

FOR THE PRACTICING MANAGER

Active Listening

Improve Your Ability to
Listen and Lead

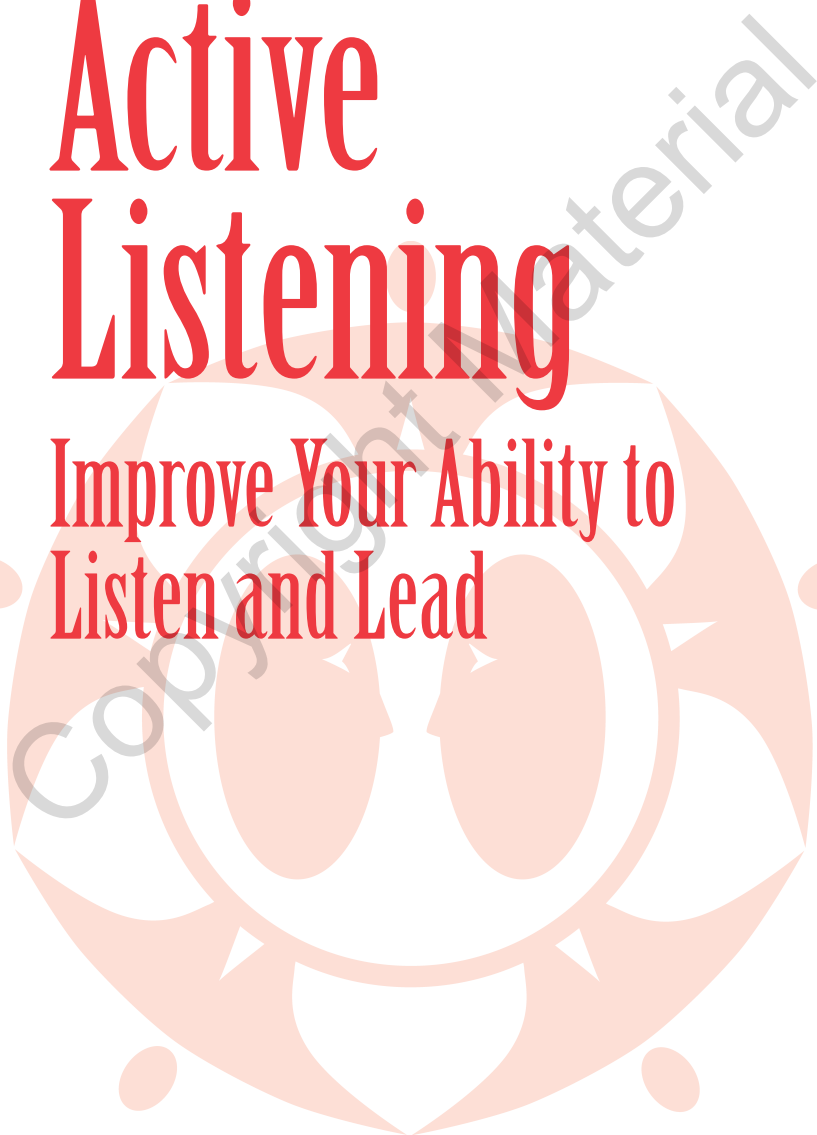
Michael H. Hoppe

Center for Creative Leadership

AN IDEAS INTO ACTION GUIDEBOOK

Active Listening

Improve Your Ability to
Listen and Lead



IDEAS INTO ACTION GUIDEBOOKS

Aimed at managers and executives who are concerned with their own and others' development, each guidebook in this series gives specific advice on how to complete a developmental task or solve a leadership problem.

LEAD CONTRIBUTOR Michael H. Hoppe

CONTRIBUTORS Wilfred Drath

Chris Ernst

Cynthia D. McCauley

Lisa Moye

DIRECTOR OF PUBLICATIONS Martin Wilcox

EDITOR Peter Scisco

ASSOCIATE EDITOR Karen Mayworth

WRITER Rebecca Garau

DESIGN AND LAYOUT Joanne Ferguson

CONTRIBUTING ARTISTS Laura J. Gibson

Chris Wilson, 29 & Company

Copyright ©2006 Center for Creative Leadership.

All Rights Reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher. Printed in the United States of America.

CCL No. 430

ISBN-13: 978-1-882197-94-1

ISBN-10: 1-882197-94-1

CENTER FOR CREATIVE LEADERSHIP

POST OFFICE BOX 26300

GREENSBORO, NORTH CAROLINA 27438-6300

336-288-7210

WWW.CCL.ORG/PUBLICATIONS

AN IDEAS INTO ACTION GUIDEBOOK

Active Listening

Improve Your Ability to
Listen and Lead

Michael H. Hoppe



Center for
Creative
Leadership

www.ccl.org

THE IDEAS INTO ACTION GUIDEBOOK SERIES

This series of guidebooks draws on the practical knowledge that the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL®) has generated, since its inception in 1970, through its research and educational activity conducted in partnership with hundreds of thousands of managers and executives. Much of this knowledge is shared—in a way that is distinct from the typical university department, professional association, or consultancy. CCL is not simply a collection of individual experts, although the individual credentials of its staff are impressive; rather it is a community, with its members holding certain principles in common and working together to understand and generate practical responses to today's leadership and organizational challenges.

