

Are You Listening?

Most of us would answer “Yes! Of course!” to that question... But what would our friends, co-workers and spouse say if asked about our listening skills?

What are some of the traits that make a good listener?

- a. Giving 100% of your attention
- b. Waiting until others have finished a thought or a sentence before responding
- c. Saying, “What I hear you saying is...” followed by paraphrasing what is understood as the other person’s meaning
- d. Asking follow-up questions
- e. Finishing someone’s sentence for him because you’ve been listening so well that you know what he is going to say

If you answered “a, b, c, and d,” you’re on target!

You have probably heard of active listening, but do you practice it regularly? Active listening means listening with not only your ears but also with your eyes and your heart. This means paying attention to body language and to how the conversation feels. Studies have shown that in a face-to-face conversation only 7% of what is communicated comes from the spoken words—38% is communicated via tone of voice, and body language accounts for 55%. This means that in a telephone conversation—where you can neither see nor be seen (no body language)—84% of the message received is in the tone of voice! {Note: With only words and tone of voice available, words are 16% and tone of voice is 84%.}

To get a feel for how important tone of voice can be read these next sentences aloud, emphasizing the underlined bolded words:

1. I didn’t say he took the **bus**.
2. I didn’t say **he** took the bus.
3. I didn’t **say** he took the bus.
4. **I** didn’t say he took the bus.

Each of those sentences conveys a slightly different meaning solely because the emphasis was put on a different word. It is also possible to get a meaning other than the one intended because your frame of reference is different from that of the speaker. This is why clarifying and making sure you understand through paraphrasing are so important.

Since body language is so important to active listening, be aware of the importance of eye contact with the speaker and of leaning forward a bit. These both show connection to and an interest in the speaker. Above all, allow the speaker to finish his or her thought before responding. Once talking starts, all listening has definitely stopped!

Bill couldn't understand why people thought he didn't listen. He believed he was totally involved in the other person's thoughts. He was very proud of the fact that he made eye contact, leaned in a bit and waited until the other person finished before he said his piece. What Bill didn't realize was that there was a silence of only about 3 nanoseconds before he started talking. Immediately prior he would lean forward, open his mouth, take a breath, and slightly bob his head. Those are all very strong indications that listening has stopped and talking is about to start.

Active listening is not rocket science. It is genuine interest in the other person's thoughts and ideas and respect for his right to express them.

- Give the speaker 100% of your attention

- Listen with your eyes, your ears and your heart

- Check that you understand the intended message

- Allow others to finish their thoughts before forming your response

- Silence between thoughts is a good thing—it lets you digest what the speaker said before forming your reply

Following these simple guidelines will not only make you a better listener, it will make you more popular. People will feel that they are being heard and not just allowed to speak. After all, isn't that what you want too?