

# The Top Seven Techniques to Effective Active Listening by Decisive Mediation

## Have you ever felt the frustration of not being listened to or understood?

The answer is very likely to be yes - even though most people believe themselves to be good listeners. Yet research by the International Listening Association indicates that humans generally listen at a 25% comprehension rate, meaning that unless we train ourselves to listen effectively and efficiently we are probably missing more of what people are saying than we realise. This is because hearing is very different to listening. We listen at 125-250 words per minute, but think at 1000-3000 words per minute, meaning we can all find our mind wandering at times.

Therefore Active Listening requires effort and practice as a skill - not dissimilar from learning maths, or a language. Yet this crucial business technique is not something that is formally taught at most schools, universities or business courses.

Many people have heard of active listening – but what does it really mean? Active listening is a method of listening and responding to another person that encourages them to communicate clearly and fully. It is listener orientated and based on a 70:30 rule, meaning you focus your efforts on the speaker and aim to talk no more than 30% of the time whilst encouraging them to make up 70% of the conversation.

As HR professionals this is an essential skill. It leads the way for positive, effective and efficient communication within your organisation and helps you quickly develop rapport with people. As key communicators within the organisation it ensures you understand what is being said, making you appear more credible and confident in your communication. In addition, when dealing with challenging situations, listening to a person in distress and really showing that person you're listening, can lead to a positive outcome. This is because when people are in heightened states of emotional release it is important to them, on a subconscious level, that they feel understood. Active listening sends positive messages back to the speaker, using body language and appropriate phrases, that they are indeed being understood. This in turn releases endorphins for both the speaker and active listener, making both parties happier. Furthermore once people feel heard, they are significantly more likely to listen to you.

Now we've gone through the background to this key skill, let's take a look at seven tips to great Active Listening:

**1. Be Non Judgmental and Pause Your Inner Voice:** There is a good listening quote that says: "People don't listen to what you say. People listen to what they say to themselves about what you say." We can find ourselves evaluating conversations and hearing our 'inner voice'; the part of the conscious mind that is constantly processing and judging information. A common trait in human communication is to constantly assimilate and judge what is being said, which can be useful in certain circumstances, but not when practicing true active listening, as this can lead to two problems.

Firstly it encourages premature evaluation of what is being said. This is because the average attention span during a conversation is only a matter of a few minutes (10 to 12) and people tend to reach a conclusion before this time.

Secondly forming and voicing a judgment can stifle the speaker and often miss the true point being made. Try to take some time off from your inner voice and focus on the speaker. Try with practice to suspend your own frame of reference for as long as you can.

**2. Body Language:** It might seem odd to mention body language when it comes to listening, but positive body language is so important in building rapport and getting the talker to open up. Try to lean slightly forward when the person is talking, rest palms on your lap, maintain eye

contact and nod your head at key points. Of course this sounds a bit formulaic so in practice it's important it's conducted with authenticity rather than appear forced.

Good listening body language demonstrates 'attendance' in a conversation. Simply put this subtly shows the speaker you are interested, encouraging them to talk further.

**3. Seek to understand before you seek to be understood:** When we enter a conversation with the aim of understanding the other person, rather than be understood ourselves, our intention will be to listen. Therefore try listening to understand, rather than to respond.

**4. Paraphrase:** You can really demonstrate active listening by paraphrasing and explaining back to the speaker what you've just heard. This both checks your understanding and demonstrates 'attendance' to the speaker – i.e. that you're genuinely interested in their needs and have heard what they are saying.

An added and highly effective technique is called amplified reflection. This prevents you having to repeatedly paraphrase and requires you simply echo back key words that are being said. This needs to be done with the right intonation – but performed correctly it's a powerful listening technique and shows the speaker you have picked up on the salient points.

**5. Acknowledgment:** A fast and highly effective way of practicing active listening is by acknowledging to the speaker you've heard what they have said. This makes the speaker feel understood. When people feel truly understood by you, they believe you to be perceptive and intelligent, which is also a great rapport builder. In difficult conversations feelings crave acknowledgement. And unless they receive the acknowledgement they need, feelings will cause trouble.

#### **How To Acknowledge Effectively:**

Imagine a scenario where a customer facing team member tells you they feel let down, and even lied to, by their manager regarding targets. If you replied: "Well there is no evidence of anyone being dishonest but we'll make sure nothing like this happens between you again." This is not an effective acknowledgement. Instead it would be more useful to reply: "It sounds like you're really upset about this and if I was in your shoes I would feel concerned too."

Of course there is no one perfect thing to say in every situation, and at times you can use your body language to convey acknowledgment. But the key to successful acknowledgement is to verbally recognise people's feelings and invisible questions. We must also acknowledge before moving onto problem solving.

Acknowledging also checks both your understanding and demonstrates 'attendance' to the speaker – i.e. that you're genuinely interested in their needs and what they are saying, thus encouraging them to provide more information. But it doesn't mean you agree with the person. In fact acknowledging and understanding are completely different from agreeing.

**6. Use Silence and Questions Effectively:** As an active listener non-oppressive silence is a valuable tool. In many cases you will learn more by maintaining your silence than asking questions. This is because your silence allows the speaker time to explain them self, helping you identify the true issues.

Whilst maintaining silence is important, asking relevant questions is also an effective way of enhancing communication, and a key part of active listening. As the introduction alluded to, ensure the other person is speaking around 70% of the time, meaning you need to make your 30% as effective as possible.

To this end, use open questions (what, when, where, why and how) if you want someone to expand and closed questions (such as do or if) when you need to narrow the conversation down. Ask open ended questions that give the other person broad latitude in how to answer, such as "Help me understand better...". This means the speaker directs the response towards what is important to them. But only ever ask one question at a time, more confuses the

conversation.

Questions can also be used in active listening to create concrete information; when used carefully they can help people to be more explicit about their reasoning. However to be effective, questions need to be genuine and aimed at enquiring to learn. Don't make disguised assertions –dressing up an assertion as a question. Doing so creates uncertainty, resentment and breaks down trust.

An example of a workplace disguised assertion from a line manager to team member would be “Is it impossible for you to focus on your work just for once?” (Instead of “I'd like you to pay more attention to your work, how can we both make that happen?”)

Disguised assertions don't work because the real message doesn't get through and instead of hearing the underlying feeling or request the other person focuses on the sarcasm and the attack. This encourages negative reciprocation. Therefore good active listeners use carefully considered and appropriate questions that helps the speaker to open up, not to chastise. Combine both - practice feeling comfortable with silences, then asking good open questions at relevant intervals.

**7. Empathy:** Empathy is a fundamental skill that an active listener should employ. Different in nature to sympathy, it is the ability to recognise and share feelings expressed by another. Empathy also allows people in a conversation to establish a connection and build trust.

We hope you found these tips on active listening useful. There are many other tips and techniques that can help you in your role. Feel free to call Decisive Mediation to access this advice.

If you would like to further develop your active listening skills we can provide your team and line managers with Active Listening Training to enhance organisational performance.

In addition if you are trying to resolve an internal dispute and would like a confidential conversation with a mediator call Decisive Mediation now on free phone 0800 998 7100 or visit [www.decisivemediation.com](http://www.decisivemediation.com) for more information.



*Article by James Cull (Principal Mediator - Decisive Mediation) – ‘I regularly write a range of free guides / tips aimed at enhancing skills useful to both HR, management and those wishing to improve business soft skills. These are placed in the blog section of my site and I inform people about them via Twitter. Follow me at @Decis\_Mediation’*