The purpose of the series is to provide managers with specific advice on how to complete a developmental task or solve a leadership challenge. In doing that, the series carries out CCL's mission to advance the understanding, practice, and development of leadership for the benefit of society worldwide. We think you will find the Ideas Into Action Guidebooks an important addition to your leadership toolkit.

Table of Contents

- 7** Listening and Leadership
- 12** The Active Listening Skill Set
- 18** Barriers to Active Listening
- 21** How to Improve Your Listening Skills
- 28** Leading with Active Listening
- 29** Suggested Readings
- 30** Background
- 31** Key Point Summary

EXECUTIVE BRIEF

Active listening is a person's willingness and ability to hear and understand. At its core, active listening is a state of mind that involves paying full and careful attention to the other person, avoiding premature judgment, reflecting understanding, clarifying information, summarizing, and sharing. By learning and committing to the skills and behaviors of active listening, leaders can become more effective listeners and, over time, improve their ability to lead.

Listening and Leadership

Jim is a smart, successful leader and a likeable coworker. Six months ago, he took on a job with greater responsibility in a new division. To his surprise, he's having difficulty leading his new group. He is unable to pinpoint the reason for the friction between himself and several of his direct reports, and he's frustrated that his new group hasn't jelled. He calls one of his direct reports in to address the issue. Here's how it goes:

JIM: Mary, we need to talk. There's obviously some friction between us, and it's having a bad effect on the whole group. What's the problem?

MARY (*caught off guard and not knowing where to start*): Well, I would say that one problem is that we don't have enough flexibility— (*Jim's cell phone rings; he answers it and swivels his chair, looking out the window while he talks.*)

JIM (*ending the call and turning back to Mary*): Okay, you were saying...?

MARY: ...that we don't have enough flexibility—

JIM: Not enough flexibility? No, that's not it. We have that floating holiday, and you can take your lunch hour anytime between 12:00 and 1:30. How much more flexibility do you want?

MARY: It's just that it would help a lot if I could take a shorter lunch and leave a few minutes earlier in the afternoon. If I don't get to my son's daycare by 6:00, they charge me a dollar a minute—

JIM: Now, Mary, you know you can't expect special favors just because you have a child. That wouldn't be fair to everyone else.

MARY (*voice trembling, but trying to maintain composure*): I see...

JIM (*standing abruptly and motioning Mary toward the door*): Yes! Well! Thank you! I'm glad we had this talk! And remember that my door is always open. Thanks!

Fortunately, most real leaders do better than Jim. But like him, many take for granted their ability to listen to others. They are often surprised to find out that their peers, direct reports, or bosses think they don't listen well and are impatient, judgmental, arrogant, or unaware.

Assessments of thousands of leaders in CCL's database indicate that many leaders have development needs that directly relate to their listening skills:

- dealing with people's feelings
- accepting criticism well

Impact of Poor Listening

The impact of not listening well is far-reaching. Colleagues, direct reports, and others often describe poor listeners in these ways:

She's just really hard to talk to.

He only listens to certain people.

He's not really interested in what I have to say.

She's already made up her mind. Why does she bother to ask what we think?

She's arrogant.

He's critical of everyone. No one wants to speak up only to be shot down.

I can't get through a sentence without her interrupting.

He doesn't pay attention to what's going on under the surface.

- trying to understand what other people think before making judgments about them
- encouraging direct reports to share
- using feedback to make necessary changes in their behavior
- being open to the input of others
- putting themselves in another person's shoes and imagining that person's point of view

The ability to listen effectively is an essential component of leadership, and most leaders know they need to be good listeners to be effective. Although they may have the best intentions, they don't know specifically what to do or to avoid doing to become better listeners. By learning the skills and behaviors of active listening, you can become a more effective listener and leader. You can use active listening with direct reports, peers, customers, bosses, stakeholders, and others to

- | | |
|----------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| • hear accurately | • buy time |
| • understand | • connect |
| • draw out ideas and information | • question assumptions and ideas |
| • empathize | • weigh options |
| • gather information | • change perspectives |
| • show respect | • soothe or heal |
| • build self-esteem | • set the stage for something else |
| • find answers | • build relationships |
| • show appreciation | |

To begin, assess your listening skills with the worksheet on the following pages.

