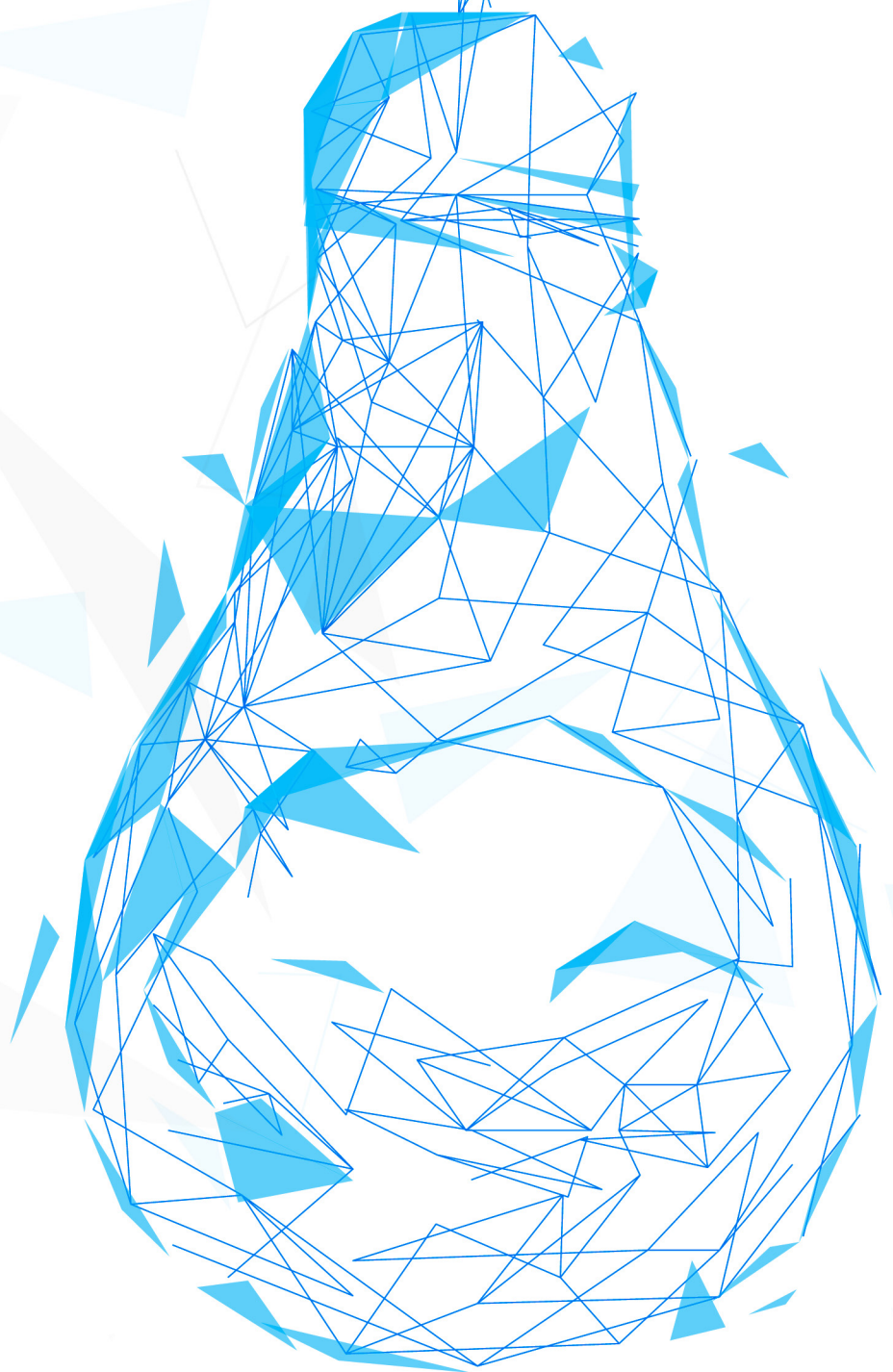


LIFE COACHING

CETIFICATE COURSE



COMMUNICATION

SKILLS

The way we communicate has the potential to build up or tear down our relationships. Listening is crucial for all effective communication. If we don't listen effectively, messages can be easily misunderstood and communications break down, leading to frustrations and rifts in relationships. If there's one communication skill we should aim to master - it's listening!

When interacting with others, it can be very easy to get distracted. Active listening is a skill that is difficult to master and requires time and patience to develop. It requires a conscious effort to hear not only the words that the other person is saying but, more importantly, doing your best to understand the message they're communicating.

We've put this guide together to help you overcome some of the barriers to effective listening and develop your ability to engage in active listening. This, in turn, will help you initiate healthier and more meaningful patterns of communication with the people in your life. Whether you want to make improvements in your relationships or sharpen up your day-to-day interactions with peers, our aim is to share some ideas that you can build into your life.

AN INTRODUCTION TO EFFECTIVE LISTENING

The English Oxford Dictionary defines listening as 'the ability to pay attention to and effectively interpret what other people are saying'. Listening is vital in developing and maintaining healthy relationships. We are naturally prone to becoming preoccupied with our own thoughts and emotions. If a person is talking to us, it's often all too easy to get distracted and not pay close attention to what the other person is saying.

