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## Active Listening

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*I think real listening is something you do with your whole self. You have to bear what people are really saying beneath all the words. You have to pick up the messages that have a certain urgency and then respond to these nuances with further questions. Over the years, I've learned that the really attentive listening requires conversational responsiveness. You have to try to listen in such a way that you can respond with your own ideas and feelings and aspirations—so that you show the speaker that you've truly been paying attention. I'm talking about a strong human connection here: How do we understand one another? How do we give ourselves to someone else, and possibly even become one?*

—Robert Coles<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

What if you had a magic wand and could, with one stroke, become a more effective leader, closer to your significant others, more influential in your professional relationships, a better friend, and a wiser, more mature adult? Active listening is a social skill that promises all of these things and more. Most people fall prey to a variety of social pitfalls in their conversations, eroding their influence, undermining their attempts to lead, and deepening the chasms between them and others. Those pitfalls include the almost universal tendency to judge others from our own points of view, trying to lead the conversation even when talking about others' interests, and the desire to convince others of the correctness of our points of view. Effective listening or active listening helps us to overcome those gaffes and become more influential and more effective in our relationships, professional and personal.

Effective listening is essential to good leadership. Unless you understand the position, views, beliefs, values, opinions, and conclusions of others, your attempts to manage others or to offer advice, directions, instructions, comments, or opinions will be blind ventures based on your experience and perhaps totally inappropriate to the other. The more you know about the views of the other person, the better you can frame not only what you say, but how you say it. The “magic wand” of active listening can be an enormous asset in your interpersonal tool kit—if you're willing to develop it.

Active or “reflective” listening was originally developed and refined by psychologist Carl Rogers for use in personal counseling. Rogers wrote extensively about his very successful approach and gave seminars teaching others how to use it to help their patients. The technique can be very useful in settings outside

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Coles, “The Inner Life of Executive Kids: A Conversation with Child Psychiatrist Robert Coles,” *Harvard Business Review* (November 2001): R0110A.

counseling, including everyday conversations, formal discussions, teaching, managing, and in marriage—in virtually every situation where people interact. Active listening is particularly useful when the speaker has a problem or is animated about some topic and the listener either wants to help the person with that problem or to learn more about the speaker’s perspective.

Active listening consists of two major components; first, seeking genuinely to understand the other person on two levels, and second, communicating or reflecting that understanding back to the speaker. This latter characteristic has caused the approach to be referred to often as “reflective listening.” The reflection is important, because it reassures the speaker and the listener that what is being communicated is being understood. Without that link, neither the speaker nor the listener is really sure whether clear communication is taking place.

Active listening is a learnable skill. But it is more than the lay language implies; it is more than simply “paying attention.” The approach includes a cluster of skills—and perhaps more importantly—a mindset. This mindset is the desire to see and understand how another person sees and experiences the world. Most of us, having grown up as we have within our own experience set, tend to think that the rest of the world sees the world as we do. We are surprised when we see people behaving in ways that seem irrational to us. The first step in developing active listening skills is to have a genuine interest in seeing the world as others do. Given that desire, one must develop some, perhaps unnatural skills to become effective at the technique (**Figure 1**).

Figure 1. Four key active listening skills.

1. Suspending judgment of the speaker
2. Focusing on emotion as well as content
3. Following, not leading the conversation
4. Reflecting accurately what you understand, so the speaker can “see” it more clearly

Source: All figures created by author.

### Suspending judgment

Perhaps the central skill in active listening is the ability to *momentarily* suspend our own judgments and beliefs about what may be right or wrong. That is difficult for most people to do. We all want to believe that we are “right.” If we cannot let go of that for a moment or two, however, we will be unable to see the world as the other person sees it. When we listen to a person actively, we suspend for the moment our own views and values, beliefs and attitudes, judgments, and conclusions. Whenever we say, “I know exactly what you mean!” we are probably still locked in our own experience perspective. We’ve picked up on something the speaker said—immediately we’ve jumped to our own similar experience and concluded that they must have responded the same way. Often that is not true. And our presumption shifts leadership of the conversation from the speaker to us.

