



## Active Listening

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Add these six active listening skills and techniques to your coaching toolbox.

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# What Is Active Listening?

You become a better leader when you become a better listener. Practice these 6 active listening skills and techniques to turn any conversation into a coaching opportunity.

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## How to Use Active Listening Skills to Coach Others

**Active listening requires you to listen attentively to a speaker, understand what they're saying, respond and reflect on what's being said, and retain the information for later.** This keeps both listener and speaker actively engaged in the conversation.

**Active listening and reflecting, responding, and giving feedback aren't always easy.** Here are some helpful active listening tips for managers:

- Pay close attention to the speaker's behavior and body language to gain a better understanding of their message.
- Signal that you're following along with visual cues like nodding and eye contact; ask clarifying questions to ensure your understanding.

- Avoid potential interruptions — from technology (e.g., phone or email notifications) and from humans (e.g., knocks on your door).
- Keep an open mind. Rather than evaluating the message and offering an opinion, simply make the speaker feel heard and validated.
- Confirm you've understood what the speaker has said by verifying your understanding.
- Be an attentive listener and have your toolkit of active listening techniques at the ready for whenever [coaching conversations](#) occur.

At CCL, we help leaders go beyond basic active listening skills so that they're better equipped to truly *listen to understand* others — including the facts, feelings, and values that may be hidden behind the words actually being shared. At the organizational level, training people how to listen more effectively helps provide role models for the next generation of leaders and builds a workplace [culture of truth and courage](#).

## 6 Active Listening Techniques

### The Active Listening Skillset

**Enhancing your active listening skill set** involves more than just hearing someone speak. When you're putting active listening skills to practice, you should be using these 6 techniques:

1. [Pay attention](#).
2. [Withhold judgment](#).
3. [Reflect](#).
4. [Clarify](#).
5. [Summarize](#).
6. [Share](#).



#### 1. Pay attention.

One goal of active listening and being an effective listener is to set a comfortable tone that gives the speaker an opportunity to think and talk. Allow “wait time” before responding. Don't cut the person off, finish their sentences, or start formulating your answer before they've finished. Pay attention to your body language as

well as your frame of mind when engaging in active listening. Be focused on the moment, make eye contact, and operate from a place of respect as the listener.

## 2. Withhold judgment.

Active listening requires an open mind. As a listener and a leader, be open to new ideas, new perspectives, and new possibilities when practicing active listening. Even when good listeners have strong views, they suspend judgment, hold any criticisms, and avoid interruptions like arguing or selling their point right away. This can be easier if you maintain an open body posture. For example, having your arms resting on the side, rather than crossed across the chest, can signal a greater degree of openness.

## 3. Reflect and validate.

When you're the listener, don't assume that you understand correctly — or that the speaker knows you've heard them. Mirror their emotions by periodically paraphrasing key points. Reflecting is an active listening technique that indicates that you and your counterpart are on the same page.

For example, the speaker might tell you, *“Emma is so loyal and supportive of her people — they'd walk through fire for her. But no matter how much I push, her team keeps missing deadlines.”*

To paraphrase, you could say, *“So Emma's people skills are great, but accountability is a problem.”*

If you hear, *“I don't know what else to do!”* or *“I'm tired of bailing the team out at the last minute,”* try helping the other person label their feelings: *“Sounds like you're feeling pretty frustrated and stuck.”* This can be a way to make them feel validated.

## 4. Clarify.

Ask questions about any issue that's ambiguous or unclear. As the listener, if you have doubt or confusion about what the other person has said, say something like, *“Let me see if I'm understanding. Are you talking about ...?”* or *“Wait a minute. I didn't follow you.”* Asking for clarification shows you are paying attention.

Open-ended, clarifying, and probing questions are important active listening tools that encourage the speaker to do the work of self-reflection and problem solving, rather than justifying or defending a position, or trying to guess the “right answer.”