We may get distracted by what is going on around us, by whatever we're thinking about, or even by what we want to say next. This can become particularly damaging in relationships because important pieces of information get lost in communication.

Listening is so essential that many employers provide their employees with listening skills training, as effective listening can directly influence better customer satisfaction, more accurate work and greater productivity, ultimately leading to more innovative and creative work.

HEARING AND LISTENING ARE NOT THE SAME

Hearing refers to the sounds that we hear as opposed to listening which requires that we pay attention to the meaning of what we're hearing. Listening means that consider not just the words that are being spoken, but how they are being spoken - the use of voice, language, and body language.

"Most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply." - Stephen Covey

An effective listener will listen not just to what's being said, but also to what is not being said, or perhaps even what is partially being said. Effective listening requires that we pay close attention to inconsistencies between verbal and non-verbal messages.

For example, if someone shares with you they're happy and fulfilled in their job, but communicate this with tear-filled eyes or through gritted teeth, their verbal and non-verbal messages are conflicting, suggesting they don't actually mean what they're saying.



THE 10 KEYS TO BECOMING AN EFFECTIVE LISTENER

1. Be Attentive

Focus your attention on the other person. We can very easily get distracted by our own thoughts on what we're having for lunch, where we're going next, etc. Do your best to empty your mind and offer the other person your complete availability, concentrating on the messages that are being communicated.

Show the other person that they've got your full attention by maintaining eye contact. Look at them, even if they do not look at you. You do not have to stare fixedly at the other person - you can look away every now and then. The most important thing is to remain attentive. Block out any distractions, like background noise. Try not to focus in on the other person's accent or any mannerisms that might stand out.

2. Put The Speaker At Ease

Encourage the other person to feel free to speak - nod or use other gestures to encourage them to continue speaking. Show them that you are listening and understanding what they're saying.

3. Empathise

Do your best to understand the other person's point of view. Consider any issues from their perspective and let go of any preconceived ideas that you might have. By having an open mind, you can more fully empathise with them.

Empathy is the heart and soul of effective listening. In order to empathise you have to put yourself in the other person's shoes and let yourself feel what it's like to be them for that moment. This is a challenging thing to do as it requires concentration and energy. However, empathy is a generous and helpful thing to offer others, and it facilitates communication more effectively than any other approach.

4. Be Patient

If the other person pauses (even for a long time), it does not necessarily mean that they have finished speaking. Be patient and allow them to continue in their own time. Don't interrupt or finish their sentence as sometimes it takes time to formulate what that want to say and then how to say it.

If the other person is discussing a problem, stop yourself from suggesting solutions. Most of the time, people don't want advice. If they do, they'll usually ask for it. Most people prefer to figure out their own solutions, and all they really want is someone to listen to them.

5. Avoid Personal Prejudice

Do your best to remain impartial. You don't have to like another person or even agree with their ideas, opinions or values to communicate effectively with them. However, it's important to withhold your judgment and set aside any blame and criticism to fully understand them.

Avoid jumping to your own conclusions. Remember that the other person is using language to represent the thoughts and feelings inside their brain. You do not know what these thoughts and feelings are and the only way you will find out is by listening.



6. Listen To The Tone

Both volume and tone of voice add to what is being said. An effective communicator will use both volume and tone to their advantage in order to keep their audience attentive. Everyone uses tone, pitch, and volume of voice in certain situations. Pay attention to these to get a better understanding of what the other person is trying to say.

7. Identify The Key Messages

Identify the key messages. Focus more on the main idea rather than the details. This will give you an overview of what the other person is trying to say and prevent you from getting lost in the details, which in turn will help you to empathise more effectively.

8. Pay Attention To What Isn't Being Said

Paying attention to the other person's body language is crucial. You can detect boredom, irritation or enthusiasm very quickly in the slope of their shoulders, the expression of their eyes and the set of their mouth. When you're listening, remember that words convey only a fraction of the message. Look out for any additional information that they are transmitting through non-verbal communication.

9. Wait For The Speaker To Pause To Ask Questions

If you do not understand something, it's important to ask for clarification. However, rather than interrupting, wait for the other person to pause. You could always say something like, "Can you just back up for a second - I didn't quite understand what you said about..."

10. Reflect Back

Reflecting back is the process of restating and paraphrasing the words and feelings of the other person. It can help the other person to 'hear' their own thoughts and focus on what they're saying and how they're feeling.

Reflecting back shows the other person that you're doing your best to understand what they're saying and trying to see the world as they see it. It doesn't involve you asking questions, leading the conversation in a different direction or introducing a new topic. Reflecting back helps the other person to feel understood and gives them the time and space to focus and further explore their ideas. Statements such as 'You're apprehensive about the changes...tell me more about that?' or 'You're excited, but I'm also beginning to sense you're a little apprehensive?' are examples of reflective questions.

For the other person, hearing back what they've just said can be really significant for them. You might find you get responses such as: 'did I really say that?' or 'hearing you repeat what I've just said seems to have made the problem clearer in my mind.' We'll be exploring some of these keys to effective listening in more detail as we take a closer look at what it means to engage in active listening.