Assess Your Listening Skills

Do you have a listening problem? To assess how well you listen to others, rate yourself on the following behaviors. Use a five-point scale:

| | | | | |
|--------------|--------|-----------|-------|---------------|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| almost never | rarely | sometimes | often | almost always |

When I listen to others:

1. ___ I sit behind my desk, accept phone calls, shuffle papers, or otherwise communicate by my activities or gestures that I am not fully attentive.
2. ___ I have a hard time concentrating on what is being said.
3. ___ I am annoyed when someone slows me down.
4. ___ I think about what I want to say next rather than about what the other person is saying.
5. ___ I don't like it when someone questions my ideas or actions.
6. ___ I interrupt or show signs of impatience as I wait for the other person to finish talking.
7. ___ I give advice too soon; I suggest courses of action or solutions to problems before the other person has fully explained his or her perspective.
8. ___ I tell people not to feel the way they do.
9. ___ I sense that people seem upset after talking to me.
10. ___ I tend to talk significantly more than the other person talks.
11. ___ I make it a point to fill any silences.

| | | | | |
|--------------|--------|-----------|-------|---------------|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| almost never | rarely | sometimes | often | almost always |

12. ___ I am uncomfortable or at a loss when the other person expresses emotions.
13. ___ I have a hard time understanding what people are trying to say.
14. ___ I avoid asking any questions that would encourage the other person to talk more.
15. ___ I ask questions for which I already have the answers.
16. ___ I expect yes or no answers.
17. ___ I frequently lose track of where the conversation is going.
18. ___ I have a hard time remembering what has been said when a conversation is over.
19. ___ I frequently discover that things the other person and I have agreed upon during a conversation don't get done.
20. ___ I avoid having things repeated, by the other person or myself.
21. ___ I keep my thoughts to myself.
22. ___ I keep my feelings to myself.
23. ___ I avoid sharing personal experiences.
24. ___ I try hard not to let the other person know how his or her behavior during the conversation affects me.

We'll revisit this assessment further along in this guidebook.

The Active Listening Skill Set

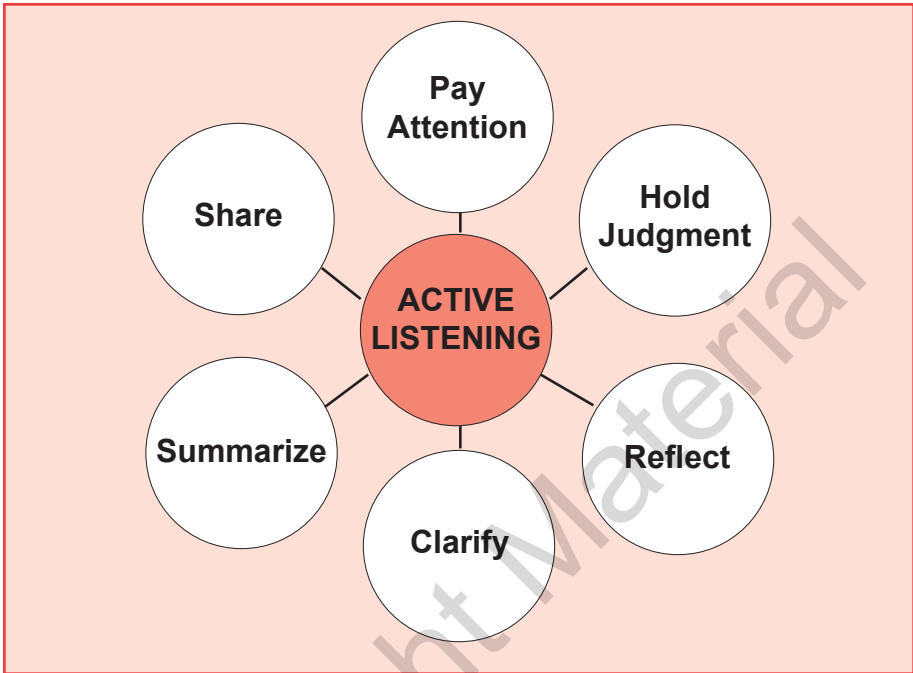
Active listening is a person's willingness and ability to hear and understand. Many of us intuitively know what active listening looks, sounds, and feels like. However, we may not know what to do to be successful at it. By learning the skills and behaviors of active listening, leaders can become more effective listeners and, over time, improve their ability to lead.

It is useful to think of active listening as an exchange between people. On one level, the quality of a conversation can be improved when one person is engaged in active listening. Leaders who practice active listening are able to draw out more information and more meaningful information during a conversation. At its most engaging and effective, active listening is the norm for conversation and everyone involved is a full participant. It involves bringing about and finding common ground, connecting to each other, and opening up to new possibilities.

Active listening involves six skills: paying attention, holding judgment, reflecting, clarifying, summarizing, and sharing. Each skill contributes to the active listening mind-set, and each skill includes various techniques or behaviors. These skills are not mutually exclusive. For example, paying attention isn't something you stop doing when you start holding judgment. Nor are the skills consistently weighted in importance. In one conversation, clarifying may take much effort and time; in another conversation, gaining clarity and understanding may be quick and easy.

Pay Attention

A primary goal of active listening is to set a comfortable tone and allow time and opportunity for the other person to think and speak. By paying attention to your behavior and that of the other



person, you create the setting for productive dialogue. Pay attention to the following:

Your frame of mind. Cultivate an active listening mind-set. Get in the frame of mind of a listener and learner. Be present, focused on the moment. Remember that your intention is to connect to and understand—not interrogate—the other person. Operate from a place of respect, letting yourself empathize with the other person. Be comfortable being silent. Remember that you'll need to accurately summarize the other person's ideas, concerns, and feelings at the end of the discussion, so prepare to do so.

