

Active listening? We're all ears.

1 Warmer

Active listening: a communication skill in which the listener is an active participant in the communication process and tries to understand the meaning and intent of the message

- Who do you know that is good at active listening?
- How can you practise active listening?
- Why is active listening important? How can it help in a person's professional life?

2 Lead in – business dilemma

- Discuss this business dilemma with a partner. Make a decision and give reasons for your decision.

You work at a large phone/internet service provider. Customer service agents keep on leaving, and customer satisfaction is extremely low. You are receiving many customer complaints. Customer service agents say that they have too much work and that management does not care about their struggles. What will be the best course of action?

- an active listening training course for management and customer service agents
- a customer service training course for customer service agents

3 Key words

- Write the words from the box next to the definitions below. Check your answers and your understanding of the words by using them word to complete the example sentence immediately after each definition.
Then read the complete article to see how each of the key words is used in context (the words are sometimes in a slightly different form).

avert bound cooperatively confrontation disengage emotional intelligence
empathetic insights outcome reflect victimisation voice

- show or express _____

One strategy in a negotiation is to make the other party feel heard. To do this, make sure to _____ their demands back at them.

- an argument or fight _____

Jude is not afraid of _____, so we always ask him to deal with complaints.

3. being able to imagine how someone else feels _____
They are very _____, which makes them so suited to a position in HR.
4. the ability to understand the way people feel _____
While analytical skills are essential, it is also important to develop your _____.
5. a sometimes-sudden, clear understanding of a complicated situation or issue

The book is mainly about all the _____ the journalist gained over the years.
6. very likely or certain to happen _____
You are _____ to succeed if you continue on this path.
7. stop being engaged in something _____
Our team was very motivated last year but became _____ after the merger.
8. the result of a situation or action _____
What are the course _____ that you would like to achieve with this programme?
9. with other people, helping each other _____
We would like to propose a partnership because we believe that we could do so much more if we work _____.
10. prevent, usually something bad _____
If we act now, we can probably _____ a crisis.
11. express a doubt or complaint or say what you think about something _____
We are trying to cultivate a corporate culture in which all employees can _____ their concerns.
12. the act of treating someone unfairly _____
It was shocking to find out how many employees from minority groups have experienced _____ by peers.

Listen and you might learn something

SOMETIMES STAYING QUIET IS THE BEST WAY TO GATHER INSIGHTS AND BUILD RELATIONSHIPS

Bottom of Form

MICHAEL SKAPINKER

16 JULY, 2023

- 1 Of all the management techniques, few are as powerful as curious conversation. If one of your staff tells you how their job is going, or how they think it should change, or what the organisation should be doing differently, say “tell me more” and ask some follow-up questions. It has an instant effect. There may be some initial wariness, especially if people aren’t used to having these sorts of chats with their boss. But after that they often widen their eyes, or give an acknowledging nod, and open up. If you haven’t done it, give it a go. It’s magic.
- 2 Why does it work? Because people feel listened to. They feel they matter. You can achieve this, too, by repeating whatever they have just told you. Psychologists call it “reflecting back”. A 2009 study assessing randomised control trials of therapy sessions in the US and Norway found that of all the techniques counsellors attempted – including confrontation, questioning and offering support – “the therapist listening carefully and reflecting back what the patient said” was the most effective. The “listening carefully” part is vital. People know when you are only going through the motions.
- 3 Some writers have been telling business leaders this for years. Stephen Covey wrote about empathetic listening in his 1989 book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. Psychologist and author Daniel Goleman wrote that knowing how to listen was an essential component of a leader’s emotional intelligence.
- 4 Why don’t leaders listen? Partly because, as Covey wrote, they are thinking about what they are going to say next. And partly because listening is not an attribute many leaders think is important. They think leaders should lead and set out a vision. They’re at the top because they have the answers. Those who educate leaders often don’t think listening is important either. A 2015 study of US undergraduate business programmes found that 76 per cent included oral presentation and 22 per cent some aspect of conversation. Just 11 per cent focused on listening.
- 5 You can learn the techniques of listening – reflecting back, asking questions – but there is more to it than that. You need to believe your teams have interesting insights. Luckily, they are bound to have them. They do their jobs every day, and know them better than anyone else. If they co-ordinate supplies, they know the suppliers. If they deal with customers, they learn what impresses or upsets them.
- 6 But your people don’t always know you are interested in their views. This can have a pernicious knock-on effect: they may lose interest in their insights themselves, or disengage from work altogether. Why bother if it makes no difference?
- 7 If you listen and ask interested questions, you may decide to do what your staff think you should do – or you may conclude you need to do something else, or nothing. Your employees may not be pleased, but at least they have been heard.
- 8 The same applies to chairing a meeting. You are far more likely to reach a productive outcome if you spend the first part just listening, encouraging others to talk. As people share their thoughts, you can begin to see the ways different groups are thinking. You can use the same listening techniques with each group: reflecting back, asking for more information. As the meeting moves on, you can summarise different points of view. You need to do this in good faith, showing that you have understood not just people’s words, but the feelings behind them.
- 9 After that, you can announce your decision: for all the listening, to lead is still to decide. Those who argued against your choice at least know you took their views into account, and are more likely to go along cooperatively with your course of action.