"When you talk, you are only repeating what you already know. If you listen, you may learn something new." - Dalai Lama XIV



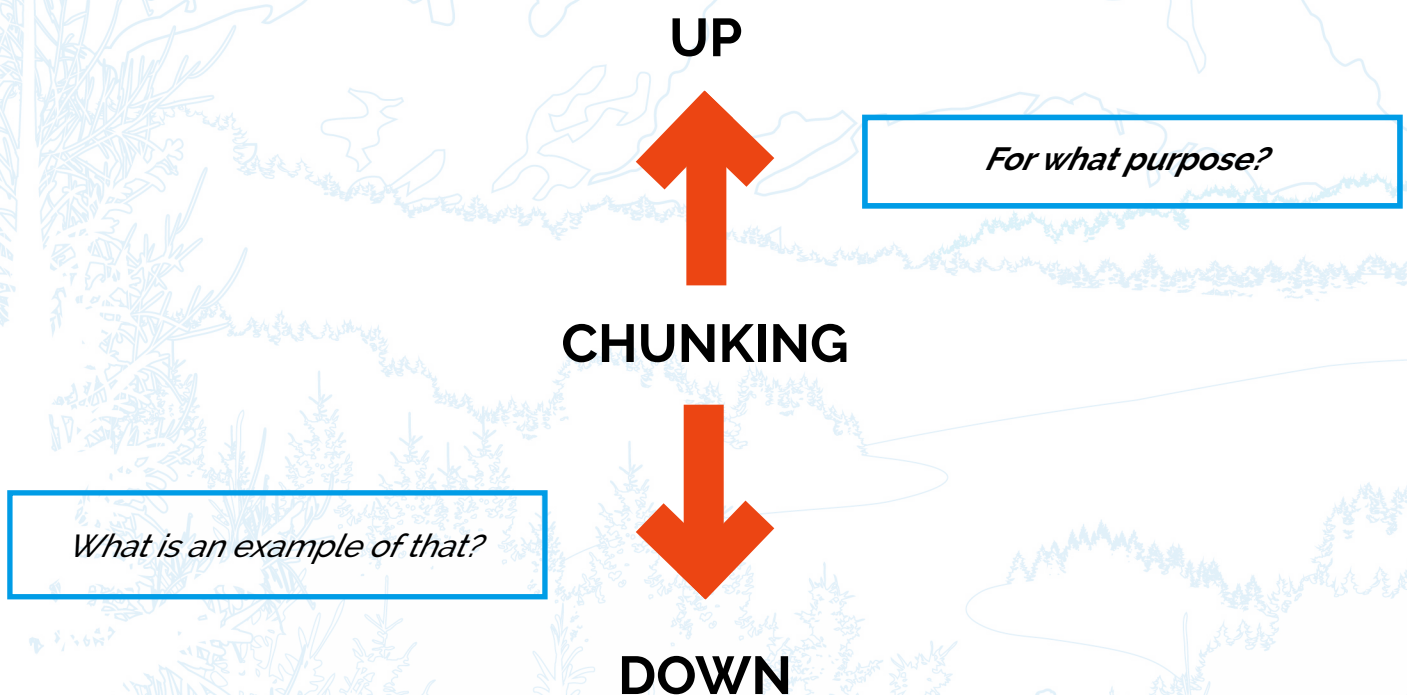
CHUNKING UP AND CHUNKING DOWN

When working with clients it is often necessary to help them either drill down into an issue or stop getting bogged down in detail and take a broad overview. This is where the 'Chunking Up and Chunking Down' method is very useful.

'Chunking up' refers to moving from small-scale, specific ideas or pieces of information to larger, more general ones. 'Chunking down' takes us from big view, down into detail.

Big projects are three dimensional. They require vision and they also require execution, which means an overview, and then workflows heading from that vision down into the different areas of execution. Chief executives are often big picture thinkers; they paint the picture of the vision or goal and surround themselves with people who like to work out the details and specifics that will allow the vision to come to fruition. In order to visualise what an entire project will look like when it's complete, we need to draw up a broad overview. If we're still thinking about the trees, 'chunking up' will lift us up so we can see the wood.

When we ask chunking up questions and direct a client toward the big picture, we are asking the client to examine what is important to them. When we identify what a person's purpose is, we can build their motivation. Those who prefer to burrow deeper into the details and pay less attention to the big picture are sometimes regarded as inferior thinkers to the 'big picture' visionaries; however, success requires both. Neither process is superior to the other, they are merely two different yet complementary thinking styles.



Questions to Chunk People's Thinking Upwards

These types of questions help people examine their beliefs, identify what's important to them and clarify their vision of their 'bigger picture'.

Some examples of Chunking Up Questions include:

- For what purpose?



- What does achieving this outcome give you?
- What is important to you about...?
- What is that a part of?
- What is an example of...?
- What have you learned?

Chunking Down question help people explore the details and identify specific information. Some examples of Chunking Down Questions include:

- What is an example of that?
- What is a component of that?
- Who/where/what specifically?

