

The Big 6 Active Listening Skills

The active listening skillset involves these 6 active listening skills:

1. Paying attention,
2. Withholding judgment,
3. Reflecting,
4. Clarifying,
5. Summarizing, and
6. Sharing.

1. Pay attention.

One goal of active listening and being an effective listener is to set a comfortable tone that gives your coachee an opportunity to think and speak. Allow “wait time” before responding. Don’t cut coachees 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. Be focused on the moment, 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 arguing or selling their point right away.

3. Reflect.

When you’re the listener, don’t assume that you understand your coachee correctly — or that they know you’ve heard them. Mirror your coachee’s information and 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, your coachee 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 your coachee label his or her feelings: *“Sounds like you’re feeling pretty frustrated and stuck.”*

4. Clarify.

Don’t be shy to ask questions about any issue that is ambiguous or unclear. As the listener, if you have doubt or confusion about what your coachee has said, say something like, *“Let me see if I’m clear. Are you talking about ...?”* or *“Wait a minute. I didn’t follow you.”*

Open-ended, clarifying, and probing questions are important active listening tools that encourage the coachee 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 ...?”*

The emphasis is on asking rather than telling. It invites a thoughtful response 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 *“How certain are you that you have the full picture of what’s going on?”*

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 have understood while practicing active listening, and ask the other person to do the same.

Giving a brief restatement of core themes raised by the coachee 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 both parties to be clear on mutual responsibilities and follow-up.

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 ideas, feelings, and suggestions. You might talk about a similar experience you had or share an idea that was triggered by a comment made previously in the conversation.

Once the situation has been talked through in this way, both you and your coachee have a good picture of where things stand. From this point, the conversation can shift into problem solving. *What hasn't been tried? What don't we know? What new approaches could be taken?*

As the 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.

In combination, these 6 skills in the active listening skillset make up one of the keys in [how to have a coaching conversation](#).

How to Improve Your Active Listening Skills

Now that you understand what the 6 active listening skills are, seriously consider whether *you* are an active listener.

Many people take their listening skills for granted. We often assume it's clear that we're listening and that others know they are being heard. But the reality is that we as leaders often struggle with tasks and roles that directly relate to active listening. Accepting criticism well, dealing with people's feelings, and trying to understand what others think all require strong active listening skills.

Even with the best of intentions, you may actually be unconsciously sending signals that you aren't listening at all. You may need to brush up on your

listening skills if any of the following questions describe you. Do you sometimes:

- Have a hard time concentrating on what is being said?
- Think about what to say next, rather than about what the speaker is saying?
- Dislike it when someone questions your ideas or actions?
- Give advice too soon and suggest solutions to problems before the other person has fully explained his or her 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. To boost your active listening skills and put your active listening skillset into practice, try these helpful tips:

1. **Limit distractions.** Silence any technology and move away from distractions so that you can pay full attention to the other person. Take note of the person's tone of voice and body language as well.
2. **Pay attention to what is being said, not what you want to say.** Set a goal of being able to repeat the last sentence the other person says. This keeps your attention on each statement.
3. **Be okay with silence.** You don't have to always reply or have a comment. A break in dialogue can give you a chance to collect your thoughts.
4. **Encourage the other person to offer ideas and solutions before you give yours.** Aim to do 80% of the listening and 20% of the talking.
5. **Restate the key points you heard and ask whether they are accurate.** "Let me see whether I heard you correctly..." is an easy way to clarify any confusion.

Being a strong, attentive listener will help you be a strong leader as well. Your co-workers and direct reports will respect you more, and you'll likely see improvements in your relationships with them as a result. If you work to develop your active listening skills, you will not only become known as a good listener, you will become a better leader as well.

Source: Use Active Listening to Coach Others – Center for Creative Leadership -

<https://www.ccl.org/articles/leading-effectively-articles/coaching-others-use-active-listening-skills/>