Continued on next page

10 Curious listening can also avert disaster. When I asked management experts why they thought no one had spoken up inside Silicon Valley Bank before it collapsed, or at JPMorgan Chase when it kept on Jeffrey Epstein as a client, they said it was because there wasn't a culture of voicing doubt. People thought speaking up would make them stand out and leave them vulnerable to victimisation.

11 If, as a leader, you are known for eliciting opinions and engaging with them, people are more likely to bring looming trouble to your attention. Having those "so what you are saying" or "tell me a bit more" conversations not only makes for a more engaged workforce. It could save your organisation – and your leadership reputation.

FT

Brooke Masters, 16 July, 2023

© [The Financial Times](#).

All rights reserved.

Articles republished from the *Financial Times*.

4 Understanding the article

a. Find key information in the article and complete the statements.

- Research shows that _____ is the most effective form of therapy.
a. offering support b. questioning c. reflecting back
- _____ is not a new idea – Covey wrote about it in 1989. Daniel Goleman also wrote featured it as a leadership component.
a. Asking questions b. Emotional intelligence c. Empathetic listening
- The majority of undergraduate business programmes focus on oral presentation, and only just over _____ include listening.
a. a tenth b. two tenths c. three-quarters
- Listening isn't enough – you need to believe that you will _____ by listening.
a. convince others b. gain insights c. make decisions
- Asking your employees interested questions doesn't necessarily mean you will _____ your findings.
a. implement b. share c. trust
- When reflecting back and asking for more information, it is important not only to acknowledge what people have said but how they _____.
a. communicate b. feel c. said it
- By knowing that you have considered their points of view, those who disagree with you are more likely to _____.
a. avert disaster b. change their minds c. cooperate
- A culture of voicing _____ can save an organisation.
a. change b. disagreement c. opinions

5 Business language – phrases

a. Match these phrases from the article with their meanings. Then, find them in the article to read them in context.

- | | |
|-------------------------------|---|
| 1. give (it) a go | a. attempt something |
| 2. go through the motions | b. be very noticeable |
| 3. do something in good faith | c. do something in an honest and sincere way |
| 4. go along with | d. do something without interest and without believing it's important |
| 5. stand out | e. support and agree with someone's idea or opinion |

6 Business language – phrases for active listening

a. Use words from the box to complete the useful phrases for active listening.

got hearing led mean page say saying tell

1. So what you are _____ is ...
2. Could you _____ me a bit more about that?
3. What I'm _____ is that you ...
4. Let me make sure I've _____ this right ...
5. What _____ you to that conclusion?
6. I want to make sure we're on the same _____.
7. What do you _____ when you _____ ...

7 Discussion

a. Discuss these questions. Try to use phrases for active listening as you listen.

- Why do most leadership programmes not focus on active listening?
- Think back to the business dilemma. Would you still choose the same answer?
- The article mentions a few examples of the benefits of active listening for leaders. How do you think active listening could benefit you and others professionally?
- What are your strengths and weaknesses when it comes to active listening?

8 Wider business theme – active listening

- a. Choose one or two of the following aspects of active listening. Research the skill(s) and how to develop them further.
- Reading body language / tone of voice / social cues
 - Performing active listening through eye contact, body language, facial expressions, etc
 - Asking questions / reflecting back / useful phrases
- b. Produce a poster, infographic, or presentation slide with your active listening tips and present it to the group.