You might hear people say 'I want to do this...but I can't because...'. This is an appropriate moment to chunk down and ask for more details. Listen out for the 'but', as it usually comes before a limiting belief. You could ask:

- What's stopping you...?
- Who, or what is it, what's stopping you?
- What is an example of this?
- Who, or what, is stopping you?
- How are they stopping you specifically?

So why would we want to ask 'chunking up' questions as a Life Coach?

- They allow the client to get a better understanding of the big picture — the whole context of the problem, decision or goal.
- To identify the client's values which are underpinning their motivation that drives a specific goal or behaviour. Reflecting on your most important values helps you to identify the right course of action increases your sense of self-efficacy (the belief in your capacity to achieve goals) and reduces stress.
- They help us to think more strategically, which is an essential skill in coaching.

And why would we want to ask 'chunking down' questions as a Life Coach? We could ask 'chunking down' questions to get more specific, for example:

- To find the root of a client's problem
- To fill in any missing information
- To identify specific goals that an individual would like to set
- To find specific ways that a value could be fulfilled in practice



It is worth remembering that this can also be a challenging exercise for the client, as each answer they give can be met with a further question. This process helps achieve clarity, but the coach must use their empathy and judgement to gauge the client's state when being challenged in this way, to know when to give them more space and to know when to press on in search of clarity.

1. Take a few moments to reflect and consider what your natural preference is — is it to think in big or little chunks? One way to do this might be to think of a new idea you've had recently, perhaps a piece of innovative thinking around work, did you think of the 'big vision' or did you think of the details of how it might be delivered?
2. How can you start practising your 'chunking up' and 'chunking down' questioning skills to become a better communicator for others?

DIFFERENT LEVELS OF LISTENING

If we want to sharpen our ability to understand others, it's crucial that we learn to listen more attentively. There are various levels of listening:

1. Ignoring: When we're not listening at all.
2. Pretending: When we're trying to show someone that we're interested, but we aren't!
3. Selective listening: When we only hear what we expect to hear.
4. Attentive listening: When we pay close attention to what someone is saying to us.
5. Active (Empathic) listening: When we focus on listening to what someone else is trying to say to us. Active listening involves attempting to understand the emotions and feelings of the person speaking, to put yourself in their shoes and share their thoughts. Empathy is a way of deeply connecting with the other person. It's not the same as sympathy as it involves much more than just being compassionate or feeling sorry for the other person. Empathy involves a deeper connection, realisation and understanding of another person's point of view.

Active listening involves listening and responding to the other person in a way that improves mutual understanding and trust. It allows the person speaking to release their emotions and any tension. It promotes the surfacing of information and creates an environment that encourages problem-solving. Active listening is used in a hypnotherapeutic context to better understand and ultimately help clients.

This type of listening does not involve offering advice or making judgements but gently encourages the speaker to discuss their feelings and emotions. Clarification and reflection are essential when listening empathically to help avoid misunderstandings. Our goal in listening must be to empathise if we really want to understand people and connect with those that we know in a more meaningful way than what we have done in the past. There can be various other goals in listening, and in reality, we're usually working towards several goals for listening at any given time. For example, we can be listening to learn while also trying to empathise with someone.



INFORMATIONAL LISTENING (LISTENING TO LEARN)

Whenever we listen to learn something, we're engaged in informational listening. This goal of listening is relevant in many daily situations: being at work or in education, when listening to the news or asking for directions. When we're listening to learn something, we're taking in new information and facts, not criticising and analysing.

Informational listening, especially in formal settings such as in the workplace or in education, is usually accompanied by note taking – where the individual records key information so that it can be reviewed at a later stage.

“The most basic of all human needs is the need to understand and be understood. The best way to understand people is to listen to them.”— Ralph Nichols

CRITICAL LISTENING (LISTENING TO ANALYSE OR EVALUATE)

Critical listening is much more active than informational listening: it's when we listen to evaluate and analyse what is being said. It usually requires some sort of decision-making or problem-solving and involves comparisons between what we already know and what we're hearing. If we're engaged in informational listening we're mostly concerned with gathering new information and facts, critical listening, on the other hand, is about analysing opinion or making a judgement.

The use of the word 'critical' in this context does not necessarily mean that we are claiming that the information is somehow flawed or faulty. Rather, critical listening refers to being fully engaged in what we're listening to by asking ourselves questions like, 'what is the main point the other person is trying to make?' or 'how is what I'm hearing different from my beliefs, opinion or knowledge?' Critical listening is, therefore, a fundamental aspect of learning.

Making judgments during listening is usually considered as a barrier to understanding someone, and this is absolutely true. However, critical listening occurs when your goal is to understand what the other person is saying, but you also have some responsibility or reason or to evaluate what's being said to you and how it's being said. For example, if there's an election coming up and you need to decide who you want to vote for, you would probably use some form of critical listening when watching a debate on TV. You listen, and you evaluate.

It's important when listening critically, to maintain an open mind and not be biased by preconceived ideas or stereotypes. By doing this, you'll become a more effective listener and widen your perception and knowledge of other people and your relationships.