Examples include: *“What do you think about ...?”* or *“Tell me about ...?”* and *“Will you further explain/describe ...?”*

When engaging in active listening, the emphasis is on *asking*, rather than telling. It assumes the other person has valuable input, and maintains a spirit of collaboration.

You might say: *“What are some of the specific things you've tried?”* or *“Have you asked the team what their main concerns are?”* or *“Does Emma agree that there are performance problems?”* and *“What's going on? Is there any other information that might be helpful to find out?”*

## 5. Summarize.

Restating key themes as the conversation proceeds confirms and solidifies your grasp of the other person's point of view. It also helps both parties to be clear on mutual responsibilities and follow-up. Briefly summarize what you've understood while practicing active listening, and ask the other person to do the same.

Giving a brief restatement of core themes raised by the speaker might sound like: *“Let me summarize to check my understanding. Emma was promoted to manager, and her team loves her. But you don’t believe she holds them accountable, so mistakes are accepted and keep happening. You’ve tried everything you can think of, and there’s no apparent impact. Did I get that right?”*

Restating key themes helps with understanding and [accountability](#).

## 6. Share.

**Active listening is *first* about understanding the other person, *then* about being understood as the listener.** As you gain a clearer understanding of the other person’s perspective, you can begin to introduce your own ideas, feelings, and suggestions. People are more receptive to new ideas and suggestions when they feel understood.

Once the situation has been talked through, both you and the other person have a good picture of where things stand. From this point, the conversation can shift into problem-solving: *What assumptions are we making? What hasn’t been tried? What don’t we know? What new approaches could be taken?*

As the listener-coach, continue to query, guide, and offer, but don’t dictate a solution. Your “coachee” will feel more confident and eager if they think through the options and own the solution.

Used in combination, these 6 active listening techniques are the keys in [holding a coaching conversation](#).

# Active Listening Is Important, But It’s Not Everything

## Leaders, Remember That Actions Speak Louder Than Words

If you’re a leader of others, know that as important as active listening is, **just listening alone is not enough to ensure that others to *feel listened to*.**

As [our research](#) has found, when employees speak up with suggestions or concerns, they still won’t feel heard if their leaders don’t then take action on what they learned. When leaders do act on what they heard, employees are more likely to raise suggestions or share ideas in the future. In fact, **the perception of feeling listened to is 2x greater among those who shared with their leader who then took an action**, than among those who shared with a leader who then did nothing.

So leaders, remember that the last and **the most important step of active listening is *taking action on what you hear***, and that is an essential building block of truly [compassionate leadership](#).

# The Benefits of Active Listening

Next, it’s important to take a step back and understand why active listening matters.

- **It conveys the message that what others have to say is valuable.** This is a way to make employees feel reassured and included, and can signal qualities such as being open-minded and valuing knowledge and expertise.



- **It facilitates understanding between individuals or teams.** Wanting to be understood is a fundamental goal in relationships and is a key determinant of relationship quality. Listening to others also sends positive signals about interest, respect, and support.
- **It builds [psychological safety](#).** Being a thoughtful listener, asking questions, seeking clarification, and encouraging others to share their perspective will reinforce your role as a spouse, friend, colleague, coach, and mentor. It can also help build a sense of [belonging at work](#).
- **It enables you to [coach others more effectively](#).** Being a strong, attentive listener will lead your co-workers and direct reports to share more information with you, such that you'll likely have a greater grasp of relevant issues and will be able to take appropriate action. You'll also see improvements in your relationships as a result.
- **It provides an example of a listening-oriented climate.** By consistently demonstrating how to actively listen, and the importance of listening, you help establish a shared expectation of how others should hear one another.

Once you begin to put the active listening skillset into practice, you'll notice the positive impact it has in a number of areas, including in leader effectiveness, in personal and professional relationships, and in various social situations.