We approach active listening by clearing our own minds of our thoughts and priorities, *for the moment*, and understanding as deeply as we can how the other person thinks and feels and then reflecting or mirroring that understanding to the speaker. Any judgment—negative or positive—will cloud our ability to hear and connect with the speaker. When we suspend judgment, we give the speaker “breathing room”—space to be honest and to do so without defensiveness.

People find it difficult to stop judging others for a variety of reasons. First, they infer that suspending judgment means that they are agreeing with the speaker, which is not so. Our goal is not to confirm their viewpoint but to understand it. If we confuse these two, it makes it harder for us to let go of our own views. Second, some people are afraid that if they listen to another's views carefully it may affect their own views in negative ways. Suspension of judgment requires some confidence in our own abilities to put aside and then reassume our own values and priorities. Consider for a moment the kind of people that you have the most difficulty not judging. Is it a religious group, a political group, a race? Whatever it is, unless you are able to pause in your tendency to judge people immediately, you will likely find it difficult to become a good listener. And listening to someone who believes deeply and differently from you does not mean that your thinking will be "contaminated." Rather, you may learn something that will benefit you for the rest of your life, professionally and personally.

#### Focusing on emotion as well as content

The second active listening skill is the ability to pay attention to both the content and the related emotions contained in what another is communicating. This is what Daniel Goleman has called "emotional intelligence" and I have referred to as "social quotient."<sup>2</sup> At first blush, this seems simple, but for those who practice active listening, figuring out quickly what a person is saying while simultaneously paying attention to the feelings surrounding that content is quite a challenge. Emotions are important because they reflect the intensity of the person's thoughts and experience. If you can see what another person is feeling and then articulate that accurately back to them, you can signal to the speaker the depth of your understanding of their world.

Identifying a speaker's emotions is not so simple. Sometimes their emotions may be obvious: anger, fear, depression. In those cases, it may be easy to identify what they're feeling. Other times, however, the feelings washing over a speaker may be ambivalence, confusion, or a vague uneasiness. These emotional states may be more difficult to see and even more difficult to articulate. Good listeners understand the wide range of emotions and are able to see and describe them in conversations.

#### Following, not leading the conversation

The primary goal of active listening is to give the speaker complete freedom to pursue issues and topics of their choosing, and in so doing, to use the listener—yourself—as a sounding board for ideas and options about handling personal situations and concerns. Most would-be listeners are unable to allow this because they begin judging and asking questions, thereby focusing on what's important to the *listener* rather than on what's important to the speaker. Good active listeners are willing and able to allow the speaker to go where he or she wants to by virtue of their competency in letting the other lead the conversation. Paradoxically, one must let go of the desire to lead the discussion along lines of one's own interests in order to become more influential with the other.

#### Reflecting accurately what you understand

Another active listening skill is the ability to reframe the content and emotion of the other person's statement in a way that makes it easy for the speaker to understand that you, the listener, understand *accurately* what the other has been saying and feeling. If one simply repeats what the other has said (parroting), the speaker may come to feel that the listener is playing some pop psychological game with them or is mocking by mimicry. If the listener overstates what the speaker has said, the speaker may feel manipulated or invaded and retreat from the conversation.

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<sup>2</sup> Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence* (New York: Bantam, 1995); and James G. Clawson, "Leadership and Intelligence," *Level Three Leadership 2e*, (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2002).

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Active listening is hard work, and it can be frightening. To lay one's own beliefs and values aside for the moment and to concentrate on how someone else thinks and believes and feels—to wrap one's self inside another's view of the world—can be unsettling. This willing suspension of one's own view of the world requires a certain self-confidence in one's own views and beliefs and in one's ability to pick them up again in a moment at will. This suspension requires you to understand that others have and utilize a rationale different from your own. The goal of active listening is to understand their rationale—and emotional experience—from *their* vantage point. Learning to be an effective active listener by suspending judgement, paying attention to content and emotion, following instead of leading, and reflecting your understanding is hard, even exhausting work. When you first begin to practice active listening, you are likely to find that you feel worn out. But don't give up! Active listening serves a valuable purpose.

