Listening Skills Top Tips

**Listening is at least half of the communication process, but sadly one that is seldom practised well. It means not just hearing what someone else says, but actively listening in order to understand what they mean and feel. Use these top tips to fine-tune your listening skills.**

To really listen requires a number of things to happen

* decoding the language, both verbal and non-verbal
* being on the alert for any hidden messages
* asking questions to clarify points you do not understand and checking to see that you have interpreted the message correctly
* following and supporting the speaker, e.g. by repeating key points in what they say to confirm that you have understood
* reflecting understanding back to the speaker using verbal and non-verbal language

### **Maintaining attention**

If you find attention and concentration difficult, you can train yourself to become better:

* If you are well prepared, you stand a much better chance of concentrating on the speaker, instead of being distracted by how you are going to steer the discussion. You don’t need a script; just a few carefully prepared open questions, perhaps supplemented with one or two probing questions.
* Tell yourself you are going to give the speaker your full attention and concentrate on their needs for the duration of the meeting.
* Take occasional notes at appropriate points. If you overdo this, you risk missing some of the detail, including observing their body language, a vital part of their overall message. The trick is to punctuate the discussion, pausing to take brief notes. The ideal time would be to conclude key points following on from summary questions.

### **Follow and support the speaker**

It helps to listen with your eyes as well as your ears. So, look at the speaker and make eye contact.

* Do not lean back in your chair with your arms crossed in front of you as if to say, "Come on then, interest me”. Instead, adopt an open posture: lean forward, ‘showing interest’.
* Encourage openness on the part of the speaker by saying things like, "Can you tell me more?", "Go on. . .", or using one or two of their last words to show that you were listening.

### **Reflective listening**

Reflective listening encourages the speaker to talk about more things in greater depth than they would be likely to do in simply responding to directive questions or suggestions.

Use reflective listening to:

* gain understanding and gather information
* help people solve their own problems and get in touch with their own feelings
* expose underlying problems, including ones the speaker had not recognised previously
* focus on the speaker’s real, specific issues and concerns, rather than what you think these are
* stave off possible misunderstandings and provide a clearer picture of concerns

There are three different levels of reflective listening:

1. Repeating or rephrasing – the listener stays close to what the speaker has said and repeats or substitutes synonyms or phrases.
2. Paraphrasing – the listener makes a major restatement in which the speaker’s meaning is inferred.
3. Reflection of feeling – the listener reflects feelings back to the speaker, e.g. "So you felt excited?”, "You felt X because Y?”, or "You felt devalued because the promotion went to someone with less experience?".

There are a few basic tips that, if followed, will help this technique along:

* Ask open questions such as: "How do you feel about work?", not: "Do you like it here?"
* Avoid filling the silence. Use silence to show that you are listening; it will prompt more thought and comment from the other person.
* When asked a direct question, respond to the feeling that lies behind it, not the question itself.
* Do not say, "I know how you feel", or tell the speaker about your experiences. Despite having shared similar/the same experience(s), do not ever assume that another person’s feelings will be the same as yours with regard to that experience. Every person’s experiences are unique to them.
* Focus on specifics rather than vague generalities. For instance, sometimes a person who has a problem will avoid painful feelings by being abstract or impersonal, using expressions like "Sometimes there are situations that are difficult…" (which is vague and abstract), or "Most people want…" (which substitutes others for oneself). If this happens, encourage team members to be more specific. For example, instead of agreeing with a statement like: "You just can’t trust a manager. They care about themselves first and you second", you can ask about the specific incident to which they are referring.

Whatever form of communication you use, and whether you are ‘officially’ the giver or the receiver of the message, you are engaged in a two-way exchange with another person.

**Focus your attention on the other person instead of yourself, and you will quickly become a much better communicator.**