“Seek first to understand, then to be understood.” — Stephen R. Covey

A CLOSER LOOK AT ACTIVE (EMPATHIC) LISTENING

'Active listening' demands that you give your full concentration to what is being said as opposed to just passively 'hearing' the message of the other person. This requires a conscious effort to hear not only the words that the other person is saying but, more importantly, trying to understand the complete message they're trying to get across. Active listening is a skill that can be developed with practice. However, it can be challenging to master and requires time and patience to develop.



Active listening makes use of the ten keys identified in the paragraphs above. It requires you to listen with all of your senses. It's important that the 'active listener' demonstrates that they're listening, as otherwise, the speaker might conclude that what they're talking about is uninteresting. You can demonstrate your interest through both verbal and non-verbal communication such as maintaining eye contact, smiling and nodding your head, agreeing by saying 'Yes' or simply 'Mmm hmm' to encourage them to keep speaking.

Offering the other person this feedback will usually help them to feel more relaxed and they'll, therefore, communicate more easily, honestly and openly. Active listening requires patience. If you're reflecting back their words, thoughts and feelings, this gives them the opportunity to clarify and reflect for themselves, so allowing them space and silence to do this is crucial. Do your best not to jump in with comments each time there are a few seconds of silence. Speakers generally want listeners to show that they're actively listening to what they're saying by responding appropriately - this can be through both verbal and non-verbal communication.

NON-VERBAL SIGNS OF ACTIVE LISTENING

Smiling can be used to demonstrate that the listener is paying attention to what's being said or as a means of agreeing with what the other person is communicating. Combined with nods of the head, smiling can be very powerful in affirming that you are listening to and understanding what the other person is communicating.

Maintaining Eye Contact usually demonstrates that you're interested in what's being said. However, some people can find this intimidating, especially shyer people, so do your best to gauge how much eye contact is appropriate in the situation.

Posture is important to consider - adopting a physical stance that makes you appear open and receptive to hearing what the other person is saying. Squarely face the person as this will demonstrate that you are present and attentive, and will also help you to read the other person's nonverbal cues. Maintain an open posture. Avoid turning your body away or crossing your arms. Lean in towards the other person - if you are sitting, sit up tall and lean forward in your chair.

Mirroring/Reflecting any facial expressions used by the speaker can demonstrate active listening. This can help show that you're empathising with them.

Focused people who are actively listening won't get distracted from what the other person is saying, and will stop themselves from doodling, fidgeting, looking at their watch, picking their fingernails or playing with their hair.

VERBAL SIGNS OF ACTIVE LISTENING

Positive Reinforcement - some encouraging words may be helpful for the speaker. However, you should do your best to use them sparingly so that you don't distract from what they are trying to communicate. Frequent use of words and phrases like 'yes', 'indeed' or 'very good' can irritate the person speaking. It's usually better to elaborate and explain why you agree with the point they've made.

Remembering details and ideas from previous conversations demonstrate that you were paying attention and will encourage the other person to continue.



Questioning. Asking relevant questions will indicate to the person speaking that you've been paying attention and that you're genuinely interested in what they have to say. Asking helpful questions can help you gather better information and learn more about the other person. Questioning is really important in building stronger relationships and will help you to manage other people more effectively.

There are both open and closed questions. A closed question will usually receive a single word or very short, factual answer. For example: 'Are you hungry?' The answer is either 'Yes' or 'No'. Open questions will elicit longer answers. They usually start with 'what', 'why', 'how'. An open question asks the other person to share their opinion, thoughts or feelings. 'Describe' and 'tell me' can also be used to begin an open question. Here are a few examples:

- How was your evening?
- Tell me what happened next.
- Why did you react that way?
- How was the party?
- Describe the situation in more detail.

Open questions can be used to:

- Initiate an open conversation: 'What did you get up to on when you were away?'
- Find out someone else's opinion or perspective: 'What do you think about the changes that we've made?'
- Find out further details: 'What else do we need to do to resolve this problem?'

Closed questions can be used:

- To conclude a discussion or make a decision: 'So now that we're all aware of what happened, can we agree that these are the right next steps to take?'
- To test your understanding or someone else's understanding: 'So if I get this promotion, I'll have flexible working hours?'
- For frame setting: 'Are you satisfied with the service you receive from your GP?'

However, an out of place closed question can quickly kill a conversation and lead to awkward silence, so are best avoided when a conversation is in full flow.

REFLECTION

As described earlier, reflecting back is the process of restating and paraphrasing the words and feelings of the speaker. 'Reflection' is a powerful tool that reinforces the speaker's message and demonstrates that the listener understands. There are two main types of reflecting: Mirroring and Paraphrasing.

Mirroring is a very simple type of reflecting, and it involves repeating almost exactly what the speaker has said. Mirroring is short and simple, and it's usually enough to just repeat the last few words or keywords that were spoken. This demonstrates to the speaker that the listener is doing their best to understand their perspective and encourages them to continue.



Paraphrasing. When paraphrasing, the listener chooses the most important details of what the speaker has shared and reflects them back. Paraphrases can be one or two brief sentences or even just a few words. Paraphrasing is not about repeating back what the speaker has shared. Rather it's about capturing the essence of what they've said through rephrasing. This demonstrates that they're not just listening to what the speaker is saying but also trying their best to understand.

