

Improve Your Life Through *Listening*

In spite of technology, communication is becoming a lost art. By developing your listening skills, your professional and personal life can be much more successful.



Learn what listening really is and how you can create the right atmosphere for quality communication that can minimize conflict, increase productivity, and enrich your life.

**By Karen D. Nutter,
Certified Master Coach**

Improve Your Life Through Listening

“I remind myself every morning: Nothing I say this day will teach me anything. So if I’m going to learn, I must do it by listening.”

~Larry King

Are you listening...?

How often do you really listen when someone is speaking? More importantly, how often do you fail to listen?

When your spouse is trying to make weekend plans, during a business meeting, when your child is complaining about school - are you listening? When you’re really busy, when you’re rushed and you can’t - or don’t - quiet your mind to be present - are you listening?

Listening is not the same as hearing. We can hear a variety of things all at the same time. Take a moment and write down what you hear right now. You may hear cars going by, dogs barking, the hum of your computer, and people talking. The reason you hear these things is because you are paying attention right now. But, did you know there were so many sounds before I asked you to write down what you heard? Probably not because you were focused on something else, so all those sounds were in the background.

Hearing is one of our senses, just like sight, touch, smell, etc. However, when you truly pay attention, hearing becomes listening. Unfortunately, in today’s world, people are paying less attention to the sounds they hear, and are more distracted by their own thoughts, opinions, and plans. As a result, they are often not truly listening to what is happening around them, and that can create a variety of problems.

Think of the last time you felt someone was talking *at* you, instead of *to* you. The person you were talking with was obviously preoccupied with his/her own agenda and didn’t seem to be appropriately responding to you verbally or through eye contact. He seemed to be thinking of what to say next while waiting for you to finish what you were saying. Or maybe he said all the right things, but you never felt that satisfying connection of genuine communication. Something was missing in your interaction.



What's on your mind?

In true interactions, all parties must be actively engaged in the communication. However, most people don't listen well. In fact, in many conversations, we are waiting for the other person to stop talking so we can speak and provide our opinion, experience, or interest. Waiting for your turn to talk (hopefully you are at least doing that) is not listening. You can't truly get to know someone, or understand them if you don't actively listen to what they are saying. And, there is no way you can truly listen if you are multi-tasking - you simply are not giving your full attention to the person talking to you.

People want to be heard. Even if not completely understood, most everyone wants to feel like what they say matters. When we are listened to we feel a sense of acceptance, importance, and self-worth. That is why listening to someone is one of the most sincere forms of respect. While hearing is something your body does automatically without any real effort, listening is a skill that must be practiced.

All managers, business owners, salespeople, and other professionals who have good active listening skills are more likely to foster a positive, successful work environment. This happens automatically because active listening reduces misunderstandings, exemplifies caring, and increases productivity as everyone on the team feels important.

Listening skills are beneficial in your personal life, too, for all the same reasons as in business. All communication requires listening and talking, without both parts there is no opportunity for growth.

“While hearing is something your body does automatically without any real effort, listening is a skill that must be practiced.”

Building Your Active Listening Skills

"I only wish I could find an institute that teaches people how to listen. Business people need to listen at least as much as they need to talk. Too many people fail to realize that real communication goes in both directions."

~Lee Iacocca

Active Listening

Active listening is a communication technique where the listener re-states or paraphrases what they heard in order to ensure understanding by both parties.

Communication is a two-way street and as such, a good listener does more than just keep quiet. Good Listeners:

- Don't interrupt
- Keep an open mind, refraining from judgement
- Make eye contact
- Ask clarifying questions to ensure understanding
- Try to feel what the speaker is feeling
- Provide encouraging feedback
- Pay attention to what isn't said - nonverbal cues

Understanding and practicing active listening can (and should) be done with every conversation.

4

Basic categories of communicators

- 1. Non-listener.** Is preoccupied with what he is thinking and does not listen to what is being said.
- 2. Passive listener.** Hears the words but doesn't fully absorb or understand them.
- 3. Listener.** Pays attention to the speaker, but not enough to grasp the full message.
- 4. Active listener.** Completely focused on the speaker, and interacts appropriately to fully understand what is being said.

Developing Your Skills

Active listening involves five key areas. With each conversation you have, employ these actions for a better discussion.

1. PAY ATTENTION

Give your undivided attention

- Look at the speaker
- Don't get distracted by your thoughts or other activities or conversations nearby
- Don't think about your rebuttal or next comment
- Look at the speaker's body language

2. PROVE YOU'RE LISTENING

Using body language, gestures, and comments, let the speaker know you are PRESENT in the conversation.

- Smile and use your expression to show interest in what is being said
- Nod occasionally
- Make small, encouraging comments such as "yes," "uh-huh," and "I see."

3. GIVE FEEDBACK

Your number one goal is to understand what is being said. To make sure your assumptions and beliefs don't get in the way of what you are hearing, think about what is being said and ask questions to confirm and/or clarify. You may ask questions such as:

- "What I'm hearing is..."
- "It sounds like you are saying..."
- "When you say ____, what do you mean?"



4. AVOID INTERRUPTING

It is natural to think ahead of what another person is saying because our thoughts move faster than our speech. Instead of interrupting:

- Focus on what they are saying instead of what you want to say
- Wait until they are completely finished
- Ask if there is anything they want to add

5. RESPOND WITH RESPECT

While your ideas may be vastly different, communication is best when it includes respect and understanding.

- Treat people as you would want to be treated
- Honestly and Politely share your views and opinions
- Realize that a difference of opinion is NOT a personal attack

Good communication skills don't always come naturally. Focus on a goal of truly hearing the people you talk with, giving them the time and respect they deserve to share their thoughts, and your whole life will change!



Communication Quick Tips

Good communication involves doing the right things at the right times, and **NOT** doing the wrong things. Here are some reminders of what to do and not do.

Avoid these communication roadblocks

- “Why” questions should be avoided as they often make people defensive
- Telling people “Don’t worry about that” can belittle their feelings
- Advising someone on what YOU think they should do is not good unless they specifically ask for your input
- Forcing someone to talk when they prefer not to is pushy and rude
- Patronizing a person with “You poor thing...” or, telling someone what they should or shouldn’t do

Polite phrases that show respect

- Use “Mr” “Mrs.” or “Miss”
- Excuse me...
- Pardon me...
- May I suggest...?
- Let’s focus on solutions
- Would you please...?

“Please” and “Thank you” go a long way in easing tension and helping develop a positive connection. If it’s been a while since you used the polite language your grandmother taught you, make a list as a reminder, then practice courtesy as much as possible.

Good Questions

Understanding the 3 main question types can help develop your communication skills:

Leading: “Would you like to talk about...?” “Could you tell me more about that?”

Open-ended questions keep the conversation moving: “Who/What/Where/When/How?”

Reflective questions help clarify what was said: “It sounds like you...”

Karen Nutter is the Chief Inspiration Officer of Life Coaching By Karen and a highly recognized coach for businesses and the leaders, managers, and staff that help create their success.

Karen's areas of expertise include communication, leadership, emotional intelligence, time management, and DISC assessment and development.

Karen's extensive experience coaching individuals and corporate groups has made her an expert in assessing and coaching Emotional Intelligence. As a result, she will be launching her book on this topic in May 2015.

Some of her qualifications include:

- Certified in Disc, Behaviors Motivators and Emotional Intelligence
- Certified Intrinsic Coach,
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