



Active Listening

GUIDE

Introduction

Listening is arguably the most important skill in communicating and in building a business.

In fact, being an active listener has numerous benefits, from reducing errors and increasing productivity to improving relationships and building a personal brand. Especially in a hybrid world of work, the ability to actively listen has become crucial. New models of working, and employees communicating and collaborating using digital platforms, can particularly challenge our listening skills. Yet, the average employee spends 70–80% of their day involved in some form of communication and devotes about 50% of their time to listening.

Executives spend even more time listening to others, interpreting communication, and being able to respond accordingly.

Given that information, one might conclude that we are all great listeners. But in fact, we are not. Research on listening indicates that we only remember between 25–50% of what we hear. Luckily, we can learn new ways of listening. This resource focuses on active listening specifically. Active listening refers to conscious efforts to hear not only the words another person is saying but also to understand the complete message that is being communicated.

“The biggest communication problem is we do not listen to understand. We listen to reply.”

Stephen R. Covey

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1. Common Listening Challenges

Active listening can be harder than we imagine. In day-to-day life, with a million different things on our minds, it is easy to convey the message that you are not really listening to your conversation partner. This can be particularly detrimental when having important conversations with your employees. See below for a list of signs that you might not come across as an active listener:

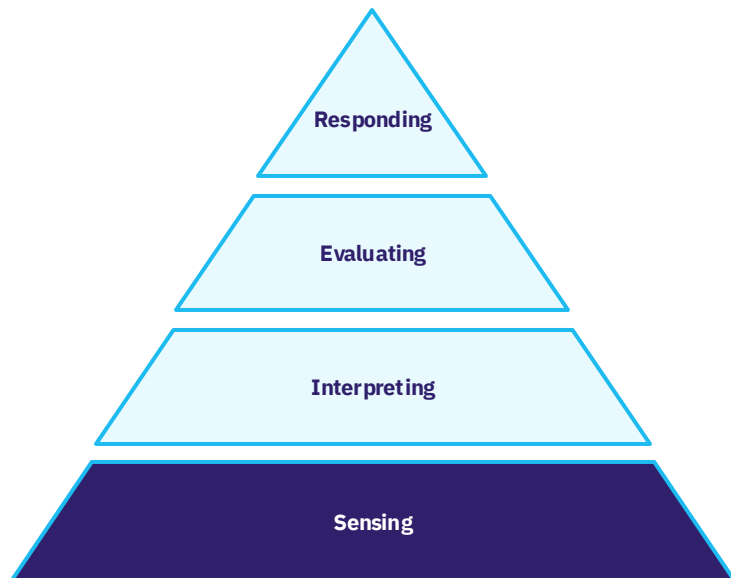
- You struggle to concentrate on what's being said.
- You tend to zone out when the speaker is conveying negative information.
- You keep on thinking about what to say next instead of listening.
- You notice feelings of dislike when someone challenges your ideas.
- You give advice before listening actively.
- You talk more than you listen.

Do any of these points seem familiar to you? Then chances are that your conversation partners will not perceive you as really caring about what they are saying. Or, that it indeed poses a challenge for you to be an active listener. So, how can you improve the manner in which you listen?



2. The SIER Model

One of the simplest models for active listening is the SIER model—which involves sensing, interpreting, evaluating, and responding. Read more about each of the steps and how you can master them below.



Sensing

The foundation of active listening is sensing. At this foundational level, you're collecting as much information as you can to help you engage with your conversation partner.

Ask yourself the following questions:

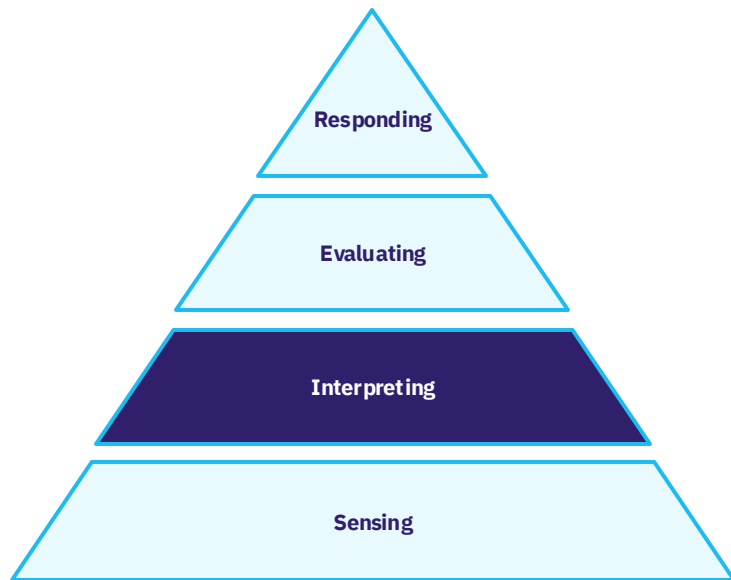
- What are they communicating nonverbally?
- How are they speaking?
- What does that tell you about their emotional state?