Your body language. Maintain comfortable eye contact. Show interest. Lean forward. Maintain open body position and posture. Give nonverbal affirmations. Nod to show that you understand. Smile, when appropriate to content. Indicate understanding and keep the other person talking.

The other person. Observing and hearing effectively require careful attention. Pay close attention to the other person's nonverbal and verbal behavior in order to pick up on the important information that it offers, and then to make sense of it. There are often cues that convey the type of emotion that underlies the perspective the other person is expressing, and also the level of that emotion. Look for and pay attention to the tone of voice, intensity, loudness, facial expressions, and physical posture. Watch for shifts in body, language, and voice. By focusing on the other person and being present in the moment, you convey that your primary purpose is to understand his or her point of view.

Hold Judgment

Active listening requires an open mind. As a listener and a leader, you need to be open to new ideas, new perspectives, and new possibilities. Even when good listeners have strong views, they suspend judgment, hold their criticism, and avoid arguing or selling their point of view right away. Tell yourself, "I'm here to understand how the other person sees the world. It is not time to judge or give my view."

Holding judgment is particularly important when tensions run high. Let the other side vent or blow off steam if needed. Don't jump immediately to problem solving or offering advice. Again, be comfortable not talking. Your main job is to listen and pay attention. This does not mean that you agree; it shows that you are trying to understand.

Practice empathy. Empathy is the ability to put yourself in someone else's shoes, to temporarily live in that person's world without making any judgments about the situation. Demonstrating empathy is the behavior that expresses your willingness to understand the other person's situation. For example, "I'd be excited

too if I had such attractive options before me” or “It must be really hard to make this choice.” It conveys respect for the other person and his or her views and experiences.

Indicate your open mind. Show your genuine intention to be open minded by saying something like “I’m coming from another perspective and I want to understand your view” or “My goal here is to understand, not to judge or make a decision.”

Acknowledge difference. Each person brings a unique perspective to a situation. Experience, culture, personal background, and current circumstances all contribute to the way people react at work. Communicate that you’d like to understand things through the other person’s unique lens.

Be patient. Slow your pace to allow the other person to talk and elaborate. Don’t speed the conversation along. Allow pauses; be comfortable with silence.

Reflect

Like a mirror, reflect information and emotions without agreeing or disagreeing. Use paraphrasing—a brief, periodic recap of the other person’s key points—to confirm your understanding. Reflecting the other person’s information, perspective, and feelings is a way to indicate that you hear and understand. Don’t assume that you understand correctly or that the other person knows you’ve heard. The ability to reflect his or her content as well as feelings creates strong rapport and deepens the exploration.

Paraphrase information. Demonstrate that you are tracking with the information presented by periodically restating the other’s basic ideas, emphasizing the facts. Responses such as “What I’m hearing is...” and “Let me make sure I understand what you’re saying...” allow you to identify any disconnects and signal to the other person that you are getting it.

Paraphrase emotion. Identifying the feeling message that accompanies the content is equally important, but often more challenging. Yet reflecting the other person's emotions is an effective way to get to the core of the issue. The feeling message may be contained in the words used, the tone of voice, the body language, or a combination of all these things. Using this technique shows the other person that you are paying close attention and that you are putting energy into understanding what he or she is communicating to you. It may also help others by providing clarity about feelings they are experiencing but not consciously aware of. Here are some examples of paraphrasing emotion:

- You seem to have doubts about...
- It seems to me that you are feeling very happy about...
- Sounds as if you're feeling pretty frustrated and stuck.

Clarify

Double-check on any issue that is ambiguous or unclear. Open-ended, clarifying, and probing questions are important tools.

Open-ended questions. These questions draw people out and encourage them to expand their ideas. They allow you to uncover hidden issues. They also encourage people to reflect, rather than justifying or defending a position, or trying to guess the "right answer." Open-ended questions can't be answered with a simple yes or no. For example:

- What are your thoughts on...?
- What led you to draw this conclusion?
- What would happen next?

Clarifying questions. These questions help ensure understanding and clear up confusion. They define problems, uncover gaps in information, and encourage accuracy and precision. Any

who, what, where, when, how, or why question can be a clarifying question, but those are not the only possibilities. For example:

- Let me see if I'm clear. Are you talking about...?
- I must have missed something. Could you repeat that?
- I am not sure that I got what you were saying. Can you explain it again another way?

Probing questions. These questions introduce new ideas or suggestions. Often they highlight details and contain an element of challenge. By asking probing questions, you invite reflection and a thoughtful response instead of telling others what to do. This fosters ownership of decisions and outcomes, and serves to develop problem-solving capacity in others. For example:

- More specifically, what are some of the things you've tried?
- How direct have you been with Marcus about the consequences for the sales force if the situation doesn't change?
- What is it in your own leadership approach that might be contributing to Tonya's failure to meet her deadlines?