Now that you understand what the 6 active listening techniques are, seriously consider whether *you* are a truly active listener. **You may want to try growing your active listening skillset by taking our [7-day active listening challenge](#).**

## Assess Your Active Listening Effectiveness

Many people take their listening skills for granted. We often assume it's obvious that we're practicing active listening and that others know they're being heard. But the reality is that research shows most of us vastly overrate our listening skills.

As leaders, we get distracted by technology, overloaded with information, and often struggle with active listening. We may have difficulty hearing bad news, accepting criticism, and dealing with people's feelings. Even with the best of intentions, you may be unconsciously sending signals that you aren't listening at all. This increases the risk of misunderstanding, which can decrease psychological safety and leave others feeling alienated.

You may need to brush up on your active listening techniques if any of the following questions describe you. Do you sometimes:

- Have a hard time concentrating on what's being said, especially when the person speaking is complaining, rambling, or gossiping?
- Find yourself planning what to say next, rather than thinking about what the speaker is saying?
- Dislike it when someone disagrees or questions your ideas or actions?
- Zone out when the speaker has a negative attitude?
- Give advice too soon and suggest solutions to problems before the other person has fully explained their perspective?

- Tell people not to feel the way they do?
- Talk significantly more than the other person talks?

If you answered *yes* to any of these questions, you're not alone.

## How to Improve Your Active Listening Skills

To boost your active listening skills, try putting these techniques into practice:

- **Cultivate a [foundation of wellbeing](#).** Listening is an effortful activity. It'll be easier to actively listen throughout the day if you're well-rested, fully nourished, and able to be mindful of what's unfolding in the moment.
- **Limit distractions and interruptions.** Silence any technology and find a quiet place so that you can give the other person your full attention.
- **Adopt a listening stance.** Keeping an open body position sends the message that you are open to what is being said. Face the person speaking, lean in, maintain good eye contact (although this can be culture-dependent), and be as relaxed as possible. This signals that it is a safe space to share.
- **Get a sense of what the other person *wants* from the conversation.** Sometimes someone needs counsel, but often listening satisfies other needs. For instance, you can try asking, *"Would you like me to be a sounding board; do you want advice; or do you want a collaborator on problem solving?"* Following up with, *"And if you aren't sure what you need, I can just listen and we'll figure it out together"* is also helpful.
- **Pay attention to what's being said, not what you want to say.** It's natural to try and anticipate when you can join the conversation. But try to contain this urge by setting a goal of being able to repeat the last sentence the other person says. This keeps your attention on each statement.
- **Notice nonverbals and facial expressions.** Take note of the person's tone of voice and body language for clues as to what they are feeling (but may not be saying).
- **Get comfortable with silence.** A break in dialogue can give you a chance to collect your thoughts — and allow the other person to do the same. Aim to do 80% of the listening and 20% of the talking.
- **Cultivate curiosity.** Being curious is a naturally nonjudgmental state of mind. If you assume you will hear something new, you probably will.
- **Encourage the other person to offer ideas and solutions before you give yours.** Often, people have already thought through potential courses of action.
- **Restate key points and ask whether you have full understanding.** *"Let me see whether you think I understand ..."* is an easy way to clarify any confusion and shows you are open to being corrected.
- **Consider revisiting the topic.** You can listen without comment and not agree with complaints. If it's something you want to pursue, ask the person to write it down along with a possible solution, then schedule another time to discuss.

## Active Listening Solutions for Leaders

It's critical to hone leaders' active listening skills and build new capabilities that strengthen conversations across the entire organization. Partner with us to ensure that everyone at your organization is able to hold

better conversations every day with our suite of [conversational skills training](#).

## BASED ON RESEARCH BY



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## About CCL



At the Center for Creative Leadership, our drive to create a ripple effect of positive change underpins everything we do. For 50+ years, we've pioneered leadership development solutions for everyone from frontline workers to global CEOs. Consistently ranked among the world's top providers of executive education, our research-based programs and solutions inspire individuals in organizations across the world — including 2/3 of the Fortune 1000 — to ignite remarkable transformations.