### **Purpose of Active Listening**

The primary purpose of active listening is to allow another person an unfettered, unguided opportunity to articulate what they are concerned about so that both you—and, more important—*they* may understand that concern more clearly and then deal with it. A major side purpose here is to allow you, the listener, to expand your horizons and to learn more about how other people in the world think about and react to events around them. Unless we do this, we are doomed to offer advice from our own perspectives and experience—which may or may not be appropriate for another.

In other words, the goal of active listening is to allow the speaker to lead the conversation without fear or inhibition—for a time—so that they can take the conversation in the direction they want. If a person is afraid of the reactions of the listener in any way, he or she is likely to maintain a certain defensiveness. This defensiveness inhibits both the speaker and the listener from clearly “seeing” the speaker's true thoughts and feelings. Active listeners seek to see the world, for the moment, through the other person's biases and filters, to be clearly aware of what the speaker is both saying and feeling, to clearly see the way the speaker thinks and to reflect that understanding back to the speaker. However difficult this may seem at first, if one can achieve this purpose, one can accomplish several important benefits.

### **Benefits of Active Listening**

#### **Understanding another person's point of view**

We all see the world differently. The more clearly we understand how others see the world, the better able we are to understand their behavior. This will broaden and strengthen our understanding of human behavior and guide our efforts at motivating and leading others. We are often perplexed about why other people are behaving the way they are. Active listening can help us to understand their behavior better and thus be better equipped for working with them.

#### **Stronger interpersonal relationships**

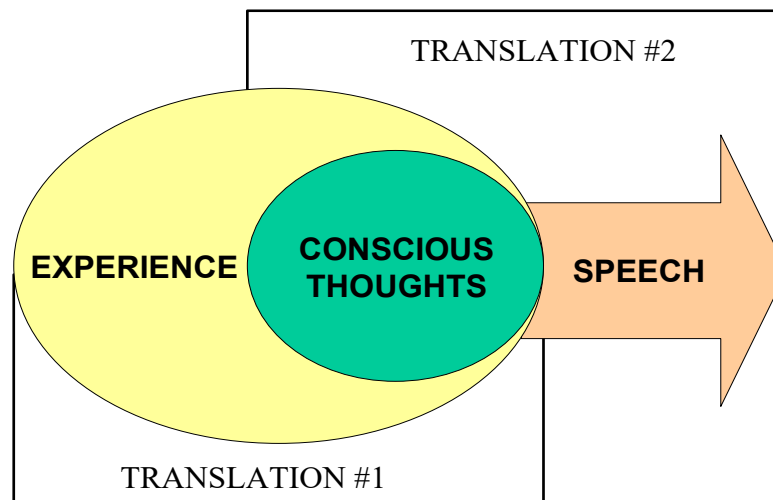
Skilled reflective listening tends to strengthen interpersonal commitments. When a speaker senses that a listener has suspended judgment and is working hard to see the world through his or her eyes, he or she appreciates the effort. Good active listening allows the speaker to feel safe. The speaker senses the respect that the listener must have for the speaker in order to be able to do this, and he is likely to return the favor. The unspoken message from the listener is: “I respect what you have to say and what you are feeling, I will take the time (and the talent required) to listen to it.” Sensing this message, the speaker feels safe, less defensive, and closer to the listener.

### Helping the speaker

When a person can speak without fear of being judged, he or she is more likely to speak openly and completely. At the same time, when one does this and both the content and emotion of the speech are mirrored in the listener, the speaker sees and hears more clearly what he or she is saying and feeling than he can do when simply listening internally. Sometimes the speaker may even say, “Did I say that?” or “Yes, I guess that’s what I’m saying.” When that happens, the speaker’s positions and concerns are clarified, and the person is then often better able to decide what to do about the question at hand.

