



MIND TOOLS

Essential skills for an excellent career



Essential skills for an excellent career



Mind Tools on

Active Listening

A free e-booklet helping you
improve your communication skills

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Mind Tools: Essential Skills for an Excellent Career

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your team, or anyone who you feel would be interested.**

About Mind Tools

Essential Skills for an Excellent Career!

Mind Tools (<http://www.mindtools.com>) is one of the Internet's most-visited career skills resources, with more than 4,000,000 visitors each year.

For **individuals** interested in developing their own careers, we offer more than 100 articles helping you learn the essential skills you need for career success. These include time and stress management skills; information and creativity techniques; and rigorous tools that help you solve complex problems, make good decisions, and implement decisions effectively.

As well as these, we offer in-depth courses, teleclass programs, e-classes and coaching, helping you solve career problems, become highly effective, and take your skills to the next level.

For **managers** and **HR professionals**, we offer flexible, accessible and highly cost-effective career and management training solutions, which can help team members reach their full potential with the minimum of fuss and inconvenience.

And for **career development professionals** we offer resources that you can use to help your clients and develop your business.

About These Articles...

This series of articles was first published in Mind Tools newsletters May, June and July 2005. It has been sent to you by someone who has enjoyed the articles or who already subscribes to and benefits from the Mind Tools newsletter. We hope that you too will enjoy our material.

If you find these articles useful, please pass them on to your colleagues and friends by sending them this PDF.

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Mind Tools on Active Listening

Introduced by Mind Tools CEO and founder, James Manktelow.

Good communication skills are essential for any successful career. Whilst many career and management development programs focus on the importance of presentation skills, few emphasize the value of truly listening.

Listening is a hugely underrated skill. By improving your listening skills, you can radically improve your relationships with the people around you. Conflictive relationships can become productive, difficulties can be smoothed over and otherwise escalating problems can be “nipped in the bud”. And just think of the wasted time, energy and resources that you can save if you understand messages fully, the first time you hear them.

That’s why Kellie Fowler at Mind Tools has written these excellent articles. They teach the theory you need to raise your awareness of the issues and opportunities, and then give practical tips and techniques that help you listen actively and effectively. All you need to do is take the time to read the articles and practice the techniques we describe.

We offer four articles:

- Hear the Message;
- Listen Up: Remove the Barriers; Hear the Words;
- Listen, Learn, Achieve; and
- Listen, and Improve Your Performance.

We hope you enjoy this series on listening and find it useful. If you do, please share this PDF with your co-workers and friends by forwarding this document to them.

And if you are not already a subscriber to Mind Tools, why not [sign up for our newsletter](#), or visit us at www.mindtools.com?

We value your attention, and look forward to giving you and your team the practical tools you need to succeed in your work.

James Manktelow
CEO
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Hear the Message!

By Kellie Fowler

From time-to-time, we're all guilty of listening, but not intently enough or effectively enough to actually hear (and fully comprehend) the message being sent to us.

Be it a lack of time or interest that causes the message not to be heard, or that you are just too busy to actually listen and comprehend, this communication mishap occurs far too often and can be disastrous in many workplace settings.

To better understand how and why the listening process can be, at times, so ineffective, you should know that listening and hearing are not the same. Instead, hearing is actually just one stage of listening, which occurs when your ears pick up sound waves and transmit these waves to your brain. On the other hand, listening is a whole communication process. By understanding the process and utilizing the right tools, you can improve your listening skills, ensuring you do more than just hear the words.

To receive the communicated message loud and clear, you have to be an active participant in the communication process. In the case of listening, this requires you to understand and evaluate every spoken message, and to follow this with the appropriate action – a response that confirms the spoken message.

Unfortunately, what can happen is that, as a listener, you do the wrong thing, which is to actively work while the speaker is talking to you. You see, our thought speed is much faster than our speech speed, which can prompt your brain to start working ahead of the speaker. Perhaps you are simply considering the speaker's next comments, or the answer to a question you feel certain will come up. Regardless of the cause, the outcome is the same: a mis-communicated message, which can lead to an inappropriate response or a wrong action - both of which can lead to serious trouble.