But sensing is also about what you communicate—what your conversation partner is sensing from you. This is something that happens in your whole body, from your eyes to your feet to your tone of voice.

Tip

Talk less. Especially in this first step, it is particularly important to encourage your conversation partner to share their perceptions. Give them the space to offer ideas and solutions before adding your own. Aim to do 80% of the listening and 20% of the talking in your interactions with others.

Practice: Think about a conversation that you have had with a colleague/friend/partner in the last week. What did their verbal and nonverbal behavior tell you that their words did not? Write down three examples.



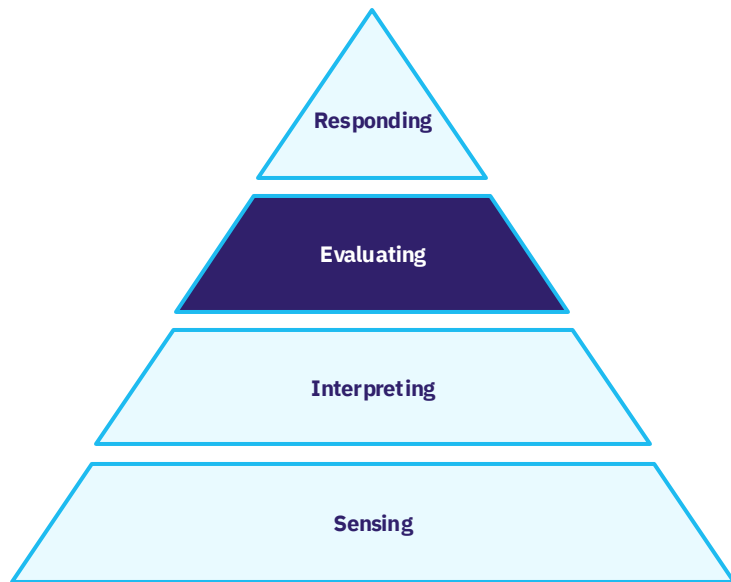
Interpreting

The next layer of active listening is interpreting. Your goal at this layer is to fully understand the message that your conversation partner is sending to you. This involves understanding the context in which you're meeting as they understand it and empathizing with them. A good technique to apply here is to "playback and reflect" information to the sender. For example, check your understanding by saying, "Let me see if I heard you correctly, you mentioned that you <insert summary of what they said>?"

Tip

Formulate questions. Resist the urge to offer suggestions or solutions and strive to respond to people with genuine, open-ended questions. This will not only require you to listen intentionally but can also result in the other person thinking about their contribution in a new way.

Practice: With a trusted friend or partner, try to conduct a 5-minute conversation where you are only allowed to ask questions and reflect back on what they have told you. Try a simple topic, such as "How was your day?" or "What did you do?" or "What does that mean?" and so on to keep the conversation going. Be sure to tell them what you are doing afterward.



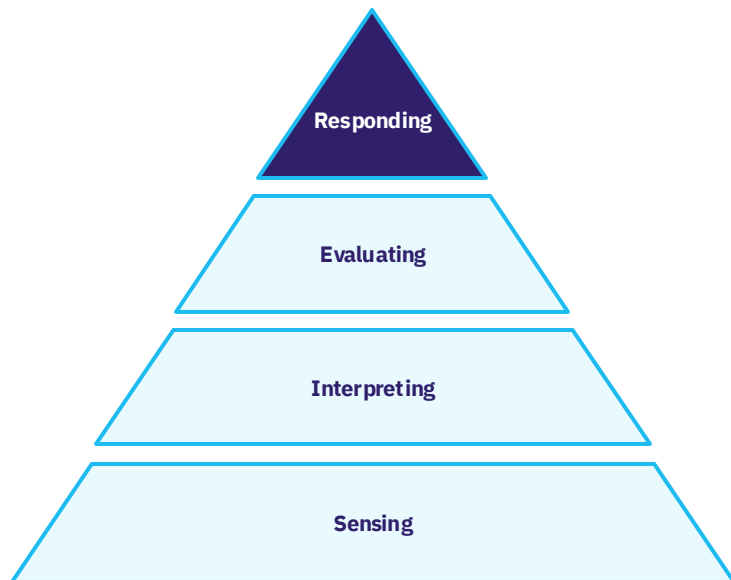
Evaluating

Next up in the active listening hierarchy is evaluation. This is the moment in the conversation where you draw conclusions about what you have sensed and interpreted. It's very important to the evaluation stage that you wait to respond to your partner—and wait to make a decision about what you are going to say—until they have finished speaking. The sooner you decide what they're trying to communicate, the less likely you are to understand them well.