Summarize

This is a brief restatement of core themes raised by the other person as the conversation proceeds. Summarizing helps people see their key themes, and it confirms and solidifies your grasp of their points of view. Again, the summary does not necessarily imply agreement or disagreement by you, but merely allows you to close the loop. It may lead to additional questions as a transition to problem solving. It also helps both parties to be clear on mutual responsibilities and follow-up.

Briefly summarize what you have understood as you listened: "It sounds as if your main concern is..." or "These seem to be the key points you have expressed...." In addition to—or

instead of—doing the summarizing yourself, you may ask the other person to summarize: “What have you heard so far?” or “To make sure we’re on the same page, would you please summarize for both of us the key plans we’ve agreed upon today?”

Share

Being an active listener doesn’t mean being a sponge, passively soaking up the information coming your way. You are an active party to the conversation with your own thoughts and feelings. Yet active listening is first about understanding the other person, then about being understood. That’s hard for anyone to learn and apply. It may be especially hard for people in leadership roles, who may have been led to believe that they need to be understood first so that others can follow them.

As you gain a clearer understanding of the other person’s perspective, it’s time to introduce your ideas, feelings, and suggestions, and address any concerns. It’s time to share your view and to collaborate on solutions and next steps. For example:

- Your telling me...triggered the thought that...
- I felt so happy when it became clear to me from what you said that I wasn’t the only one feeling that way.
- May I share something similar?

Barriers to Active Listening

Most people would see some of the skills and behaviors associated with active listening as basic courtesy (not interrupting, for example). But other active listening skills (such as asking clarifying questions) are less familiar and therefore may require teaching

and practice. Leaders who seek to improve their ability to actively listen may face a number of barriers.

The Image of Leadership

The role of listening can seem to contradict common cultural notions of what a leader is. In a society that values leaders who are action oriented, charismatic, visionary, and directive, the expectation is that leaders should have the answers, call the shots, and do all the talking. Our emphasis on the performance of leaders cuts into their ability to be quiet and listen. Interestingly, leaders believe they listen just as much as they talk. But studies show they do 80 percent of the talking in their interactions with others.

Silence as Agreement

Listening quietly can also be confused with agreement or acceptance of the other's ideas and perspective. When leaders disagree or have additional ideas and information, they may be quick to debate or respond. Active listening allows different viewpoints to be aired and assessed. It does not require you to discount or hold back your own opinion or objections; however, it does require allowing sufficient time to learn, uncover assumptions, and seek clarity—all with an open mind.

External Pressures

A volatile, uncertain, complex, or ambiguous environment makes it tempting not to listen. The daily demands placed on leaders make it difficult to slow down, focus, inquire, and listen. At the same time, one of the critical skills for dealing with uncertain conditions is to actively solicit information and make sense of it. Communicating effectively—especially the ability to listen well—is a survival skill.

Lack of Know-how

Listening is a neglected communication skill. Much of the emphasis on communication by leaders is about how to effectively “get your message out.” Less effort is made to ensure that leaders accurately receive the messages of others.

Individual Makeup

An individual’s experience (whether accustomed to working collaboratively or independently, for example) and personality (such as action driven, impatient, talk oriented, or reserved) may also create barriers to effective active listening.

Time and Place

Listening is particularly challenging when you aren’t in the same room with those with whom you are working. Telephone calls and video conferences are impersonal, nonverbal cues are missing, technology may be distracting, and the lure of multitasking is strong. Active listening may be all the more important given the reality of working routinely across time zones and with co-workers anywhere in the world.

Emotion

When people express strong feelings, it may be tempting to react quickly or passionately. It’s better to use active listening to ease tensions, address conflict, and find common ground for solving problems. Low-grade emotions, too, can make it difficult to listen well. When a leader is negotiating with someone he or she doesn’t respect, it may be a particular challenge to listen without judging, to be patient, and so on. Emotions are always going to play a role at work; a good leader is able to manage his or her feelings and help others to manage theirs.

Cultural Differences

The way we work, communicate, and lead is deeply connected to our cultural backgrounds. Routine or natural behaviors can be misinterpreted and can create unexpected problems when you are working with people whose cultural backgrounds are different from yours. Similarly, ideas and techniques that leaders learn—including techniques of active listening—have some level of cultural bias. While active listening may allow you to better communicate in culturally diverse settings, it is important to be mindful of your own assumptions and interpretations.

How to Improve Your Listening Skills

This section offers specific tips and activities to help you practice and hone your active listening skills. Look back at the assessment that you completed on pages 10–11. If you gave yourself a 4 or 5 on any item, find that item below. We've listed tips for addressing each one; use the margin to add ideas of your own. Then use our suggestions and your ideas to set goals and practice plans.

1. I sit behind my desk, accept phone calls, shuffle papers....
 - Select a place and time that make distractions and disruptions less likely.
 - Ask others not to disturb you.
 - If you are in the middle of something important, ask the other person for a few minutes to complete your task. Then pay full attention to him or her.
2. I have a hard time concentrating on what is being said.
 - Turn toward the other person, make eye contact, and remove things in front of you that may distract you.