Clearly, this also leaves the door open for unexpected delays (while you work to clear up miscommunication messes), setbacks (you cannot progress with that important project if you and your team do not all understand the next step); even undesirable outcomes (if you don't understand the scope of the work, how can you deliver the desired end result?)

Because people vary in how clearly they express themselves and have different needs and purposes for communicating, messages are sent (and received) in different ways, making effective listening challenging at times.

To help you combat this, you must first understand that there are different listening modes. These are:

Competitive or Combative Listening

This type of listening occurs when the receiver may be more interested in promoting his or her point of view instead of considering the speaker's thoughts. When this occurs, the listener may look for breaks in the conversation so he or she can deliver his or her own points of view, perhaps attacking any points they may not agree with; hence combative listening. In such cases, the listener may only be pretending to pay attention to the speaker, while actually formulating what they need/want to say next. Unfortunately, as this happens, the listener is often more involved in formulating their argument or rebuttal than in listening, which so often results in confused communication.

Passive or Attentive Listening

This type of listening occurs when the listener is sincerely interested in both hearing and understanding the message that is being spoken to them. This listener is actively listening; however. The problem occurs when this good listener fails to take action (does not verify all he or she is told); and hence is passive.

Active or Reflective Listening

This type of listening occurs when the listener is genuinely interested in the speaker's message. He or she sincerely wants to know what the speaker thinks, how the speaker feels, and what the speaker wants, and is active in confirming that he or she understands all of this before reacting. This listener is very effective and will take the time to verify the message by repeating it to the speaker. Clearly, this type of listening is most effective and highly recommended for optimal results.

Take the time now to consider what kind of listener you are and consider how you can improve your listening skills. You may want to make notes throughout the day after you meet with coworkers, detailing your listening experience. Next, assign a level that reflects how effective you think your listening was in each situation (with 1 being the lowest score; 10 being the highest). Try this for one week. At the end of the week, take a few minutes to ponder your findings and give yourself an overall weekly score.

Lastly, write down where and what you think you could have done better. For instance, did you actively listen, but forget to verify or reaffirm all you were told? Or, were you put on the spot and, because of such, listened in a combative or competitive way, thinking of your point of view as the speaker worked to convey his or her thoughts to you?

These negative listening modes can be easily changed and in the coming articles in this four-part series on listening, we provide more detail about how to do this and more. In the next articles, we will explore the most common listening hurdles and how to overcome them, we will discuss theories of communication, and we will complete the series by providing proven tips and techniques that you can use to become a more effective listener.

Listen Up: Remove the Barriers; Hear the Words...

By Kellie Fowler

In the last article, we discussed something that some might believe to be obvious: That listening well is one of life's great challenges.

We saw how important it is to possess and project a true desire to hear the messages that other people are sending us, to listen carefully, and to take the time to clearly reiterate the message before walking away. And we saw the importance of active listening, rather than the combative or passive approaches to listening which lie behind much failed communication.

Sure, this may sound like hard work, but remember that listening, really listening with our whole being, is a skill and one of the most important compliments we can give another human being.

To do this, you should know that there are different levels of communication. Now, you should also know that mismatches in the types of interaction or the levels of communication may also contribute to misunderstanding, or impede the true hearing of any message.

Three different types or levels of communication are:

- Facts
- Thoughts/Beliefs
- Feelings/Emotions

As listeners, we tend to “tune-in” to the level we think is most important. However, we may have no idea what the speaker thinks is most important, and this can create misperceptions or crossed wires, which yield the most undesirable results.

Sure, the purpose of the conversation and even the relationship you have with the speaker will influence what levels are used for the interaction. Even so, these will still vary. To best understand this, consider the differences in these verbal communications:

- You are lost and ask a gas station attendant for directions.
- Your spouse or loved one is being affectionate and playful.
- Your boss is reprimanding you for a costly mistake you made.
- Your child falls down and is injured and comes running to you hurting and crying for your help.

Considering these, it is easier to see that if you do not hear and address the appropriate elements of the communication, the situation can quickly worsen: A factual response to your child's pain would seem cold and uncaring. And a belief-oriented response to the gas station attendant would probably be seen as peculiar!