Tip

Wait 3 seconds. To make sure you get your conversation partner's point and avoid responding too early, get comfortable with silence and try to wait 3 full seconds before responding. This will give you a chance to move your focus from thinking about what to respond with while the person is still talking to actively listening to what they are saying, and it gives you time to think of a thoughtful reply afterward.

Practice: In your next conversation, before responding, ask the other participant for "permission to respond." For example, ask, "Can I make a suggestion?" or "Do you still want to add anything?" before launching into your response.



Responding

Finally, you respond to the input from your conversation partner. By this stage, you should have a fairly clear understanding of what was being said to you. It is your aim to communicate that you've understood whatever subtext may be present and to move the conversation along, as well as to clarify anything that remains ambiguous.

Tip

Summarize. Restate the key points you heard and ask whether your summary is accurate. Setting the goal of summarizing the main takeaways of a meeting or conversation will improve your active listening skills and help others confirm their thoughts were accurately received. A good technique to consider is to keep the acronym CPPC in mind:

Context. Summarize the context of the message: "Thanks for sharing your views with me on how we can approach the non-performance of your colleague."

Purpose. What is the purpose of the conversation and of your role? "I believe together we can find viable next steps that will help us address the issue."

Process. What action or next steps should now occur? "Listening to your concerns, I agree that we should try XXXXX, or alternatively, I suggest that we..."

Call to action. End the response with a solid agreement on the next steps: "To take this forward, I think we should do the following..."

Practice: Use the CPPC acronym in a conversation with a trusted colleague or partner. It might feel awkward at first, but structuring your response in this way will help you show that you have listened to the other person and also improve your ability to be heard.

3. Making Active Listening a Habit in Your Organization

The SIER model is a simple model to approach active listening challenges. There are habits to promote active listening. Find a list of ten best practices below and make sure to establish them across your organization to prioritize active listening, and thus, impact the quality of your conversations.

1. Show employees that they are important and being heard. When employees entrust you with their stories, clearly show them that you care about their experiences and their well-being. Create space for them to share their feelings. Be candid and open.
2. When appropriate, face the speaker and have eye contact. In most Western cultures, eye contact is considered a basic ingredient of effective communication. It shows that you are interested and following the conversation. However, it may not be appropriate in other cultures, so be sure to act according to your context.
3. Be attentive to nonverbal cues. This way, you will pick up on hidden meaning, in addition to listening to what is said. Facial expressions, tone of voice, and other behaviors can sometimes tell you more than words alone.
4. Be nonjudgmental. Listen without judging or jumping to conclusions.
5. Show that you're listening. Use your body language and gestures to show that you're engaged. These can include nodding, smiling, encouraging the speaker to continue through verbal comments such as "Uh huh," or "Yes, I see," and so on.
6. Don't interrupt. It is great to ask clarifying questions (see next point) but at its time. Allow the speaker to finish each of their points before asking questions and avoid interrupting with arguments.
7. Ask clarifying and reflective questions. Be sure to wait until the speaker makes a pause. To ask questions, you could use phrases such as:
 - a. "What do you mean when you say...?"
 - b. "Is this what you mean?"
8. Don't think about what to say next. Don't mentally prepare a rebuttal or a smart response. Be sure to fully focus on trying to understand the experience or point of view being shared.
9. Paraphrase and summarize. Some useful phrases to paraphrase are:
 - a. "Let me paraphrase to be sure I understand."
 - b. "What I'm hearing is..."
 - c. "I understand that..."
10. Listen from empty. Try to listen to what is being said at the moment instead of making assumptions based upon your own perceptions or biases in the conversation. Be there with the other party, in the moment.

4. Final Words

Becoming a better listener will improve your productivity, as well as your ability to influence, persuade, and negotiate. The SIER model is a simple model you can use to establish the habit of active listening. To do so, we encourage you to perform the practices from each layer of the hierarchy in the SIER model. Together, let's establish the habit of active listening across organizations.