- With permission from the other person, take notes to help you remember important points.
 - If a session gets long, suggest a breather.
3. I am annoyed when someone slows me down.
 - Consider the potential costs of not slowing down and listening to the other person.
 - Offer the other person a specified amount of time during which you will be fully attentive. If the conversation is not finished by then, suggest another time to continue.
 - Be proactive. Make room on your calendar every day to walk around and visit with people. Let them know you want to hear their concerns, suggestions, and needs.
 4. I think about what I want to say next....
 - Set a goal of being able to repeat the last sentence the other person has said.
 - Allow yourself time to formulate your response after the other person finishes speaking.
 - Remind yourself that your primary goal as a listener is to understand, not to fix.
 5. I don't like it when someone questions my ideas or actions.
 - Ask yourself why you think that your ideas and actions can't be improved upon.
 - Ask someone you trust to give you feedback when you come across as a know-it-all.
 - Pay attention to your body language, tone of voice, facial expressions, and gestures when you're questioned.
 6. I interrupt or show signs of impatience....
 - Focus on what is being said, not what you want to say.
 - Give the other person permission to call you on interrupting him or her.

- Allow yourself time to formulate your response after the other person finishes speaking.
7. I give advice too soon....
- Consider that the other person may primarily need to be heard and understood.
 - Ask open-ended questions that encourage the other person to offer ideas.
 - Don't be afraid of silence. It gives the other person a chance to continue, and it gives you a chance to collect your thoughts.
8. I tell people not to feel the way they do.
- Feelings are real for the people experiencing them. Don't expect people not to have them.
 - Acknowledge the other person's feelings and include them in your interpretation of what's going on.
 - Ask the other person to describe how his or her feelings affect work and relationships.
9. I sense that people seem upset after talking to me.
- Summarize the key points you heard the other person make. Ask whether that was what he or she was trying to communicate.
 - Ask someone you trust to observe you during conversations with others and give you feedback.
 - List two or three things that you may have done to contribute to the other person's reaction. At an opportune time, check them out with him or her.
10. I tend to talk significantly more than the other person talks.
- Apply the 80:20 rule. Do 80 percent of the listening and 20 percent of the talking.
 - Periodically paraphrase what you have heard the other person say: "Let me see whether I heard you correctly..."
 - Don't be afraid of silence. It gives the other person a chance to continue, and it gives you a chance to collect your thoughts.

11. I make it a point to fill any silences.
 - Ask yourself why you're uncomfortable with silence. Extroverted preferences? Desire to appear decisive?
 - Don't be afraid of silence. It gives the other person a chance to continue, and it gives you a chance to collect your thoughts.
 - Admit your discomfort with silence to the other person: "I feel the urge to respond immediately, but I want to hear as much as possible from you."
12. I am uncomfortable...when the other person expresses emotions.
 - Remember that emotions can provide important data. They can tell you what's behind the spoken words.
 - Pay attention to the tone of voice, body language, and the use of specific words.
 - Name the emotions as you notice them: "You seem worried about.... Tell me more about it."
13. I have a hard time understanding what people are trying to say.
 - Use open-ended, clarifying, and probing questions.
 - Ask people to give you the essence of what they're trying to say. Repeat what you hear, and invite corrections and additions.
 - If others are present, ask someone else to state what he or she heard.
14. I avoid asking any questions that would encourage....
 - Be clear about why you are having a conversation. Almost any valid reason requires you to ask questions and allow the other person to talk.
 - You might ask a person who tends to be long-winded to list the topics he or she wants to discuss and give you the list in advance.
 - Suggest a time and place for the conversation where you can be relaxed and unhurried.

Create Listening Reminders

Use images or your own shorthand to create active listening reminders for yourself. You may copy the active listening graphic on page 13 and keep it taped to your computer. Shrink the graphic and tuck it into your wallet or keep it with your notebook or PDA. Draw or find your own image of what active listening means to you. Or reverse the approach—find an image of what poor listening can do, and use that as your reminder. Some leaders just write *LISTEN* at the top of their notes at each meeting.

Remind yourself of specific behaviors. If you are working on a specific skill of active listening, give yourself a cue or reminder. Perhaps you are focused on not interrupting; you could keep a note or card handy that says “Don’t interrupt!” Or if you are honing your questioning skills, refer to a list of open-ended, clarifying, and probing questions that you’ve brought with you.

When you can plan ahead for a discussion or meeting, work out your active listening strategy ahead of time just as you would think through the content of the meeting. What is your goal, and how will active listening help you achieve that goal? Map out specific behaviors, questions, and ideas so you will have reminders in the midst of the meeting.

15. I ask questions for which I already have the answers.
 - Avoid doing this. Such an approach isn’t appropriate for active listening.
 - Consider that doing this may make the other person feel manipulated.
 - If you have a possible answer, offer it and encourage the other person to reflect on its potential strengths and shortcomings.
16. I expect yes or no answers.
 - Remind yourself that such an expectation is not appropriate for active listening.