Thus, it is important to consider all that goes into the message you are hearing, as well as the words themselves.

While seemingly elementary, there are quick and easy steps you can take to ensure that you hear the words, factor in the situation and even consider the sender's motivation and desirable outcome. These include:

- First and foremost, stop talking! It is difficult to listen and speak at the same time.
- Put the other person at ease. Give them space and time and "permission" to speak their piece. How we look at them, how we stand or sit, makes a huge difference: Relax, and let them relax as well.
- Show the other person that you want to hear them. Look at them. Nod when you can agree, ask them to explain further if you don't understand. Listen to understand them and their words, rather than just for your turn.
- Remove distractions. Good listening means being willing to turn off the TV, close a door, stop returning emails or reading your mail. Give the speaker your full attention, and let them know they are getting your full attention.
- Empathize with the other person. Especially if they are telling you something personal or painful, or something you intensely disagree with, take a moment to stand in their shoes, to look at the situation from their point of view.
- Be patient. Some people take longer to find the right word, to make a point or clarify an issue. Give the speaker time to get it all out before you jump in with your reply.
- Watch your own emotions. If what they are saying creates an emotional response in you, be extra careful to listen carefully, with attention to the intent and full meaning of their words. When we are angry, frightened or upset, we often miss critical parts of what is being said to us.
- Be very slow to disagree, criticize or argue. Even if you disagree, let them have their point of view. If you respond in a way that makes the other person defensive, even if you "win" the argument, you may lose something far more valuable!
- Ask lots of questions. Ask the speaker to clarify, to say more, give an example, or explain further. It will help them speak more precisely and it will help you hear and understand them more accurately.
- STOP TALKING! This is both the first and the last point, because all other tools depend on it. Nature gave us two ears and only one tongue, which is a gentle hint that we should listen twice as much as we talk.

Becoming an effective listener is not a lengthy or particularly challenging process. Even poor listening habits can be easily changed and in the final two articles in this four-part series on listening, we provide proven tips and techniques that you can use to become a more effective listener.

Listen, Learn, Achieve!

By Kellie Fowler

In the second article in this series, we learned that the different types or levels of communication include:

- 1) Facts;
- 2) Thoughts and Beliefs; and
- 3) Feelings and Emotions.

And we looked at how to best respond to each. The common denominator here is to stop talking and to really pay attention to the speaker and the message he or she is delivering.

Now, we look at more listening tools, including ones we believe will make a very strong impact on your overall success as you work to become a better listener.

Effective "Parroting"

Having already established the importance of stopping talking, you may find that the strongest tool you can use to ensure you hear the message being sent to you is to simply paraphrase (use your own words) in "parroting" back the message to the sender.

When doing this, strive to:

- Repeat the facts
- Share the thoughts and beliefs you heard
- Convey and underlying feelings and emotions you believe are involved
- Take the time to communicate the message sender's wants, needs and expectations

In doing this, you will find that the most successful listener doesn't respond just to the words he or she hears. Instead, they look beyond the words for the feelings and the intent. By doing this, you ensure you receive the entire message every time.

Other tools and techniques for becoming the best listener possible include containing your desire to ask questions during the process in which the speaker is sending the message to you.

Instead, continue to listen intently. Remember, the answer to your question may be in the message, but you have to continue listening.

Once you are fairly certain you understand the message, you can quit actively listening and respond with your own message (one that reaches beyond "parroting" the sender's message).

Finding the Right Balance

For, to be an effective listener, you need to find a balance between listening, hearing and responding. This does mean revealing your own position or providing appropriate input/feedback, but only at the right time.

In the event there is confusion, make sure you send the message back that you are unsure of what is being said or perhaps that you need clarification on a few points. This step, although it may seem otherwise, is actually part of listening.

Allow the sender of the original message to clarify without interrupting. Feel free to ask him or her to say it another way, but give the sender the opportunity to clear up any misunderstandings before you jump back in.

Can you now see how effective listening now becomes more of an interactive process?

Continue to use eye contact and the “listening” body language we discussed in other articles in this four-part series. Be careful about crossing your arms or do anything that may be interpreted as being closed or critical, as both will damage the sender’s ability to provide you with a clear message and will negate your best efforts to effectively listen.

