

The Five Components of Active Listening

Communication is not a one-way process. It requires, at least, someone to give the message and someone to receive it. Demonstrating active listening shows the speaker that their message is being both received and understood.

This article explains the five components of active listening and offers suggestions for demonstrating these in conversation.

Active listening has five components:

1. **Testing understanding**
2. **Questioning**
3. **Building**
4. **Feedback**
5. **Summarising**

Testing understanding

Testing your understanding by **clarifying** what the speaker has said ensures you have the correct facts and demonstrates that you have understood. **Eliciting facts** is one of the basics of active listening. A simple way of demonstrating this component in conversations is to rephrase or restate what has been said back to the speaker. Some useful ways of doing this are:

- Can I just clarify? You're saying that ...
- My understanding is that ...
- Let me make sure I've got this right, you're saying ...

Do not just repeat what the person had said. **Rephrase the highlights** or key points of what has been said, but take care not to distort the meaning.

Testing your understanding in this way has some key advantages:

- It clarifies that someone has received the message correctly.
- The speaker knows that people have been listening, which can boost their confidence and morale by making them feel valued.

Questioning

There will be occasions when clarification of what has been said is necessary to find out more as well as testing your understanding. More background information or other facts and figures may be necessary for decision-making purposes.

Asking probing questions allows you to do this while also demonstrating that you have been listening to all that the speaker has said.

Questioning by group members also prevents the speaker going on too long without a break for information to be absorbed. Some people tend to give messages full of fascinating facts but much too detailed for a single sitting. Asking for clarification **breaks this monotony** and also enables the speaker to arrange the information into manageable chunks which people may find easier to digest. Examples of this include:

- And what were the details of those actions?
- Could you tell me some more about ... ?

Building

Building on someone's proposal or idea is another component of active and effective listening. Listening is not about sitting back and waiting for the information to come to you, it is about adding to the speaker's point of view with ideas of your own, whilst taking care not to hijack the original idea.

A simple way of building is to highlight those aspects or points you like about the information you have been given and to share any of your own associated ideas or facts. Examples of this are:

- What you said about ... is really interesting. I think we should discuss this more.
- Your thoughts on ... sparked off some ideas and I'd like to propose we ...

Feedback

Active listening also involves giving feedback to the speaker about how their message affected you. Reflecting back feelings and emotions enables you to check you have understood the speaker's sentiments and allows you to empathise. It also gives the speaker a chance to correct any misconceptions that may have inadvertently been conveyed.

Feedback should follow the following five rules. It should be:

- Non-judgemental
- Clear
- Honest
- Immediate
- Brief

Summarising

Summarising is a critical skill for active listening. It clarifies and reinforces the message for both listener and speaker. It finishes off one subject, creating the opportunity to move onto another, and gives the speaker the chance to correct the listener if they summarise inaccurately. It may be appropriate to do this after each defined topic, especially when a decision has been taken.

Alternatively, it is sometimes preferable to save the summarising to the very end of the conversation and then go over the notes to collate what has been said and agreed. A good way of beginning to summarise may be:

- So let's recap on what has been said and agreed.
- OK, let me note down the key points we've discussed.