



## Developing good listening skills

Steven Covey, one of the greatest communicators of our age, teaches that the most important aspect of communication is listening. Listening involves more than hearing another person's voice—it requires one's full attention to what the person is communicating through tone of voice, body posture, and the context of what is being said. To truly listen to what someone is saying takes effort. Following are suggestions to increase your communication skills.

Give your full attention to the communication – Deal with distractions before you begin, or postpone the discussion until the distractions are eliminated.

**Demonstrate your attention** – Good feedback assures others that you are listening to them. Try some of these techniques that demonstrate you are engaged and listening.

- Eye contact
- Open posture (arms at side, facing person squarely, relaxed)
- Nod when appropriate
- Empathize – communicate your understanding of the other person's experience and how it has been impactful. For instance, "It sounds like you were pretty scared when..."
- Verbal responses, i.e., "Uh huh," "I see."
- Take your time to respond to a statement or question. Don't try to answer it in your head before the other person is finished completing his or her thought.

**Restate important points** – Reassure yourself and the other person that you got it right. If you don't have it right, seek to understand further what the other is communicating by asking more questions about what has been said.

- "So what you're saying is..."
- "I want to make sure I'm understanding you. You are feeling..."

**Respond with your own reactions** – Let the person know what effect the communication has had and will have on you:

- Avoid judging the other person. If negative feedback is necessary, discuss actions, not personalities, moods, profession, race, gender or other personal matters: "When you \_\_\_\_, it \_\_\_\_"
- Ask good questions–Good questions give the other person a feeling of safety and value. Some questions encourage information sharing and new ideas, while questions encouraging "yes" or "no": answers keep communication short, narrow, and controlled. Also avoid questions that imply criticism.

**Which of the following questions encourages a positive response?**

- Why do you always...?
- How would you feel about?
- Why did you...?
- What if we...?

A final note

Any time we try something new it feels awkward at first and we may make mistakes. The best way to improve your communication skills is to practice with someone you trust. Even better, practice with someone who also seeks to improve his or her communication

## **5 Steps to effective listening**

The most effective communication happens when both parties listen well. Here are some ideas that can help improve your ability to communicate through active listening.

### **1. Make eye contact**

- Eye contact sends a nonverbal message that you're ready to hear what the other person has to say.
- It helps keep other things from distracting you.
- It also conveys to the other person that he or she is important to you.

### **2. Give encouragement**

- Nonverbal cues such as nodding, leaning forward and keeping an open posture all communicate to the speaker that you're paying attention.
- Verbal encouragers such as, "I see" or "mmhmm" also let the speaker know you're interested.

### **3. Empathize**

- Nonverbal cues such as tone of voice can give you a sense of the emotions behind the words.
- Use feeling words to deepen the conversation.  
— For example: "It sounds like you felt \_\_\_"

### **4. Reflect**

- Reflecting back to the speaker communicates that you're keeping up with what's being said.  
— For example: "So what I heard you say is \_\_\_."
- This also can open the door to new ways of thinking about the situation or things the other person hadn't planned on talking about.  
— For example, "It sounds like you're finding a lot of great new ways to keep your kids busy for the summer."

## 5. Engage

- Don't be afraid to ask questions or prompt the speaker to keep talking. This enables deeper exploration and again communicates that you're interested. — For example: "How did that make you feel?" or "Tell me more about that."
- You can also use questions to clarify what you heard.

These steps can help you show others you're fully present with them. They can help you listen well which can improve the quality of your interactions.

Best of all, they can help with all of your relationships. At work, at home and everywhere else, being a good listener can help you understand what others need and want. And that can contribute to getting along with others better and resolving any conflicts easier.