

How to Have a Better Conversation: Active Listening and Helpful Questioning

Active listening is a way of listening and responding to another person that improves mutual understanding. Often when people talk to each other, they don't listen attentively. They are often distracted, half listening, half thinking about something else.

Active listening is a structured form of listening and responding that focuses the attention on the speaker. The listener must take care to attend to the speaker fully, and then repeats, in the listener's own words, what he or she thinks the speaker has said. The listener does not have to agree with the speaker – he or she must simply state what they think the speaker said. This enables the speaker to find out whether the listener really understood. If the listener did not, the speaker can explain some more.

Active listening has several benefits. First, it forces people to listen attentively to others. Second, it avoids misunderstandings, as people have to confirm that they do really understand what another person has said. Third, it tends to open people up, to get them to say more. If people feel that others are really attuned to their concerns and want to listen they are likely to explain in detail what they feel and why. If both people do this, the chances of being able to develop a solution to mutual problem or situation becomes much greater.

In general....

If posing a question

- Quickly express appreciation
- Briefly summarize a preliminary point
- Ask the relevant question

If making a point

- Quickly express appreciation
- Briefly restate the relevant idea as presented
- State your idea, interpretation, reflection
- Invite a response

Specifically...

Expressing appreciation

- Thanks for bringing this to my attention...
- I am glad that we are talking about this...
- It's helpful for me to hear your viewpoint, so thanks for being willing to have this discussion
- I know this is important to both of us...

Asking open-ended questions

- What do you think is going on?
- What do you think is the best way forward?
- What is the best way for me to help you?
- What don't I know about this situation?
- What happened to make you feel this way?
- If you were me, what would you have done?

Acknowledging the other person's concerns and feelings

- I can see that this has been difficult for you.
- It looks like you are very concerned about this situation.
- It sounds like you've tried to work on this as best you can.

Explaining the thinking behind your questions or comments – this allows you to explain your reasoning or how you reached a conclusion, rather than leave the other person to generate his own explanation that might differ greatly from your actual motivations. This also allows people to ask you to clarify your reasoning or point out how they may reason differently.

- I am asking this question because _____.
- I came to understand the situation this way.....so it led to the following question...

Checking for accuracy – make sure you really understand what the other person means

- I think I heard you say _____. Do I have that right or do you remember it differently?
- It sounds like you want/need/feel _____. Do I have that right, or would you describe it differently?

Asking the other person to expand and/or clarify

- Tell me more about why that is important to you.
- Please say more about that.
- Could you provide some additional details about that?
- Can you give me some examples of what you mean?

Summarizing/restating the other person's comments to illustrate understanding

- Repeat what the speaker said, or what you think they said. Check for accuracy.

Balancing listening and speaking – silence can encourage others to speak up

Common Listening Missteps

- Trying to solve the problem rather than focusing on what is being said
- Assuming you already know what the person is trying to say
- Trying to analyze the problem
- Jumping to conclusions or rushing to judgment
- Giving unsolicited advice
- Saying how much you understand the problem
- Interviewing people who are upset rather than listening to them
- Moving too quickly to problem-solving, before the person has completed his/her thoughts
- Changing the subject