Paraphrases should be non-judgemental and not based on any assumptions or prejudices. This technique can seem quite unnatural at first and demands practice in order to feel comfortable with it.

“The first step to improving your listening skills is to stop talking. It is very difficult to talk and listen at the same time.” - Tony Buon

EXERCISE 1:

As mentioned above, reflection is a difficult skill to master and requires practice so for this exercise why not ask a friend or family member to help you practice. Initiate a conversation with this person about something that they are interested in (for example, a relationship they're in or an issue at work).

A) **Mirroring:** Listen to what they are saying and do your best to mirror back what you hear. Remember mirroring is simply offering back short, simple keywords.

Now, take a few minutes to answer the questions below:

- How did you feel when you were mirroring?

- What effect did it have on the conversation?

- Ask the other person how it felt when you were mirroring them. What did they say?

B) **Paraphrasing:** Continue listening to what they are saying and now try paraphrasing what you hear.



Now, take a few minutes to answer the questions below:

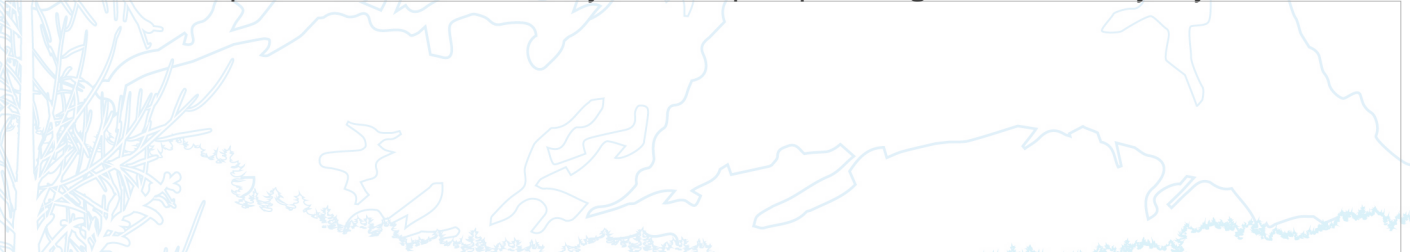
- How did you feel when you were paraphrasing?



- What effect did it have on the conversation?



- Ask the other person how it felt when you were paraphrasing. What did they say?



CLARIFICATION

Clarification involves asking the speaker questions to ensure that the correct message has been received. This usually involves the use of open questions which allows the speaker to expand on the necessary points.

This might involve the listener asking the speaker to repeat something or provide examples if they're unsure of what was meant. The listener could even summarise the message to the speaker to check that their understanding is correct. Clarification simply means to 'make clearer'. The goal of clarification is to make sure that the person speaking and the listener are 'singing off the same song sheet' and share the same understanding of what was said.

Thus, identifying any areas of misunderstanding and resolving them. Clarification also helps to reassure the person speaking that the listener is attempting to understand what they're saying and is genuinely interested in them.

SUMMARISING

One way that the listener can clarify what the speaker means is to use a summary which reviews part of or even the entire conversation. A good summary will confirm that the listener and speaker understand each other. A summary is most effective if it's given from the speaker's perspective, not an interpretation from the listener's point of view.



The listener should look to summarise the main points that the speaker has communicated. They should consider what the speaker is trying to accomplish in the communication? It's important that the listener does not introduce any new main points into the summary – if they do, they should make it clear that they're adding them. It's important that the listener is as concise and straightforward as possible when giving a summary.

Once a summary has been offered, the speaker must then be given the opportunity to correct the listener's understanding. This is important in order for the listener to fully understand the speaker. Where necessary, the speaker should be encouraged to express themselves again. This gives the person listening another chance to get clearer on what the speaker actually meant.

EXERCISE 2:

The next time that someone gives you instructions or information (for example, your manager instructs you about a new task or a family member discloses a personal problem), use summarising to check your understanding.

Remember that a summary is most effective if it's given from the speaker's perspective, not the listener's opinion or point of view.

Then take a few moments to answer the questions below:

- Notice what you had to do to summarise – was it difficult or easy?

- What effect did it have on the conversation?

- What effect did it have on your understanding?

“Effective questioning brings insight, which fuels curiosity, which cultivates wisdom.”-Chip Bell



EXERCISE 3:

This exercise will help you to bring together all of the active listening skills we've discussed so far. Enter into a conversation with someone you know (friend, family member, colleague, etc.) and ask them questions about themselves.

Make a real effort not just to hear what the other person is saying, but, more importantly, to understand the whole message they are trying to put across. Don't interrupt them, and do your best not to become distracted by your own thoughts or opinions - offer them your complete availability. Let the goal of the conversation be to understand the other person by asking appropriate questions and then simply listening to them. Do your best to make use of the active listening skills we've identified throughout this workbook so far.

Following the conversation take some time to reflect on the following questions and make a few notes:

1) Which of the active listening skills did you feel you used successfully during this conversation?

2) Which of the active listening skills did you feel you didn't use so successfully? Are there any areas for improvement?