We can point out here that people do not always “know” what they think and feel. Carl Rogers spoke about two “translations” that must occur for a person to communicate clearly (see **Figure 2**). First, one must be aware of one’s own experience, the things one is feeling and thinking. Current work on the nature of emotional intelligence<sup>3</sup> suggests that people vary widely in this “skill.” Being aware of one’s experience to the point that one can formulate a thought about it is the first translation. The second translation comes when one tries to put his or her thoughts into spoken words. If your experience is like mine, you find daily examples of others who struggle to say clearly “what they mean.” You may even find yourself struggling from time to time throughout the day to communicate clearly to others what you’re thinking and feeling. When we “see” or hear reflected back to us what we’re saying, two things happen: first, we gain a sense of validation in the world, that someone else out there understands us, and second, we are able to understand ourselves better by virtue of that “mirroring” effect.<sup>4</sup> Instructors in the classroom will often write what students say on the chalkboard so that others and the speaker may “see” and explore the functionality of their comments. Yet, while active listening does much to strengthen relationships and to help people deal with each other, these benefits come at a certain cost.

Figure 2. Carl Rogers’s two translations in communication.



<sup>3</sup> See Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence* (New York: Bantam, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> Alice Miller's classic book, *The Drama of the Gifted Child* (New York: BasicBooks, 1997), for example, points out how fundamental an impact mirroring has on the development of small children. Simply put, when we are allowed to see ourselves in our relationships with others, we gain an ego strength and self-confidence that cannot be gotten elsewhere.

### Disadvantages of Active Listening

Active listening has some disadvantages. Perhaps the most obvious is that it takes time. Active listening is not the sort of thing one can do in one minute in a hurried exchange with a subordinate or colleague.<sup>5</sup> But the old advertisement adage, “You can pay me now, or you can pay me later,” applies here. If one does not take the time to understand the other person in a relationship early on, the prices or costs of lack of trust, lack of respect, lack of communication, lack of motivation, and loss of ability to influence or lead make the accounting more difficult. The time commitment in active listening, both in learning to do it well—as well as to use it—is heavy on the front end, but rewarding in the end.

A second disadvantage is that many think they are good listeners when they are not. People who “parrot” what another says and believe themselves to be good reflective listeners are fooling themselves—but probably not those they are talking with. Skill in active listening requires above all else the ability to put one’s own view of the world aside *for the moment* and then to focus exclusively on the other person’s content and emotion. Unless the genuine intent and the skill to back it up are there, attempts to use active listening as a management “tool” may actually undermine a relationship.

Consider the two-by-two table shown in **Figure 3**. If a person does not have a genuine interest in understanding another’s point of view, this “attitude” will probably come through sooner or later to the speaker. Having some skill at reflective listening then is not enough; genuine interest is a critical foundation. On the other hand, if one has a genuine interest but weak skills, the other person may forgive technical gaffs because they know you are really trying. If you can add a degree of skill to your genuine attempts to listen actively, you may hope for deeper, more aware, more productive relationships. If you have neither skill nor interest in active listening, you may spend your time in superficial relationships never really knowing why others do what they do—especially around you. That suggests a need to clarify the fundamental principles of using active listening.

Figure 3. Impact of sincerity and active listening skill on relationships.

	Low Sincerity	High Sincerity
High Skill	<b>MANIPULATION</b>	<b>RICHER RELATIONSHIPS</b>
Low Skill	<b>RELATIVELY SUPERFICIAL RELATIONSHIPS</b>	<b>BUMBLING RELATIONSHIPS</b>

<sup>5</sup> Ken Blanchard, author of *The One Minute Manager* (New York: William Morrow, 1982), might disagree. Actually, a person skilled at moving in and out of active listening could probably use it to good effect from moment to moment throughout any given day.

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## Principles of Active Listening

There are some seemingly simple principles to active listening that you should keep in mind as you begin to try it—they seem easier to do than they really are.

