



## The Art of Active Listening

“Listening” is an integral part of effective communications, however, few are ever taught how to listen effectively. For most, “hearing” what was said is synonymous with “listening” to what was said; however in reality they are two distinctly different functions. “Hearing” is a physical act defined in the dictionary as “the process, function or power of perceiving sound”. “Listening” is an intellectual act defined in the dictionary as “hearing sounds with thoughtful intention”. Therefore, unlike hearing, which for most is a natural function, listening is a skill that improves through training and practice in the art of “active listening”.

Active listening involves demonstrating an interest and understanding in what is being said through staying focused, asking questions, listening for the main point(s) and listening for the rationale behind what is being said. As with any skill, active listening is learned through the recognition and application of certain basic techniques. The basic techniques for active listening are nonverbal attending, open-ended questions, paraphrasing and reflecting feelings.

### Nonverbal attending

Nonverbal attending is physically signaling that you are listening. The use of nonverbal attending:

- Sets a comfortable tone
- Encourages the speaker to keep talking
- Demonstrates your concern & interest
- Signals to the speaker that you are interested in what they have to say and that you are following the conversation.

### Examples:

- Maintaining eye contact
- Leaning slightly forward
- Allowing pauses
- Raising eyebrows
- Smiling

- Nodding
- Sending brief verbal messages (umm-humm, oh I see...).

Non-verbal attending assists you in staying focused on what is being said so that you don't risk missing key points. It's physically telling your mind - don't wander – this is important – stay tuned.

Telecommunicators must effectively communicate without the benefit of face to face interaction with callers. However, even in this situation the Telecommunicator can use non-verbal attending – not as a means of physically communicating with the caller but as a means to help the Telecommunicator to remain focused and to project a tone/manner of speech that displays interest in the caller. For instance, to project a more pleasant tone – smile; to feel more focused & in control, particularly in challenging situations - stand up.

### **Open-Ended Questions**

Open-ended questions are questions that can't be answered "yes" or "no", requiring the speaker to provide more information. Open-ended questions begin with words like *"Tell me about...Why...How...Describe...Explain...."* The use of open-ended questions:

- Encourages the speaker to open up
- Allows the speaker to expand on the subject in a free-ranging, comprehensive way.
- Lets the speaker know that his/her thinking matters to you
- Loosens up quiet or reticent people
- Helps vent anger or negative emotions.

### **Examples:**

- *"Bringing in this new CAD system was the worst mistake we've ever made!"*  
Open-ended question response: *"What makes you say that?"*
- *"I think we'll have problems changing to 12-hour shifts".*  
Open-ended response: *"Tell me what your concerns are".*

Open-ended questions assist you in remaining clear on what is being said & demonstrating your interest in the conversation.

Basic Telecommunicator training includes instruction on the "5 W's" – Where, When, What, Who, Why. In essence, the "5 W's" are open-ended questions designed to enable the Telecommunicator to expeditiously obtain necessary information & remain clear on what is being said. The "5-W's" can be enhanced by applying the additional active listening questioning techniques of paraphrasing & reflecting feelings.

## Paraphrasing

Paraphrasing is a brief rephrasing of information provided by the speaker. It provides the restatement of the essence of the information in your own words. The use of paraphrasing:

- Demonstrates you are listening and that you understand what the speaker is saying
- Helps you make sure your interpretation or understanding is correct
- Allows the speaker to explore the issues more fully, but does not suggest that you agree.
- Encourages the speaker to more fully analyze & discuss the subject matter.

### Examples:

- *"I can't figure out what to do with this trainee. She's able to do the job but it seems like she always wants to do things her way as opposed to our way."*  
Paraphrasing response: *"You see her as having difficulty following our policies & procedures?"*
- Caller: *".....and he has a gun"*  
Paraphrasing response: *"You say you saw a gun?"*

Paraphrasing assists you in listening for the main points. It is not uncommon for people to be somewhat vague when discussing sensitive issues or to have trouble coming to the point. By restating the speaker's main points in your own words, you assist not only your own understanding but also help the speaker to clarify their main points and concerns.

## Reflecting Feelings

Reflecting feelings is repeating in a short declarative statement the emotions or feelings which the speaker is communicating directly or indirectly. It asserts your awareness & understanding of the speaker's feelings without indicating whether or not you agree with him/her. The use of reflecting feelings:

- Helps to open communication channels & establish rapport
- Causes the speaker to feel understood
- Gives the speaker the freedom to explore the issue further
- Helps the speaker to vent emotions or "let off steam".

### Examples:

- *"Since I've become a shift supervisor I'm not sure how I'm doing. I don't know if I'm really in control. Sometimes I think I made the wrong decision to accept the promotion."*  
Reflecting Feelings response: *"You're afraid you won't make it in your new position?"*

- Caller: *“Please help me – I don’t know what to do”*.  
Reflecting Feelings response: *“I understand you’re scared. I’ll stay on the line with you until help arrives”*.

Reflecting feelings assists you in listening for the rationale behind what the speaker is saying. It is listening empathetically to help you understand where the speaker is coming from.

Active Listening enhances your communications abilities in both your personal & professional lives. It helps you gain a better understanding of what everyone around you is “saying” so that relationships are improved and potential conflicts minimized. Active Listening can be a difficult skill to master. It may feel awkward at first but if practiced daily, in a variety of situations, it will eventually become natural and automatic so that you are no longer just hearing someone talk – you’re listening to what they’re saying.

**By Candice Solie, APCO Institute Director**

## Quiz

### **CDE Article – The Art of Active Listening**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Agency: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

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Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

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1. The basic techniques for active listening include
  - a. Open-ended questions
  - b. Paraphrasing
  - c. Reflecting feelings
  - d. All of the above.
  
2. The following are examples of non-verbal attending:
  - a. Maintaining eye contact.
  - b. Smiling and nodding.
  - c. None of the above.
  - d. A & B.
  
3. Non-verbal attending helps the listener stay focused.
  - A. True
  - B. False
  
4. The five Ws of telecommunications training are open-ended questions.
  - A. True
  - B. False
  
5. Reflecting feelings helps the speaker vent emotions.
  - A. True
  - B. False