- Review the information in this guidebook about open-ended, clarifying, and probing questions.
 - Avoid dead-end questions that ask for confirmation instead of insight: “Don’t you think that...?”
17. I frequently lose track of where the conversation is going.
- Periodically paraphrase what you have heard the other person say: “Let me see whether I heard you correctly...”
 - If you do lose track, ask for help: “I don’t follow. Will you help me see where this is going?”
 - Remind yourself of the original purpose of the conversation.
18. I have a hard time remembering what has been said....
- With permission from the other person, take notes to help you remember important points.
 - At the end of the conversation, summarize the key points and ask for verification. Or ask the other person to summarize.
 - If the conversation is important enough and both of you are comfortable with having it recorded, do so.
19. I frequently discover that things...don’t get done.
- Toward the end of the conversation, state what you and the other person are committing to do—and by when.
 - Ask the other person to send you a brief written summary of his or her agreed-upon actions.
 - Consider that cultural dynamics may be at play, and follow up as needed.
20. I avoid having things repeated, by the other person or myself.
- Remind yourself that repetition helps to ensure that you understand what the other person means to say.
 - Periodically ask each other what you have heard the other say to catch any miscommunication early.
 - If others are present, ask someone else to state what he or she heard.

21. I keep my thoughts to myself.
 - Being an active listener includes sharing your thoughts. Just remember that your primary objective is to understand; being understood is secondary.
 - Build on what the other person says: “That triggered the following thought for me.”
 - Use a you-first approach. Sharing your thoughts first may squelch the other person’s ideas.
22. I keep my feelings to myself.
 - Being an active listener includes sharing your feelings. By sharing them, at a level comfortable to you, you can convey empathy and active engagement.
 - Use the SBI technique. Describe the *situation* in which the other person’s behavior occurred, describe the *behavior*, and explain the *impact* that it had on you.
 - Given that few of us can conceal our feelings, it makes sense to share them and, by naming them, to gain control over them.
23. I avoid sharing personal experiences.
 - Remember that they are potentially tremendous sources for teaching and connecting with the other person.
 - Start off with someone you trust and relatively safe topics.
 - Do avoid sharing personal experiences to lecture or to diminish the other person’s experience.
24. I try hard not to let the other person know....
 - Do the opposite. If the behavior is inappropriate, it gives the person an opportunity to correct it or to apologize and explain.
 - Use the SBI technique. Describe the *situation* in which the other person’s behavior occurred, describe the *behavior*, and explain the *impact* that it had on you.
 - Invite the other person to let you know how your behavior affects him or her.

Leading with Active Listening

Remember Jim, the leader who's having trouble with several of his direct reports? With active listening skills and a chance to go back in time, his talk with Mary could go something like this:

JIM: Mary, I've been wanting to talk to you. I sense that something is getting in the way of our working well together (*pauses; Mary nods*). I'd like to try to understand and change that (*Mary nods again*). It would help me to hear your observations.

MARY (*not knowing exactly how to start*): Well, I would say that one problem is that we don't have enough flexibility— (*Jim's cell phone rings.*)

JIM (*reaching for the phone, setting it to silent and putting it away*): I'm sorry. I forgot to turn the ringer off. You were saying that we don't have enough flexibility?

MARY: Right. Our schedule is pretty rigid, and with the kind of work we do, there's really no reason it has to be that way. And in my case, it would help a lot to be able to take a shorter lunch and then leave a few minutes earlier in the afternoon. If I don't get to my son's daycare by 6:00, they charge me a dollar for every minute I'm late.

JIM: Wow, a dollar a minute? That could add up. Even just five minutes a day, five days a week...

MARY (*voice trembling, but trying to maintain composure*): And even worse than that was the day when I was the very last parent to get there. Nick's teacher was mad, and he looked so scared. He told me later that he was afraid I wasn't going to come at all...

JIM (*nodding*): I see what you mean. I don't have kids myself, so I've never had to deal with that kind of thing, but I can see that it

would be very upsetting. So let's see—your idea was to take a shorter lunch and then leave a little earlier in the afternoon?

MARY: Yes.

JIM: That works for me. You'd have just as much time for your work, and you wouldn't have to worry about being late for Nick. It's fine to go ahead and start today, if you like. I'm glad we had this talk.

MARY: Me too. Thank you so much.

JIM: Thank you too.

Active listening can make a huge difference in our interactions with others. Working relationships become more solid, based on trust, respect, and honesty. Leaders benefit from the depth of engagement and information that can come as a result; it lets them plan and proceed with greater insight and knowledge. Active listening is not an optional component of leadership; it is not a nicety to be used to make others feel good. It is, in fact, a critical component of the tasks facing today's leaders.

Suggested Readings

- Barker, L. L., & Watson, K. (2000). *Listen up: How to improve relationships, reduce stress, and be more productive by using the power of listening*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Burley-Allen, M. (1995). *Listening: The forgotten skill* (2nd ed.). New York: Wiley.
- Kahane, A. (2004). *Solving tough problems: An open way of talking, listening, and creating new realities*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.
- Lombardo, M. M., & Eichinger, R. W. (2004). *FYI for your improvement: A guide for development and coaching* (4th ed.). Minneapolis, MN: Lominger.

