

Active and Effective Listening

Active Listening: Addressing power differentials and conveying value

by School's Out Washington | Apr 22, 2013 | Posted under [Opinions](#)

by Jenny Walden, MSW Intern at School's Out Washington

I had the opportunity to attend the [14th annual White Privilege Conference](#) (April 11th-13th) which was hosted for the first time in the Seattle area. Though I only was able to attend one day of workshops, I left with insight not only about different dimensions of privilege and oppression, but also challenging personal and professional questions that I will no doubt engage throughout my career.

The first workshop I attended was *Active Listening, Human Value, and Solidarity: How to Counter Classism in Everyday Language*, presented by Pippi Kessler, the director at [Ma'yan](#) which is a nonprofit research and education center in New York City. The workshop took place in a standard hotel-sized room, but was packed with about 30 participants, with many of us (including me!) gladly squeezing together on the floor so that we could all fit. Pippi led a lively and engaging discussion that introduced the importance of active listening as well as different strategies to utilize when communicating. Upon reflection, my biggest take away from the workshop is that **listening can be revolutionary**. It provides a space to bear witness to others and communicate their inherent value. Through active listening we can avoid universalism of experiences, and move towards more inclusive communication, relationships, and communities.

I wanted to share some of the verbal techniques presented that address power differentials and convey value and visibility to others. The following information is modified from materials presented during the workshop and can be utilized when communicating with children, youth, and adults.

Why is listening important?

Listening is one of the most effective, efficient strategies available to you. It speaks to our deepest human need to be seen, valued, and unconditionally cared for. Being a witness to someone else's life is one of the most powerful gifts you can offer another person.

Active listening removes us from being just cultural observers to being change agents. Humans have inherent value and active listening is a way to communicate that value in everyday conversations.

Active Listening communicates two main goals:

1. **Saying what you see** communicates: "I see you. You are not invisible to me."
2. **Asking open questions** communicates: "I'm curious about you. I want to be changed by you."

Say What You See	Ask Questions
<p>Use perception words:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• "It looks like..."• It seems like..." <p>Play back what you hear:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Repeat: "First you got stuck in the rain, then then you got splashed by a bus"• Summarize: "Wow-you had a bad day!"• Clarify: Make sure you accurately heard what was said and understand the underlying meaning.	<p>Look out for "fake" questions!</p> <p>Fake question: "Did you have a great time at the party?"</p> <p>Open questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• "How are you doing?"• "How was your day?"• "What do you think of this?"• "How are you feeling?"

When you are actively listening there are 3 layers of information to be thinking about:

1. **Facts**
2. **Feelings**
3. **Human Needs**

Human needs are especially important and can be conveyed as physical or emotional needs, a need for understanding, a sense of safety, a need to be engaged, or a need to connect and receive recognition.

When playing back what you hear, be mindful of the phrases you use. Some phrases have hidden, embedded “guesses” about the other person or shut down possibilities about what their answers might be. Instead, swap out guesses for phrasing that leaves room for variation.

Guesses	Open Phrasing
“What do your mom and dad do?”	“What was it like for you growing up?”
“Everybody...”	“Some people...”
“Nobody...”	“I...”
“Girls...”	“Sometimes...”
“Always...”	“Often...”
“Never...”	“Some...”
“All...”	

Source: <https://www.schoolsoutwashington.org/blogs/sowa-blog/active-listening-addressing-power-differentials-and-conveying-value>

10 Steps To Effective Listening

[WomensMedia](#) Contributor

[ForbesWomen](#)

Use these listening skills.

ISTOCK-IZUSEK

by Dianne Schilling

You might also enjoy this article: [*9 Small Steps That Will Make You Happier, Starting Now*](#)

In today's high-tech, high-speed, high-stress world, communication is more important than ever, yet we seem to devote less and less time to really listening to one another. Genuine listening has become a rare gift—the gift of time. It helps build relationships, solve problems, ensure understanding, resolve conflicts, and improve accuracy. At work, effective listening means fewer errors and less wasted time. At home, it helps develop resourceful, self-reliant kids who can solve their own problems. Listening builds friendships and careers. It saves money and marriages.

Here are 10 tips to help you develop effective listening skills.

Step 1: Face the speaker and maintain eye contact.

Today In: [Leadership](#)

Talking to someone while they scan the room, study a computer screen, or gaze out the window is like trying to hit a moving target. How much of the person's divided attention you are actually getting? Fifty percent? Five percent? If the person were your child you might demand, "Look at me when I'm talking to you," but that's not the sort of thing we say to a lover, friend or colleague.

In most Western cultures, eye contact is considered a basic ingredient of effective communication. When we talk, we look each other in the eye. That doesn't mean that you can't carry on a conversation from across the room, or from another room, but if the conversation continues for any length of time, you (or the other person) will get up and move. The desire for better communication pulls you together.

Do your conversational partners the courtesy of turning to face them. Put aside papers, books, the phone and other distractions. Look at them, even if they don't look at you. Shyness, uncertainty, shame, guilt, or other emotions, along with cultural taboos, can inhibit eye contact in some people under some circumstances. Excuse the other guy, but stay focused yourself.

Step 2: Be attentive, but relaxed.

Now that you've made eye contact, relax. You don't have to stare fixedly at the other person. You can look away now and then and carry on like a normal person. The important thing is to be attentive. The dictionary says that to "attend" another person means to:

- be present
- give attention
- apply or direct yourself
- pay attention
- remain ready to serve

Mentally screen out distractions, like background activity and noise. In addition, try not to focus on the speaker's accent or speech mannerisms to the point where they become distractions. Finally, don't be distracted by your own thoughts, feelings, or biases.

Step 3: Keep an open mind.

