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# Active listening



# Active listening

## What is it?

When you are carrying out improvement work, listening is vital. It is one of the most effective ways to understand stakeholder perspectives and is a real skill. **Sometimes you are listening to hear what isn't said, as much as what is.**

The keys to successful listening are being able to **withhold your own assumptions** (even temporarily) to prevent jumping to conclusions, demonstrating a genuine interest in the person you are listening to and trying to empathise with their position. True, active listening takes concentration, but will demonstrate your interest in others' views, gain trust and enable you to gain a deeper understanding of issues and situations.

Stakeholders may have questions, concerns and challenges they want to raise (see [enabling collaboration by working with resistance](#)). Genuine listening will help you to promote understanding, involvement and constructive discussion throughout the change process. Complementing listening with open and honest discussion is an important element of any change work.

Active listening can help you determine the type of intervention needed and help ease the introduction of any changes by identifying and addressing the concerns people have to help engage them in your improvement work. Also ask questions and seek suggestions from your team and stakeholders – the best ideas often come from those who live the process.

## When to use it

Whenever you are thinking about change.

## How to use it

### 1. Define terms to promote clarity

Clarify technical terms, codes and jargon, as well as discussing the different assumptions people have about meanings. Agreeing definitions at the start helps ensure clarity.

### 2. Repeat/paraphrase

Repeat back what the other person is saying, using some of their words – this will help you make a more thoughtful response and enable you to check understanding.

### 3. Don't interrupt

Give people space to talk freely and don't assume that silence means agreement – build in time for people to say all that they want to and prepare questions to elicit their views if they are not immediately forthcoming.

#### **4. Listen 'between the lines'**

Try to 'hear' the speaker on all levels – words, feelings, assumptions, values, wishes and fears. Use your instincts to consider if this person means what they say. Be alert to how language or body language can indicate feelings – eg 'I took the bullet' might sound like a macho response, but can indicate hurt.

#### **5. Don't rush to fill silences**

Silence can enable the speaker to think through or reflect more deeply on what they are telling you. It can enable them to gain additional insights into their views, or make links between ideas. Sometimes silence can reflect emotional discomfort; providing this space can enable someone to say how they are really feeling.

#### **6. Feed back impressions**

You can check observations with simple assumption statements – eg 'If I were in your shoes, I might be thinking...' and see if people agree. To develop trust, show genuine interest, provide a safe environment and listen openly. A range of factors may affect the trust that colleagues have in you, eg having been previously let down by the management.

Active listening alone isn't enough: you must be prepared to be influenced by what you hear. Be genuine or you may run into problems later.

Guidelines for good dialogue include:

- Be clear how you will use the information you have heard.
- Avoid inflammatory comments.
- Avoid trying to convert others to your point of view before you have listened to their views.
- Show respect by listening attentively, eg through non-verbal indications of interest and responding appropriately.
- State your intent at the beginning.
- Acknowledge contributions that people make.
- Accept responsibility for your actions and be prepared to take blame or apologise where necessary.
- If colleagues surprise you, express your surprise – then ask them to explain (without telling them they are wrong or trying to reason them round to your viewpoint).
- Make guesses based on your assumptions, then ask them to confirm. A good way to do this is to start your guess with 'I wonder if...?'
- Ask questions in a spirit of curiosity – not judgement.
- 'Bracket' interesting points of the conversation and return to them later.
- Move gently, especially on personal/risky topics – watch out for signals that you need to back off.
- Take care not to escalate resistance.
- Stay excited about your idea and stay connected with the other person.
- Make your short term goal to listen and explore – avoid knee jerk reactions.

Once you have listened and explored, you can move on to the next objective – eg seek mutual gain, cut losses or rethink the idea.

## What next?

Listening skills are important at all stages of a project as communication is key to a number of issues including [identify frustrating problems](#), [gaining insights from/working in partnership with health service users](#) and supporting people through change. See [SBAR](#) for more tips on communicating specific issues.

## Additional resources

Kline, N (2015) *Time to Think: Listening to Ignite the Human Mind*, CPI: William Clowes