- Nichols, M. P. (1995). *The lost art of listening: How learning to listen can improve relationships*. New York: The Guilford Press.
- Prince, D. W., & Hoppe, M. H. (2000). *Communicating across cultures*. Greensboro, NC: Center for Creative Leadership.
- Shafir, R. Z. (2003). *The zen of listening: Mindful communication in the age of distraction*. Wheaton, IL: Quest Books.
- Sullivan, J. E. (2000). *The good listener*. Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press.

Background

For thirty-five years, CCL has worked with thousands of leaders to develop their skills. Our approach to that process has largely been one of helping leaders gain awareness of and insight into their behaviors, preferences, strengths, and weaknesses—and offering the opportunity to adapt and learn new skills. Active listening is a tool that has been embedded in a number of CCL programs. We often highlight behaviors tied to active listening in discussion about giving and receiving feedback, dealing with conflict, building relationships, building teams, and so on. Behaviors connected to effective listening are addressed in several assessments used by the Center, including Skillscope, Benchmarks, and the Campbell Leadership Index. Active listening also undergirds our feedback and coaching methodology. The Center's approach to coaching is one that encourages people to come up with their own answers. To work with a coachee effectively, the coach must be a skilled practitioner of active listening.

While active listening has been understood as a useful leadership and development technique, we've begun to see it as a core set of skills for all leaders. The ability to listen effectively is connected to many of the leadership skills that are essential in today's environment, including the ability to adapt and remain flexible in

the face of change, take the perspective of others, lead employees with a participative management style, build and mend relationships, and manage change. In recent years, we've also seen an increase in concern about listening skills among the leaders in our programs. Leaders who have received negative feedback can attribute some of their struggles to an inability to listen well. Others are being told directly that they are not listening. To meet this concern, we've begun to make our approach to active listening more explicit.

Key Point Summary

Active listening is a person's willingness and ability to hear and understand. You can become a more effective listener and leader by learning the skills of active listening: paying attention, holding judgment, reflecting, clarifying, summarizing, and sharing.

By paying attention to your behavior and that of the other person, you create the setting for productive dialogue. Pay attention to your frame of mind and your body language, as well as the other person's nonverbal and verbal behavior.

Holding judgment makes it possible for you to be open to new ideas, new perspectives, and new possibilities—to understand how the other person sees the world. Practice empathy, indicate your open mind, acknowledge difference, and be patient.

Reflecting the other person's information, perspective, and feelings is a way to indicate that you hear and understand. Use paraphrasing to confirm your understanding. Don't assume that you understand correctly or that the other person knows you've heard.

Clarifying is double-checking on any issue that is ambiguous or unclear. Use open-ended, clarifying, and probing questions to do so.

Summarizing helps people see their key themes, and it confirms and solidifies your grasp of their points of view. It may lead to additional questions as a transition to problem solving. It also helps both parties to be clear on mutual responsibilities and follow-up.

As you gain a clearer understanding of the other person's perspective, it's time for sharing—introducing your ideas, feelings, and suggestions, and addressing any concerns.

Active listening can make a huge difference in our interactions with others. Working relationships become more solid, based on trust, respect, and honesty. Active listening is not an optional component of leadership; it is not a nicety to be used to make others feel good. It is, in fact, a critical component of the tasks facing today's leaders.

Ordering Information

TO GET MORE INFORMATION, TO ORDER OTHER IDEAS INTO ACTION GUIDEBOOKS, OR TO FIND OUT ABOUT BULK-ORDER DISCOUNTS, PLEASE CONTACT US BY PHONE AT 336-545-2810 OR VISIT OUR ONLINE BOOKSTORE AT WWW.CCL.ORG/GUIDEBOOKS.

FOR THE PRACTICING MANAGER

Active Listening

Listening well is an essential component of good leadership. You can become a more effective listener and leader by learning the skills of active listening. Working relationships become more solid, based on trust, respect, and honesty. Active listening is not an optional component of leadership; it is not a nicety to be used to make others feel good. It is, in fact, a critical component of the tasks facing today's leaders.

LEAD CONTRIBUTOR

Michael H. Hoppe is a senior program and research associate at CCL's Greensboro campus. He delivers custom programs to clients worldwide, as well as the Leadership Development Program (LDP)[®] and other open-enrollment programs. He also researches and designs modules on cross-cultural leadership issues. Michael holds an M.S. in clinical psychology from the University of Munich, Germany; an M.S. in educational psychology and statistics from the State University of New York at Albany; and a Ph.D. in adult education and institutional studies from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

The Center for Creative Leadership is an international, nonprofit educational institution whose mission is to advance the understanding, practice, and development of leadership for the benefit of society worldwide. We conduct research, produce publications, and provide a broad variety of educational programs and products to leaders and organizations in public, corporate, and nonprofit sectors.



Center for
Creative
Leadership

www.ccl.org

ISBN 978-1-882197-94-1



5 1 1 9 5



9 781882 197941