### Respond, don't lead

While you are in the reflective listening mode, your goal is to understand as completely as possible, not to direct. The goal is to let the speaker determine *what* will be talked about next and to what degree. The speaker should choose what is important, not the listener. If you begin to direct the discussion, it will focus on your interests, not the speaker's. If you begin to ask questions, you will begin to lead the discussion and you will have lost an opportunity to learn more about the other person and what *he or she* wants to talk about.

### Respond to the personal rather than the impersonal

Whenever we respond to what another person has said, we are faced with multiple choices. A key choice is whether to respond to the personal or the impersonal components of what has been said. When one responds to the impersonal, one directs the discussion away from the speaker's beliefs and values, when often those are the very things he or she is trying to communicate or understand better. Some people find it difficult to talk with others about personal things. That is a choice we all have, speakers and listeners. The choice to remain impersonal has a consequence of keeping the relationship on a relatively superficial level. If you are willing to listen personally, you must still respect the speaker's choice about how much to open up—or not. The speaker may not want the listener to get that close. More often than not, however, the choice to focus on the impersonal, arm's-length content of the discussion is a result of the discomfort of the listener in dealing with (that is, listening to) personal matters. If you feel this way, remind yourself that your goal is not to offer advice about what to do about a particular personal problem, rather only to *understand* it. Ultimately, it is the speaker's responsibility to take action about the issue. Perhaps this will make it easier to participate in a more personal conversation.

### Recognize feelings as well as content

Emotions are an important determinant of behavior. The skill of recognizing feelings is an essential part of understanding another person. If we cannot recognize and reflect the emotions that speakers have, we may not be able to understand their values and the strength of those values. Learn to watch for and be able to identify the *feelings* associated with what a person is saying. Some managers find it almost impossible to recognize feelings—perhaps, because the demands of their jobs have taught them over the years to suppress the emotional side of their personalities.<sup>6</sup> Each of us has learned patterns that determine how much emotion we show in our relationships. Whether we show them or not, they are there, and if listeners can watch for and reflect them, we can learn more about what bothers us, what we like, what we dislike, and how to manage those emotions at work as well as in our nonwork activities.

### Know when to use active listening

Active listening is in some ways like a carpentry tool or a golf club in that it has specific purposes and predictable outcomes, and therefore, is not applicable to every situation. In the way that judgments about which tool or golf club to use when are important skills for the carpenter and golfer, knowing when to use active listening is a key skill for the effective manager. Ideally, one will sense these times and be able to slip in

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<sup>6</sup> Again, the work on emotional intelligence is revealing here. See footnote 3.

and out of active listening so smoothly that the speaker is hardly aware of the change in structure yet feels better understood and ready to proceed without concern.

Many managers claim that they have a “communication problem” in their organizations. When asked what this means, they often say, “I can’t get them to understand what I want them to do!” This answer reflects a theory of communication that begins with the desire to *be* understood. We suggest that a more productive theory of communication would *begin with the desire to understand* and only secondly move to the desire to be understood.<sup>7</sup> The reason is that when other people feel understood, they are much more likely to be willing to listen to what you have to say (later) and, therefore, will allow you to be understood. Although (a topic for another discussion) the means one uses to be understood are critical, too.<sup>8</sup> Unless one can be clear, stimulating, respectful, and congruent, others will probably not respond well. Further, sharing the raw data from which you have drawn your own conclusions, rather than sharing only your conclusions, lets others draw their own conclusions and tends to lead to more productive working relationships.

### Choose appropriate response types

Whenever we respond to what someone else has said, we choose a type of response. We can array these responses on a continuum of directiveness, as shown in **Exhibit 1**. The goal of active listening is to be nondirective. As you review this array, you will be surprised at where some response types appear. You may be surprised, for example, that questions rank so highly on the scale toward “directive.” If you think about it, when we ask a question, we are focusing the discussion on what *we* want to know—not necessarily on what the speaker wants to talk about. When we ask questions, immediately the speaker is asked to take a secondary role, one of responding to your inquiries. Questions send a message, however subtle or unrecognized, that you are leading the discussion and not really interested in what the speaker wants to talk about. Active listening seeks to use the responses on the nondirective end of the spectrum so that the speaker will feel free to say what is on his or her mind.

