



EFFECTIVE LISTENING 101

WHAT IS EFFECTIVE LISTENING?

Effective listening is listening with the intent to truly understand what the speaker is trying to communicate.

Effective listening is a core skill for working through conflict, collaborating, and co-existing well with others. However, it is not something that most of us naturally do or are taught to do.

Effective Listening Takes Work!

We communicate more through non-verbal means—such as body language, facial expressions, tone, loudness, and way of speaking—than we do through the words we say.

Additionally, our brains can process a lot faster than we are able to speak. Our minds therefore have room to wander while someone is speaking, rather than focusing solely on what they are saying and what they are communicating through their body language.

Hence, effective listening is a skill, and it takes work! Thankfully, it is a skill anyone can learn with enough practice.

HOW TO PRACTICE EFFECTIVE LISTENING

- **Focus on truly trying to understand:** The most important “skill” we can bring to listening is a genuine intention to understand what the other person is trying to communicate.
- **Practice curiosity:** To help you truly understand what the other person is trying to communicate, practice being curious. Try to have a “beginner’s mind.” Listen with a keen, careful, and inquisitive interest in what the other person is communicating. Be open minded, suspend your assumptions, and avoid analyzing or judging what the other person is saying. Pay attention to their words, way of speaking, body language, and what is not said as well as what is said. Try to hear the “music behind the words.”
- **Be attentive:** Use behaviors that help the speaker know that you are truly trying to understand them. Pay attention to attitudes, perceptions, and values; maintain appropriate posture and proximity to the other person; make empathic eye contact; and use facial expressions and body language that match what the speaker is communicating.

- **Be inviting:** Use inviting behaviors to encourage the speaker to communicate fully. Listen without interrupting; listen without judging; encourage the other person to continue talking; and ask effective questions with sincere curiosity.
- **Clarify:** Clarify what the other person is trying to communicate. Ask questions to help you better understand; acknowledge the other speaker's emotional affect; and reflect back what you think you are hearing.
- **Confirm:** Confirm that you are hearing what the speaker is trying to convey. Summarize what you have heard, using the other person's key words and the feelings they have conveyed; ask whether your summary is correct and complete; and revise your summary as needed until it is correct and complete.
- **Pause:** We often feel the need to respond right away. Don't. Pause and create space for you and the other person to process what is being communicated. A little silence goes a long way when listening.

ASKING EFFECTIVE QUESTIONS

To truly understand what a speaker is trying to say, it is important to ask effective questions. We recommend asking questions that are:

- **Open-ended rather than close-ended:** questions that cannot be answered with a simple 'yes,' 'no,' or 'maybe,' and instead require the respondent to elaborate on their points; and
- **Non-leading rather than leading:** questions that do not push the other person to respond in any certain way.

The table below illustrates the differences between these types of questions.

Example question	Type of question
<i>You care about that, don't you?</i>	Close-ended, leading
<i>Do you care about that?</i>	Close-ended, non-leading
<i>I think this is a very important issue: How do you feel about it?</i>	Open-ended, leading
<i>How do you feel about this issue? How does it affect you?</i>	Open-ended, non-leading

Pro Tip: First, Seek to Understand

People are typically better listeners once they have expressed their own feelings and concerns, and often people don't listen to us because they don't feel heard.

Thus, it is generally a good practice to seek to understand before being understood. If you effectively listen to another person, they will be more likely to truly listen to you!

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