Worksheet #1 A Self-Evaluation for Active Listening

A Self-Evaluation for Active Listening

What are your listening habits? Take a few minutes to rate yourself. Read each statement below. Circle YES if it is true for you most of the time. Circle NO if it is not true for you most of the time.

1. I allow the other person to finish what s/he is saying before I speak. | YES | NO
2. I pay attention even when I don't like the speaker. | YES | NO
3. I easily ignore distractions when I am listening. | YES | NO
4. I can easily remember what other people say to me. | YES | NO
5. I ask the speaker questions when I don't understand something. | YES | NO
6. I look at people when they are talking to me. | YES | NO
7. I don't do other things when I am listening. | YES | NO
8. I keep listening even when the message is too complicated. | YES | NO
9. I ignore behavior or appearances that bother me and listen to what the speaker is saying. | YES | NO

Your YES answers show that you already have some active listening skills. In other words, you are involved in the communication process. You take responsibility for understanding the speaker's message.

Your NO answers show that you could use some improvement in some areas of active listening. With practice, you can improve your listening skills.
Listening Skills

Attending Skills

Attending skills are just that: giving attention to the speaker. Responses that show you are listening to the speaker are maintaining eye contact, leaning forward, using responsive body motions, and asking questions. These things show that you are really interested in what the speaker is saying. You should avoid distracting outside noises and daydreaming. You should also provide the speaker with necessary silences for thought. Occasional responses such as "Uh-huh," "OK," or "Mmmmm" show the speaker that you are listening. To be totally attentive, it is necessary to search for meaning in the speaker's eyes, body language, and voice tone, as well as his/her words. Look for meaning in the total expression of the speaker.

You are not using attending skills if you interrupt or finish sentences for the speaker, if you are thinking about your response to what the speaker is saying before s/he finished talking, or if you stop paying attention because you disagree with the speaker.

What other clues might help you recognize that a listener is not attending to you? Sometimes it is hard to tell when someone is not listening to you because s/he gives the appearance of listening. So how can you tell if someone is only half-listening?

Reflective Skills

Reflective skills mean that you check with the speaker to see whether you understand his/her meaning. You demonstrate that you are listening by saying back to the person what s/he has said to you. One way to demonstrate reflective listening is by using "say-back." You say back to the person what s/he has told you. Don't repeat the speaker word-for-word or parrot him/her, but use your own words to say back what was said. You may reflect content, emotion, or behavior in what you say back. For example, you might start a say-back sentence with "If I understand you correctly, you are saying that..." or "Please correct me if I misunderstood, but you were saying..."

To use reflective skills to make sure you understand the content of what the speaker said, you can restate in your own words the content of the verbal message. If, for example, your spouse tells you about a rough day on the job, you could say back, "Sounds like things didn't go well for you today." This would reflect the content of what the speaker said.
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To use reflective skills to understand the behavior of the speaker, you can suggest your own interpretation of the behaviors. You can also ask the speaker to attach a message to the behavior. Try to get in the habit of responding to the behavior. Although behavior has many interpretations, with the help of the speaker, you can gain insight into its meaning. For example, you might notice the body language of the speaker and say, “I see that you are walking rather slowly today. What’s up?” or “I notice that you keep looking at the clock. Is there something you need to do?” These questions reflect the behavior of the speaker.

To use reflective skills to reflect back the emotion of the speaker, you can put yourself in the speaker’s position and ask, “How would I feel if I were in his/her place?” If you feel that the speaker is confused or uncertain about what s/he is saying, you could say, “You look puzzled. Can I clear up the confusion?” or “So, basically you are feeling uncertain about your plans.” A statement or questions such as these would indicate that you are reflecting about how the speaker is feeling.

To listen to a speaker with your full attention, you must listen to the words and pay attention to the behavior, body language, emotion, or feelings of the speaker.

In the activity below, mark the following responses as reflecting content (C), behavior (B), or emotion (E). Put your answer in the spaces provided.

_____1. Do you mean that we will get an increase in our pay, but our benefits will stay the same?

_____2. I see that gleam in your eye. Did you get a raise?

_____3. Sounds like you’re dealing with some anxiety about your upcoming performance evaluation.

_____4. When I asked you if you were coming, and you took a few minutes to respond, what did that mean?

_____5. Let’s see. You want me to record the temperatures over the next six hours and then bring the report to your office immediately.

_____6. You keep tapping your pencil on the desk. Are you feeling impatient?
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Incongruence

When the feelings, body language, or voice expressions do not match the verbal message, this is called incongruence. The speaker is sending conflicting signals. When you spot incongruence in a speaker’s message, you can clear up confusion by pointing this out. Begin by pointing the incongruence out in a friendly, non-threatening manner. If you seem judgmental, the speaker may perceive this as a personal attack and withdraw or react in a defensive or aggressive manner. Some examples of responses from a listener might be, “You say you want to get home early, but your voice sounds hesitant.” Or “On the one hand, you act kindly, but your face looks angry.” You may also ask questions that point out incongruence, such as, “You say you want this assignment, but you have arrived late for our session several times, Is there something that is bringing up resistance in you?”

