

Active Listening

Active Listening is hearing – with understanding – the intended ideas, information, and suggestions of others. The basic elements of communication, including a sender, a receiver, and feedback, are all present. This is a key communication skill and promotes understanding among people. Active listeners attend to nonverbal, symbolic, and verbal messages. The challenge is to listen through our own assumptions, biases, judgments, and emotions and then to ask suitable questions to get more information. Use the following techniques.

Paraphrasing

Paraphrasing is restating the content of a message in your own words. Typically, it does not include feelings. This gives the speaker an opportunity to reflect on what they are communicating and to refine it if they like. When you get it right, the other person will say, “exactly!” or communicate in some other way that they feel understood. When you paraphrase what you have heard into your own words, you show your present understanding and thus enable the sender to address any clarification to the specific understanding or misunderstanding you have revealed.

Clarifying

Clarifying is reflecting on the broader context of what you understand the speaker to be saying and often comes in the form of a question. You can request the other to clarify by asking, “What do you mean by...?” This gives the speaker an opportunity to fill in any missing pieces to the interaction. The desired outcome is a clear understanding of the issue or issues chosen for attention. Clarifying is checking understanding of a message by asking to hear it again or asking for more information and details. In clarifying you help to spell out the communication of the speaker. This encourages both of you to consider the meaning and impact of words or actions. You are reflecting back the intent of the verbal and/or nonverbal cues. Use clarifying when you want to understand what is being communicated in context.

Probing

Probing is a subset of clarifying. Probing is used to prompt a speaker to give more information or to explore a situation that is not clear to you as the listener. It creates a request to become more specific in situations that are often of an important, sensitive, or problematic in nature.

Perception Checking

A perception check occurs when you state what you perceive the other to be experiencing. A good perception check conveys this message – “I want to understand your feelings – is this (making a statement of his/her feelings) the way you feel about it?” A perception check is a way of verifying the accuracy of your interpretations. It includes a description of the information you received, your possible interpretations, and a request for confirmation. You may find that using it in non-class relationships is also useful!

Our perception of another person’s feelings can result more from what we are feeling, are afraid of, or are wishing for than from the other person’s words, tone, gestures, facial expression, etc. If we feel guilty, we may perceive others as angry or accusing toward us. Our inferences about other people’s feelings can be, and often are, inaccurate. Thus, it is important to check them out for good interpersonal communication.

Perception checking responses aim to:

- Convey that you want to understand the other as a person and to understand his or her feelings.
- Help avoid actions that are based on false assumptions of what the other was experiencing.
- Help people to be more open to what you have to say.

Cautions

Regardless of which of the techniques you choose to use, you will need to listen not only for the words, but also for the feelings behind them. To truly comprehend the message a person is sending, you must try to understand the other person's frame of reference, even if you do not agree with it. Using this strategy is an important first step in creating understanding with others.