

ACTIVE LISTENING

Why is listening, *really* listening, so difficult?

1. Talkers get noticed! As babies, we made a noise to attract our parents' attention whenever we needed something. As children, we saw that the loudest and noisiest often became leaders in the playground. In class, those who spoke out clearly were rewarded and praised by the teachers. In adult and business life, the same pattern continues and those who make the most noise often get more attention than they merit.
2. We think we are more important. Sometimes we say to ourselves, consciously or subconsciously, that we are more important than the person we are talking to. In these circumstances we hold on to our own opinions and are unlikely to listen to anyone else's. This situation can be enhanced and encouraged by status or positional power.
3. We are experts. If we are sure of our ground on a particular topic or theme, we can easily discount anything anyone else says on the subject – even before they say it! Being an expert can hinder effective listening. However, many inventions have occurred because someone did not know 'it couldn't be done' and somebody else listened!
4. We think faster than we speak. This means that, as listeners, we have time available. This can be put to good use by concentrating and trying to fully understand what is being said to us or to bad use by allowing distractions and our own thoughts to intrude. When we add to this our own preconceptions and mind-sets, it is easy not to listen at all or to hear only what we want to hear.
5. Some people are poor speakers. The fault is not always with the listener. We can speak too quickly; send out too much information at once, use unsuitable language or speech patterns. We can use body language that is inconsistent with the words we speak.

The keys to Active Listening

- Concentrate and focus on the speaker – empty your head of your own thoughts and concerns
- Use the correct body language – for example: sit still with an open posture (arms not folded or behind the head, back straight or leaning slightly forward); avoid fidgeting or pencil-tapping; keep warm eye contact (no eye-balling or staring out of the window); use the occasional nod or helpful murmur
- Reflect and feedback to confirm understanding: 'so what you think is we should
- Do not make a judgement on what the speaker is saying too early

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