Reflective listening is effective in many situations because it helps the listener decipher unclear messages, provides instant feedback to the speaker, lets the speaker know that the listener is listening, and keeps the focus on the message. As the listener, you will decide when reflective listening is appropriate and when it is not.

Listening Obstacles

Sometimes there are obstacles to listening that can interfere with listening reflectively or even with being attentive to the speaker. The obstacles or barriers usually stem from the listener’s judgmental thoughts or responses. This can take many forms. When the listener has a judgmental point of view, s/he keeps the speaker from sharing his/her thoughts and feelings.

Some examples of listening obstacles and judgmental responses are:

1. Having to be right - The listener may say, "You're wrong. No way! I'll tell you how it is."

2. Dismissing the speaker's needs - The listener may say, "Wait until later. I'm busy right now."

3. Giving advice - "Why didn't you do this first?"

4. Discounting emotions or thoughts - "You shouldn't feel that way."

5. Comparing unfavorably - "Susie didn't have any trouble when I worked with her. What's your problem?"
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Many times it is much easier to be judgmental than to be reflective and hear what the speaker is saying and feeling. Be aware of your own tendencies to be judgmental, your biases, beliefs, interests, and fears. All of these may prevent you from listening for understanding. Hold off on making a judgment until you get all the information.

Clarifying Questions

Another important listening skill that you will need to develop is that of asking clarifying questions. Clarifying questions will help you gain more information to complete what the speaker is trying to say. If you don't understand something the speaker has said, you can ask questions. If the speaker left out something you needed to know, you can ask for clarification.

For example, your boss tells you that if you want to apply for a shift change or a department change, you need to let him know right away. Some clarifying questions you might ask are:

- Whom do I need to tell?
- Exactly when is the deadline?
- Can anyone apply for a shift change?

What clarification questions might you ask in response to the following?

Your boss says to you: “Bring those papers on productivity rates for your area by my office next Tuesday.”

Once you ask for clarification, the speaker can provide you with corrections and details to the message. To process this new information, you can return to your reflecting skills and may need to continue to ask questions to gain new information. Reflecting and questioning will help you gain skill in the listening process.
Ways to Improve Your Listening Skills

- Always look directly at the speaker. In some cultures, direct eye contact is rude and offensive. However, in Western culture, direct eye contact means you are listening.

- Focus on what the speaker is saying. Keep all other distractions out of your mind.

- Listen. Don't interrupt. Let the speaker get the message across to you without interruption. May you "just know" what they are going to say or maybe you want to add something to his/her remarks. Think better of this. Allow the speaker to complete his/her comments.

- Do not let preconceived ideas about the subject or speaker get in the way of the conversation.

- Let the speaker know you are understanding what s/he is saying by giving short clues, such as "Yes," "I understand," "Oh," "Go on," "Okay," etc. You are signaling to him/her that you want him/her to go on.

- Body language is a clue to your understanding of what the speaker is saying. By nodding, having eye contact, smiling, etc., you are showing the speaker that you want him/her to continue. On the other hand, if you turn to look out the window or at your computer screen, you are signaling your lack of interest.

- Silence does not indicate passivity. Good listening is hard work.

- After the speaker has finished his/her remarks, it is all right to ask questions to help in your understanding of what has been said. This shows interest and gets you the facts you need.

- Summarize the remarks of the speaker.
Listening Scenarios

Scenario 1

Bob and Barbara carpool to the school where they are both teachers. Barbara is late again this week. Finally, she arrives at Bob's house. She begins to say something about her two-month-old girl awakening continually throughout the night. She doesn't even get her sentence completed before Bob cuts her off, "It seems like your alarm clock must be on the wrong time again." Then he sees the confused look on Barbara's face.

Why did Barbara look puzzled? What did Bob do to cause the confusion?

Scenario 2

Chris is so upset about his monthly sales report for his district that he does not pay attention to Mr. Smith's directions. Although Chris turns in a nicely written report, he does not include information about clients and costs, which Mr. Smith told him to include.

What listening skill would have been most helpful for Chris?

Scenario 3

At a publicity meeting for a new product, Lauren says to Jill and Emily, "The winter season is a peak time for this company. We are very fortunate to be able to bring this new product out at this time. But we're going to have to increase the number of businesses we call on. I've revised our campaign plan. I want you all to make forty calls a day." Jill and Emily nod in agreement. No questions are asked. Before they leave her office, Lauren gives a quick summation. She says, "Thanks for your help. I think this week you can each manage forty calls." Jill says, "Forty? I thought you meant twenty calls each!"

What led to the confusion? What saved Jill and Emily from making a terrible mistake? What should Jill and Emily asked before leaving the meeting?
Scenario 4

Joe is driving in Marietta and can't find Rossi Pasta. He stops on Third Street and asks someone who is sitting on her porch for directions. The lady says, "You go down to the second stop light and make a right turn. I'm not sure of the street name. It begins with a 'W' I think. Drive to the bridge located beside the Chinese restaurant. It's near the football field. Go to the stoplight immediately before the 'Y' in the road. It has flowers planted there. It should be right on the corner. If you come to the '7-11' you know you've gone too far."

What was Joe trying to find? What should Joe do at the end of the conversation to make sure he understands? Could you find the business Joe was looking for?