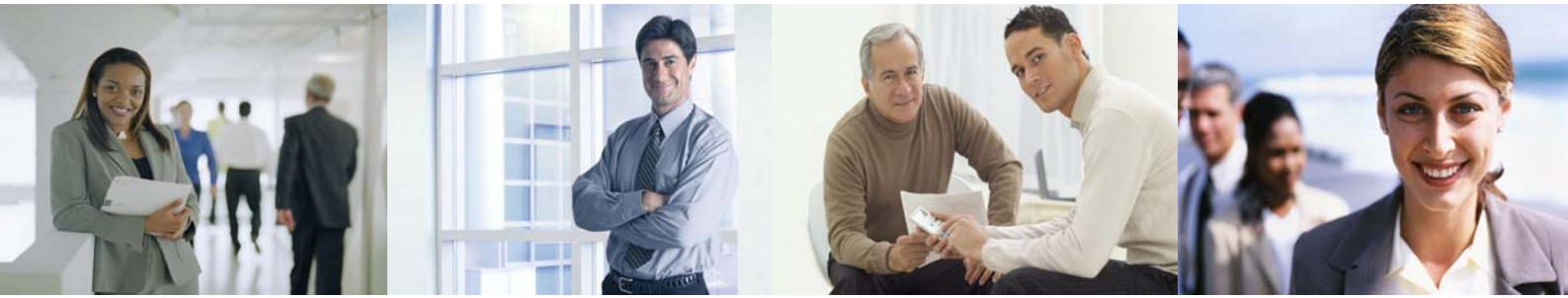


Active Listening



Are you a good listener?

Listening is not simply hearing what is said. It's about processing and understanding the content of what's being said, and being open to the presented information without prejudice.

When we settle down in front of the TV after work and guiltily tune in to 'that soap' whilst eating our dinner, we may be said to be *passively* listening. When we listen to someone complaining about life's woes and secretly switch off now and again to wonder about the football scores or what the weather will be like at the weekend, we are *selectively* listening. But by far the best and most productive form of listening is *active* listening. Throughout our working lives, we have to attend numerous conferences, breakfast presentations, learning seminars, keynote speeches...and so this is a useful art to learn.

What is Active Listening?

Primarily it's about focus, concentration and keeping an open mind. There are many barriers to active listening:

Physical distractions

- Hunger
- Thirst
- Needing the toilet
- Too many glasses of wine the previous night
- Uncomfortable seating

Poor listening environment

- The temperature is stiflingly hot or the air-conditioning has been set to 'polar region'
- The lighting is too dull or too bright
- There is too much noise within, or what appears to be some kind of a dance party going on outside

Psychological distractions

- Preconceived views of the listener
- Prejudice towards the speaker
- Judgement
- Poor concentration skills - a tendency to drift off into fairyland
- Mental overload

Active Listening

The Speaker

- Communication skills - they are too quiet, or mumble and sound like they are eating their words, or have a very strong accent or peculiar dialect
- Their manner of delivery - too flat, or too articulated, no eye contact
- Their appearance - no 'presence', poor grooming, wearing a t-shirt with an offensive slogan, have an off putting smell of cologne
- Use of language - profanity, pomposity

Poor Comprehension

- Content is too hard to interpret/understand

Overcoming the barriers

As an active listener, you cannot always change all the circumstances in which you are listening, but you can improve your listening skills to overcome some of these barriers. Here are some practical suggestions:

Physical Discomfort

Make sure you are ready to listen. Fulfil your hunger or thirst, go to the toilet, take an aspirin, do whatever is necessary to make yourself more physically comfortable. Of course if you know you have an important occasion where those listening skills will be needed, it may be wise to avoid staying out till 3am drinking cocktails the night before. If the seated arrangements don't suit, see if you can move to a better position.

Poor listening environment

If you know you might be dealing with an extreme temperature, be prepared. Take something warm or wear something cool. If this isn't possible, or if the lighting is too bright or dim, then tell whoever may be responsible for changing it. You will not benefit or take in any information if you are too distracted or uncomfortable to listen. In the case of noise, sit with your back to any doors or windows and focus on the speaker. If you can keep your attention on the speaker you will be able to ignore other noises. If it is simply too noisy and the speaker does not acknowledge and do anything about it, then tell them. Or simply leave.

Psychological distractions

Your attitude plays a vital role in determining how actively you listen and pay attention. It is essential to keep an open mind and leave pre-conceived ideas and prejudices at the door, so to speak. Even if you do not like the speaker, the information they are presenting to you may still be of use.

At all costs avoid the following passive-aggressive listening behaviour:

Judgement - making a decision or drawing conclusions before you have even heard all the content.

Opposing thought - constantly dredging up arguments or opposing points throughout. Deciding beforehand to oppose every point.

Mind Reading - deciding what the speaker is going to say before they have even spoken

Conceit - believing you are always right so shouldn't have to give time to someone else's point of view. If this is you, then you have probably already stopped reading this article anyway though.



Active Listening

As most peoples concentration span is quite limited, it is easy to get distracted and daydream, or begin to think about other subjects on your mind. This is especially so when listening to any lengthy amount of speech, as people think many times faster than they can speak. The key is to try and focus on the main points, take notes if possible, concentrate on the speakers eyes, replay and rephrase the words, read between the lines. Without judgement of course. And a further point, if making notes, try not to doodle. This will simply keep you distracted.

The Speaker

If the speaker has exceptionally poor communication skills and you have maybe already politely asked them to 'speak up', then try focussing on their lips, it can enhance your hearing. If all else fails and it is possible, get a transcript of the content. If they are a bad presenter, speak in a monotone, jump around madly waving their hands in the air, stare at the floor shuffling their feet, wear really overpowering scent, use ridiculously pompous language, then all you can do to overcome this is focus solely on content. As for the use of bad language, ignore it. And in all these cases, learn from the experience. Simply avoid this particular speaker in the future if you can.

Poor comprehension

In the case of poor comprehension, yours not theirs, when you find yourself not understanding content at all, then make notes and be prepared to ask questions. Try not to drift off. Maybe you are attending the wrong seminar/presentation?

Good listening skills take time and practice to learn, but are an essential communication tool.

Remember the simple keys for successful listening:

- Be attentive - focus on the listener and not your surroundings
- Be smart - focus on the content not the delivery
- Withhold judgement
- Don't interrupt
- Try to relax...you may learn something useful!

Giving listeners a chance

Obviously if you are going to be the speaker, you want to give your listeners the best possible chance to actively listen and learn, so the same rules apply:

- Ensure the environment is comfortable, the temperature is adequate, there is good lighting and ventilation, and noise is at a minimum.
- Check seating arrangements by sitting in them yourself. Are you comfortable? Are you too far away?
- Check your presentation skills. Put enthusiasm into your voice, and smile. Make eye contact with your listeners. Speak slowly and clearly. Keep information concise and straightforward.
- Don't wear distracting clothes or perfume/aftershave.
- Provide pens and paper for note taking and allow time for questions.