### Then What?

You should not try to use active listening all the time. Eventually, people may want to know what you think and what your view is. This is one of the points in Coles’s quote at the beginning of this note. Active listening could be another tool in your social toolkit. If you know how to use it, you must also know when to use it and when to put it aside and move on to another tool, perhaps questioning or giving advice. Active listening will help you understand another person better and help them to understand themselves better. Often, a person who has a good active listener will come naturally to the course of action they wish to pursue by hearing and seeing the reflections of their listener. In these cases, the listener need never switch to giving advice or direct instructions. This is good for both parties: the speaker feels more autonomous and powerful while the listener feels more influential and powerful.

Sometimes, though, the speaker runs out of steam. While Rogers, in a counseling session, would carefully avoid giving advice at these points, in a managerial setting you may feel it appropriate to switch over to giving suggestions. Just beware, though. Most of us are way too quick to do this, and in so doing we undermine the development of our relationships. This tendency is what William Glasser has called “control theory,” the desire of most people to assume that they know what’s right and that they have a right and obligation to get

<sup>7</sup> See Stephen Covey’s best-selling book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989).

<sup>8</sup> For more information here, see the discussion on the language of leadership in the chapter on “Leading Others” in James G. Clawson, *Level Three Leadership 2e* (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1999).



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others to agree with them and to accede to their point of view.<sup>9</sup> We will be better leaders if we can resist this urge to control others.

### **Conclusion**

Do not expect after reading this note that you will be an expert at active listening. That takes time and practice. If you practice using active listening and are genuine in your interest in understanding others, you will gain some skill with it. If your first few attempts are stumbling or laden with errors, don't fret; speakers will sense your interest in truly trying to understand them and make allowances. Likewise, we encourage you not to despair and give up the effort. If you become an effective active listener, you'll be a better spouse, a better parent, a better friend, a better mentor and coach, and a better leader.

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<sup>9</sup> William Glasser, *Choice Theory* (New York: Harper Collins, 1999).

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Exhibit 1

**Active Listening**

Response Types

**DIRECTIVE**

<b>Commands and threats</b>	Telling a person what to do. Giving orders.
<b>Persuasion</b>	Selling, urging, entreating, building “logical” arguments to persuade the other to your point of view. Arguing is a heated form of persuasion.
<b>Advice</b>	Offering what you think should be done, based usually on your own view and values.
<b>Questioning and focusing</b>	Establishing a focus on what you will talk about next. Can be done through statements or questions.
<b>Giving feedback</b>	Telling the other person your judgments—both positive and negative. Extremely volatile, i.e., can be constructive or destructive to the individual and to the relationship. Can be solicited or unsolicited.
<b>Directive probing</b>	Asking leading questions to reach specific conclusions. Effective, if used skillfully, in getting a person to “personalize” joint conclusions.
<b>Role playing</b>	Building skills by allowing the other person to practice saying and behaving in situations that are likely to appear.
<b>Summarizing</b>	Attempting to outline the major points of the discussion.
<b>Self-disclosing</b>	Giving information about yourself. Very powerful in building trust and credibility. Can be overdone.
<b>Exchanging</b>	Undirected exchanges of greeting, social comments. Builds rapport and pleasantries and establishes a socially acceptable base for the conversation.
<b>Problem solving</b>	Open-ended exploration of alternatives without preconceived notions about how to solve the problem. Brainstorming, or “dialogue” techniques, then evaluating alternatives.
<b>Continuances</b>	“Umm,” “uh-huh,” “yeah,” and other means of encouraging the other person to carry on.
<b>Silence</b>	Can be somewhat directive depending on the situation.
<b>Reflective listening</b>	Setting aside personal views and listening to another’s content and emotion and then reflecting that understanding back to the speaker. Related to empathy. Extremely useful in building support.

**NONDIRECTIVE**

Source: Created by author.