



## Effective Listening

There aren't many people who think of themselves as having poor listening skills, but when we think about others, we often have a different opinion.

And if you search for the most sought after skills employers are looking for, listening, as part of communication and interpersonal skills, is one of them.

You've probably met people who you've considered to be 'good listeners', and have also had experiences when you felt you weren't being listened to.

So what's the difference between these two?

In a moment, we'll look at how we can interact with a speaker in a way which promotes 'good listening', but before that let's start with some of the things that can get in the way.

First, external distractions. Things like phones ringing, email notifications, interruptions from colleagues and text messages. Attending to these, rather than to the person who's talking to you, sends a clear message that you're not really listening.

Next are the internal barriers we put up.

Many of these are summed up neatly by this quote 'Most people don't listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply.' Stephen R. Covey

Here are some of the ways we do this.

The listener thinks they know what the person is going to say, so doesn't bother listening and instead just waits for the other person to finish so that they can reply. Perhaps during this time, they're putting together and rehearsing what they're going to say. Of course, you can't pay attention to what someone is saying, and think about how you're going to reply at the same time.

Sometimes people listen just enough so that they can then 'go one further'. If the speaker had it hard, they had it harder. If the speaker's holiday was good, theirs was fantastic.

Or maybe the listener isn't really interested in what the speaker is saying, but wants to appear to be nice and sound supportive, so they say things like, 'I know',



and 'How awful' to give the impression that they're listening and being attentive, but they're only listening enough to get the gist of what's being said.

Listeners sometimes see their role as advice givers, which can come across as being judgemental, or as telling the other person what they think they should do, when often all the speaker really wants is for someone to listen to them.

There are many different variations and motivations on listening to reply, however, there are times when it's important that we *do* listen carefully – perhaps because the information is important, or maybe the speaker has something which is important to them and they want to share it with you.

In situations like these, you can use a technique which is sometimes called active listening. Here's how it works.

The first thing to do is, as far as possible, remove any potential distractions.

Then let go of any *listening to reply* inclinations you may have.

Make sure you use the right amount of eye contact. Too little can make it appear that you're fearful, lacking in confidence, or just not interested. And too much can come across as threatening, or sexual.

Adopt a posture which shows that you're being attentive. It might help when you do this to lean slightly forwards towards the speaker.

While listening, it can be helpful to nod occasionally or say things like 'uh huh' to show that you're 'with the listener', this is sometimes called backchanneling. On its own, or if it's overused, it can make the listener appear insincere.

So keep this to a minimum and try this instead. Every so often paraphrase what the speaker has said. You might start with 'So what you're saying is...' and then give a short summary of what the speaker's just said.

This is known as an understanding response and serves two main purposes.

First, it lets the speaker know that you've heard them, and second, if you've misunderstood anything, this will come out and it can be cleared up.

As you go along you may need to ask questions to clarify things – to make sure you've understood.

Or ask questions to understand the situation in more depth.



Whether asking for clarity or more detail, try not to say things which could be taken as being judgemental.

When the speaker has finished, they may then be looking for help and advice, but it may also have been enough for them just to have been heard.

In this sense, being a good listener is about being non-judgmental, open and making sure that you fully understand what the speaker has said and letting them know that you've heard them.

And when people feel they've been heard, they often feel valued and understood.

Whether at home or at work, communication is the fuel that creates, builds and sustains relationships.

Minimising external distractions, and listening to understand instead of listening to reply, both send clear messages that you're interested in what the speaker is saying. And, when appropriate, combining these with an active listening technique can help to provide an environment where the speaker feels they've been listened to and heard.