3) If I were to have this conversation again, what would I do differently and why? For example, It felt like I missed one or two important things so I would have asked more clarifying questions to explore some of these areas.



4) What have I learnt from this conversation? For example, I learned something new about my friend which might not have happened if I had just offered her my perspective instead of listening.



COMMON LISTENING MISCONCEPTIONS

We all have the ability to listen effectively in different situations and to different people. However, it is an active process that has to be done consciously, and becoming an effective listener requires practice. There are some common myths or misconceptions about listening which can influence how we feel and actually make the listening process less effective. Here are six very common misconceptions about listening:

1. Learning to listen is difficult

Everyone learns to listen from a young age and throughout life we spend a lot of our time listening. How well we listen to others will depend on our motivation to listen, the circumstances of the communication, and to some extent our personality too.

The skills required for effective listening are not difficult to learn. The key to developing your skills in listening is practice. It's worth the effort to learn to listen. Employers consider effective listening a hugely valuable trait, particularly in management and leadership roles. You'll also see benefits in your personal and social life too – such as deeper and more meaningful relationships with others.

2. 'Hearing' is not the same as Listening

Like breathing, hearing is a passive process: you do it without even thinking about it. Listening, on the other hand, is an active process and a learnt skill. Your brain has to work harder to process the information that you hear and see to understand the meaning of the message.

Understanding is the goal of listening. Listening is a lot more than just simply hearing. Effective listeners will focus on the meaning of the words that they hear and put them into context to gain understanding.

Good listeners will also pay attention to the speaker's non- verbal cues, including general body language, tone of voice, and gestures.

3. Intelligent people are better listeners

There's no link between intelligence and effective listening skills. If an individual is intelligent and has a wide vocabulary, then this can make it easier to process information and gain understanding. However, these attributes do not necessarily make them more effective listeners. For example, very intelligent people might be more likely to get bored with a conversation, and start thinking about other things and therefore not listen.

On the other hand, individuals with higher emotional intelligence, are more likely to be better listeners. Emotional intelligence refers to an individual's ability to assess, identify and manage their emotions and the emotions of other people. If someone has a high emotional



intelligence then they are more likely to consider the emotional needs of another person – assessment of such needs often comes about through good listening.

4. I'm already a good listener

People tend to overestimate their own listening abilities and underestimate those of others. We tend to think that we're better listeners than other people. Effective listening, however, can only be measured by the depth of understanding that we gain. No one is born a good listener. Without practice and training, we're unlikely to be a particularly effective listener. Believing that you're a better listener than others is unlikely to be true unless you've taken the time to learn and practise your listening skills.

5. We get better at listening with age

Individuals don't automatically become more effective listeners with age. Without practice and conscious effort, an individual's listening skills will not get better over time.

As an individual goes through life, their capacity for listening is likely to improve. Whether they utilise this capacity and actually listen more effectively depends on their personality, their particular situation and avoiding any bad habits, they may have picked up along the way.

BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

There are many reasons why interpersonal communications can fail. Sometimes the message that the speaker communicates may not come across as they planned or intended. In a similar way, the listener may not receive the message in exactly the way the speaker intended. It's therefore, hugely important that the speaker asks for feedback to ensure that their message has been clearly understood. Active listening, clarification and reflection will also help, but the skilled communicator also needs to be aware of the barriers to effective communication and how to overcome them.

There are many barriers to communication, and these can result in the speaker's message becoming distorted. Healthy communication involves overcoming such barriers and conveying a clear and concise message.

LANGUAGE BARRIERS

Language and linguistic ability can act as a barrier to effective communication. However, even when communicating in the same language, the terminology used in a message can act as a barrier if it's not fully understood by the listener. For example, a message that includes abbreviations and specialist jargon won't be understood by someone who isn't familiar with the terminology used. Regional Expressions and colloquialisms can easily be misinterpreted or even considered offensive.

"You learn when you listen. You earn when you listen—not just money, but respect." — Harvey Mackay

PSYCHOLOGICAL BARRIERS

The psychological state of those communicating will influence how their message is sent, received and perceived. For example, if someone is feeling stressed then they might be preoccupied with their own personal concerns and not as receptive to the message. Anger is another good example of a psychological barrier to communication. When



we're angry, it's easy to say things that we often later regret and also to misinterpret what other people are actually saying.

Generally speaking, individuals with low self-esteem are often less assertive and therefore might not feel comfortable communicating. They often withhold from saying how they're really feeling or read negative subtexts into messages they're hearing.

Physiological barriers can result from the listener's physical state. For example, a receiver with a hearing impairment may not grasp the entirety of a spoken conversation, especially if there is significant background noise.

ATTITUDINAL BARRIERS

Attitudinal barriers are perceptions or behaviours that prevent individuals from communicating well. Attitudinal barriers to communication often result from personality conflicts, resistance to change or a lack of motivation. In order to really understand other people well, it's essential that we overcome our own attitudinal barriers to facilitate effective communication.

COMMON BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE LISTENING

There are many things that can get in the way of effective listening and it's so easy to pick up bad habits.

Can you relate to any of the following?