Listen without judging the other person or mentally criticizing the things she tells you. If what she says alarms you, go ahead and feel alarmed, but don't say to yourself, "Well, that was a stupid move." As soon as you indulge in judgmental bemusements, you've compromised your effectiveness as a listener.

Listen without jumping to conclusions. Remember that the speaker is using language to represent the thoughts and feelings inside her brain. You don't know what those thoughts and feelings are and the only way you'll find out is by listening.

Don't be a sentence-grabber. Occasionally my partner can't slow his mental pace enough to listen effectively, so he tries to speed up mine by interrupting and finishing my sentences. This usually lands him way off base, because he is following his own train of thought and doesn't learn where my thoughts are headed. After a couple of rounds of this, I usually ask, "Do you want to have this conversation by yourself, or do you want to hear what I have to say?" I wouldn't do that with everyone, but it works with him.

Step 4: Listen to the words and try to picture what the speaker is saying.

Allow your mind to create a mental model of the information being communicated. Whether a literal picture, or an arrangement of abstract concepts, your brain will do the necessary work if you stay focused, with senses fully alert. When listening for long stretches, concentrate on, and remember, key words and phrases.

When it's your turn to listen, don't spend the time planning what to say next. You can't rehearse and listen at the same time. Think only about what the other person is saying.

Finally, concentrate on what is being said, even if it bores you. If your thoughts start to wander, immediately force yourself to refocus.

Step 5: Don't interrupt and don't impose your "solutions."

Children used to be taught that it's rude to interrupt. I'm not sure that message is getting across anymore. Certainly the opposite is being modeled on the majority of talk shows and reality programs, where loud, aggressive, in-your-face behavior is condoned, if not encouraged.

Interrupting sends a variety of messages. It says:

- "I'm more important than you are."
- "What I have to say is more interesting, accurate or relevant."
- "I don't really care what you think."
- "I don't have time for your opinion."
- "This isn't a conversation, it's a contest, and I'm going to win."

We all think and speak at different rates. If you are a quick thinker and an agile talker, the burden is on *you* to relax your pace for the slower, more thoughtful communicator—or for the guy who has trouble expressing himself.

When listening to someone talk about a problem, refrain from suggesting solutions. Most of us don't want your advice anyway. If we do, we'll ask for it. Most of us prefer to figure out our own solutions. We need you to listen and help us do that. Somewhere way down the line, if you are absolutely bursting with a brilliant solution, at least get the speaker's permission. Ask, "Would you like to hear my ideas?"

Step 6: Wait for the speaker to pause to ask clarifying questions.

When you don't understand something, of course you should ask the speaker to explain it to you. But rather than interrupt, wait until the speaker pauses. Then say something like, "Back up a second. I didn't understand what you just said about..."

Step 7: Ask questions only to ensure understanding.

At lunch, a colleague is excitedly telling you about her trip to Vermont and all the wonderful things she did and saw. In the course of this chronicle, she mentions that she spent some time with a mutual friend. You jump in with, "Oh, I haven't heard from Alice in ages. How is she?" and, just like that, discussion shifts to Alice and her divorce, and the poor kids, which leads to a comparison of custody laws, and before you know it an hour is gone and Vermont is a distant memory.

This particular conversational affront happens all the time. Our questions lead people in directions that have nothing to do with where *they* thought they were going. Sometimes we work our way back to the original topic, but very often we don't.

When you notice that your question has led the speaker astray, take responsibility for getting the conversation back on track by saying something like, "It was great to hear about Alice, but tell me more about your adventure in Vermont."

Step 8: Try to feel what the speaker is feeling.

If you feel sad when the person with whom you are talking expresses sadness, joyful when she expresses joy, fearful when she describes her fears—and convey those feelings through your facial expressions and words—then your effectiveness as a listener is assured. Empathy is the heart and soul of good listening.

To experience empathy, you have to put yourself in the other person's place and allow yourself to feel what it is like to *be her* at that moment. This is not an easy thing to do. It takes energy and concentration. But it is a generous and helpful thing to do, and it facilitates communication like nothing else does.

Step 9: Give the speaker regular feedback.

Show that you understand where the speaker is coming from by reflecting the speaker's feelings. "You must be thrilled!" "What a terrible ordeal for you." "I can see that you are confused." If the

speaker's feelings are hidden or unclear, then occasionally paraphrase the content of the message. Or just nod and show your understanding through appropriate facial expressions and an occasional well-timed "hmmm" or "uh huh."

The idea is to give the speaker some proof that you are listening, and that you are following her train of thought—not off indulging in your own fantasies while she talks to the ether.

In task situations, regardless of whether at work or home, always restate instructions and messages to be sure you understand correctly.

Step 10: Pay attention to what *isn't* said—to nonverbal cues.

If you exclude email, the majority of direct communication is probably nonverbal. We glean a great deal of information about each other without saying a word. Even over the telephone, you can learn almost as much about a person from the tone and cadence of her voice than from anything she says. When I talk to my best friend, it doesn't matter what we chat about, if I hear a lilt and laughter in her voice, I feel reassured that she's doing well.

Face to face with a person, you can detect enthusiasm, boredom, or irritation very quickly in the expression around the eyes, the set of the mouth, the slope of the shoulders. These are clues you can't ignore. When listening, remember that words convey only a fraction of the message.

Listening Skills Exercise: Summarize, Summarize, Summarize!

For at least one week, at the end of every conversation in which information is exchanged, conclude with a summary statement. In conversations that result in agreements about future obligations or activities, summarizing will not only ensure accurate follow-through, it will feel perfectly natural. In conversations that do not include agreements, if summarizing feels awkward just explain that you are doing it as an exercise.

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Source: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/womensmedia/2012/11/09/10-steps-to-effective-listening/#15a55cf13891>