

Active listening? We're all ears.

1 Warmer

- a. What skills and attributes make someone a good listener?
- b. Are you a good listener? Why (not)?
- c. How can active listening impact leaders and employees? Consider the points below.
 - conflict resolution
 - decision-making
 - inspiring trust
 - motivating others
 - problem solving
 - setting goals
 - team building

2 Lead in – business dilemma

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

You work at a large phone/internet service provider. Customer service agents have a very high turnover, and customer satisfaction has reached an all-time low. Customer service agents complain that they are overworked and that management is blind to their struggles. What is the best course of action?

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

3 Key words

- a. Write the words from the box next to the definitions below. Check your answers and your understanding of the words by using them 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).

attribute	bound	confrontation	disengage	elicit	empathetic
insight	knock-on	looming	pernicious	victimisation	wariness

1. the state or quality of not completely trusting _____
When investing in start-ups, _____ is an asset: you need to be able to identify all the red flags.
2. an argument or fight _____
As a manager, Tara could no longer avoid _____, so she got a coach to help her work on her communication skills.
3. being able to imagine how someone else feels _____
Our director is not known for being very _____, but his cut-throat way of doing things has worked in his career so far.
4. a characteristic or quality _____
Being approachable and his ability to build trust are some of his best _____ as a leader.
5. a sometimes-sudden, clear understanding of a complicated situation or issue

I gained many _____ about the hotel industry while I interned at the Royal.
6. very likely or certain to happen _____
We are _____ to meet our targets if we follow the marketing plan.
7. having a harmful effect _____
The staff cut has had _____ effects on the customer experience.

8. indirectly causing other situations to happen _____

We didn't expect productivity to be a _____ benefit of the new napping policy, but we were pleasantly surprised.

9. stop being engaged in something _____

Lack of agency in their jobs is one of the top reasons employees say they feel _____.

10. get information or get someone to respond, rather than telling them the answer _____

We need to _____ new solutions from those team members who seem most dissatisfied with the current process.

11. the act of mistreating someone _____

Our policy is clear: we do not tolerate any _____ or emotional abuse in our organisation.

12. about to happen soon and a cause for worry _____

No matter how much they had prepared, they felt utterly ill-equipped to deal with the _____ health crisis.

Listen and you might learn something

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

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- 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.

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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.

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Brooke Masters, 16 July, 2023

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4 Understanding the article

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

Data about listening and psychology	1.
Listening in business writing	2.
Listening in business education	3.
How to listen	4.
What (not) to do after listening	5.
Why listening is important	6.

5 Business language

a. Match these words to make informal phrases from the article. Then, find them in the article to read them in context.

- | | |
|-----------------|---------------|
| 1. give (it) | a go |
| 2. go through | in good faith |
| 3. do something | out |
| 4. go along | the motions |
| 5. stand | with |

b. Discuss what the phrases mean and look up the meanings of any you do not know.

6 Business language – phrases for active listening

a. Reorder the words to form useful phrases for active listening.

1. saying / you / are / is / what / so

2. bit / that / tell / a / you / more / about / me / could

3. I'm / that / you / what / is / hearing

4. right / me / I've / let / sure / got / let / this / make

5. to / led / that / what / conclusion / you

6. just / we're / the / I / sure / to / page / same / on / want / make

7. you / you / what / when / do / say / mean

8. to / especially / relate / can / what / said / you / I / about

9. by / curious / what / statement / to / I'm / last / know / you / your / mean

7 Discussion

a. Discuss the following questions. Try to use phrases for active listening from the previous activity.

- Did anything in the article surprise you?
- Why do you think active listening is absent in most leadership programmes?
- Think back to the business dilemma. Do you still have the same response?
- What other everyday problematic situations could be improved with active listening? Consider your own personal and professional context.
- Which active listening subskills do you feel confident in? Which would you like to develop more? How could you achieve this?

8 Wider business theme – active listening

a. Choose two of the following active listening skills. Research how these processes work and how to develop the skills further.

- Hearing / auditory processing
- Reading body language / tone of voice / social cues
- Staying focused / Keeping attention
- Regulating your emotions
- Integrating different sources of information
- Performing active listening through eye contact, body language, facial expressions, etc

What are the most important takeaways?

b. Produce a poster, infographic, or presentation slide with your active listening tips and present it to the group.