

The ABC's of Active Listening

By [Sheryl McAtee](#) July 26, 2018



Let's face it, listening is hard. We have ideas we want to share. We've thought this through and we know what to do. New ideas will slow us down. We need to end this meeting!

And yet, most communication and leadership classes include active listening as an essential skill for team members, managers and leaders. So, what does active listening include? What are the steps?

If passive listening is defined as passively accepting information, then active listening is defined as listening that is engaged, responsive and interactive. Here are some basic active listening steps:

1. **Allow time.** Time is the most significant barrier to active listening. It takes time to really listen, acknowledge, process, test understanding and respond. Either set aside more time for a conversation or focus the topic so that you don't feel rushed to move on to the next thing.
2. **Focus on the other person.** Active listening requires really focusing on someone else – not on your own thoughts or on what you want to say next.
3. **Practice rephrasing.** Part of active listening is rephrasing what another person says to confirm understanding – without parroting the same text back. Here's a conversational example, if someone says, "I can't believe he said that to me in that meeting!". You could say, "Sounds like you want to understand more what he was thinking." This acknowledges the other person's statement, while also engaging thoughtfully to advance the dialogue.
4. **Resist problem solving or giving advice.** Active listening is about listening, not advising. Often, people just want to be heard. Offering advice too soon can lead to resistance, so let the person find their own way by helping them process – without problem solving.
5. **Ask open-ended questions.** Here are some examples, "What else do you think about ___?" "What other thoughts do you have about this?" or just "Keep going – you are doing a good job processing (or explaining or working through) this." This encourages the person to continue, without driving the dialogue.
6. **Wait to be invited.** You may be ready to give your two cents in the middle of the other person's story. Don't! Wait to be asked for advice or suggestions before you give it.

Active listening requires time, patience and the belief that the other person has insights that are worth waiting for. Remember, no one conversation needs to resolve all issues or answer all questions. Listening now can provide useful insights for actions tomorrow.

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