- It's very easy to find yourself formulating a reply while the other person is still talking. This means that you're not really listening to what's actually being said.
- Even good listeners can often be guilty of critically evaluating what's being said before fully understanding the message the other person is trying to communicate. This results in assumptions being made and the listener reaching conclusions about the speaker's meaning that are likely to be inaccurate.
- You may be thinking of other things such as 'I really want a cup of coffee', or 'will I be able to meet that deadline today?' You're distracted and not giving your full attention to what's being said. These can all lead to misunderstandings and a breakdown in communications.
- You're distracted by the person speaking and not actually listening to what they're saying. For example, you don't particularly like the individual who is speaking, and you find yourself mentally arguing with them and criticising them. Or perhaps you're distracted by their voice and find yourself paying more attention to how they sound than what they're actually saying. Perhaps you have a prejudice or bias towards them for some reason.

Perhaps you've been conditioned to believe that the other person's views are wrong, possibly because of your own past experiences or because of something about them. Effective listening requires that we're open-minded to the ideas and opinions of others. You don't have to agree with them but choosing to listen to them might help you consider them in a slightly different light and understand their perspective.

The word 'listen' contains the same letters as the word 'silent'- Alfred Brendel



- You're sympathising rather than empathising with the person speaking- you're understanding what they're saying, but you're not putting yourself in their shoes. Sympathy isn't the same as empathy. When you sympathise you're feeling sorry for the other person, but to empathise is to actually put yourself in their position and imagine what it would feel like.
- Most people have an internal self-dialogue going on, and they spend a lot of time listening to their own thoughts and feelings. It can be a challenge to switch the focus from yourself on to the other person. Effective listening demands that we quiet our own minds, become open to the views of other people and empathise with them.

VERBAL & NON-VERBAL SIGNS OF INEFFECTIVE LISTENING

There's nothing worse than when you're in a conversation with someone, and they begin to lose concentration or show you that they're not actually listening. It's easy to tell when someone's become distracted. Some of these signs of inattention while listening include:

- Lack of eye contact – listeners who are engaged with the person speaking tend to maintain eye contact. However, lack of eye contact can also be a sign of shyness.
- Distraction - fidgeting, yawning, doodling, looking at their watch.
- Inappropriate posture – if someone's paying attention to the person speaking, they tend to lean slightly forward. Someone who's not paying complete attention will most likely seem restless and slouch, lean back or 'swing' on their chair.
- Lack of head nods and inappropriate expressions – someone who is engaged in the conversation will usually nod their head and smile as a means of encouraging the speaker and showing them that they're paying attention. Lack of head nods can mean the opposite – that they are not actually listening.
- Selective listening – when someone chooses to listen to certain parts of the conversation, but not to all parts of the conversation. If the listener thinks that they have heard the speaker's main points, they might filter out what they perceive as important and then stop listening.
- Daydreaming – this might occur when the person listening hears something that sets off a sequence of unrelated thoughts in their mind. They become consumed by their 'own world' and often adopt a 'far-away' look.
- Changing the subject – someone who's distracted will often suddenly think of something unrelated and try to change the topic of the conversation to what they're thinking about.
- Advising – attempting to offer the speaker advice before they've taken time to fully understand what the problem is.

EXERCISE 4:

Consider a time when you felt you weren't listened to (could be work, family, doctors, shopping, etc.)

1. In what ways could you recognise that the person you were communicating with was not listening? What were the signs?



2. What impact did this have on you and how did this make you feel? For example, devalued, angry, or hurt.



3. Now consider some principles of good listening. In what ways could this other person have communicated more effectively?

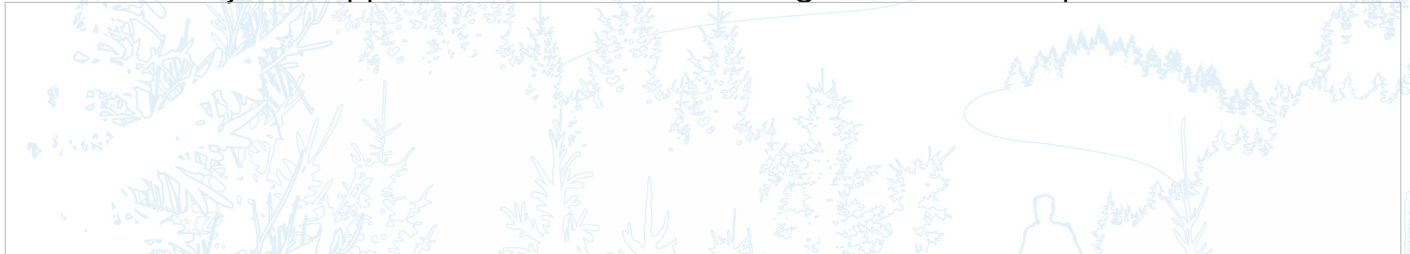


"The best listeners listen between the lines." - Nina Malkin, Swoon

EXERCISE 5.

For this exercise, you'll need to be completely honest with yourself. Consider a time when you feel you were not listening very effectively.

1. Consider why this happened – which of the listening barriers were in place?



2. What behaviours were you aware of showing (or trying not to show)?