Do your best to remain empathetic and non-judgmental. Work to be accepting and respectful of the person and their feelings and beliefs (even if you do not agree) without invalidating or sharing your own position.

Clearing Hurdles...

As we have previously pointed out, even your best efforts to become an effective can be thwarted by some all-too-common hurdles. We have briefly touched on a few of these, but have not included all of the following.

Be wary of rehearsing what you might want to say before you say it: This has your mind focused on your next comment and not the speaker’s message.

Be careful about judging the sender and the message too early: If you judge someone to be incompetent, you are likely to not place important on his or her message. What if your judgment is wrong? Perhaps they know exactly what they are talking about, and their message is of great importance to you or your work.

And fight the urge to identify with everything the sender says to you. If you take everything you are told and relate it back to your own thoughts or experiences, you are not allowing yourself to understand how it relates to the sender. This is one of the most important components of effective listening.

Even if you feel certain you have the solution to the problem being conveyed to you, take the time to hear everything the sender is conveying before conveying this. Don’t spend

the time you should be listening working to come up with answers. During this time, you may miss what is most important.

While you are listening, do not argue or debate with the speaker (if necessary, this can come later). Arguing too early may convey that you are disagreeable or that your focus is on finding things to disagree with, instead of hearing the message. Remember, “parrot” the message then engage in dialogue that is empathetic and constructive, but only after you have listened and heard all the speaker is conveying.

Everyone wants to be right, making the urge to twist the facts, make excuses or skew the message so that it favors your views a tough want to combat. Yet, being right is not nearly as important as being informed, especially when it comes to your success!

Sure, you want to be nice and supportive, as you should; but, do not placate. Being liked or popular is not the goal here. Hearing the message and acting accordingly is.

Lastly, do not pretend to be listening. Sometimes this is the toughest thing to do, particularly when we’re rushing to get something done. Many of us find our minds drifting to our next appointment, preparing for the upcoming meeting for our boss, or thinking ahead to that incoming phone call. When it comes to effective listening, living in that moment is of the utmost importance.

Listen, and Improve Your Performance!

By Kellie Fowler

In the last article, we shared with you information on the most common hurdles that stand in the way of effective listening and provided some common sense tools you can use to clear these hurdles and to become a more effective listener in no time at all.

In this, the final article of our four-part series on effective listening, we provide you with a “cheat sheet” that contains an outline covering tried and true suggestions for becoming a more effective listener.

As we conveyed earlier, please feel free to share this information with your colleagues, as the ultimate goal should be to educate the entire team on this topic so that everyone may become better listeners and even better communicators. To make this easier, we have presented these articles in PDF format, so that you can distribute them freely to co-workers and your team.

Stop Talking

We start by simply reviewing the basics, the first of which is the most common mistake made when striving to be a more effective listener. Simple as it may seem, the most important thing to remember is to stop talking.

Pay Attention to the Purpose and the Words

Once you’ve done this, commit the time and attention needed to actually hear the sender’s message. In doing this, you may find it most useful, whenever possible, to establish your purpose for listening even before the communication begins. For instance, consider what you want your listening efforts to achieve. This can help ensure the results you (and the person you are listening to) can be obtained.

Eliminate Distractions

Next, concentrate on the message by eliminating internal and external distractions. For instance, if you are listening as a member of a group, work to ensure other members do not enter the meeting late, or exit early – both of which can distract the person speaking, as well as disrupting those listening. And, if you are having a one-on-one meeting with someone, work to eliminate distractions such as phone calls or interruptions from another colleague.

Take Notes Using Shorthand or Key Words Only

While listening, it’s perfectly acceptable to take notes. However, when taking notes, make sure to pay close attention, which includes making periodic eye contact, asking questions and paying attention to the non-verbal messages (body language, tone changes, etc.) being sent to you by the speaker. Even the best listener will find this difficult. Therefore, when taking notes, write down only key words or phrases, the things you will need to trigger the message instead of writing down complete thoughts or sentences, which can distract you from listening. (Obviously, remember to expand notes afterwards, while the meaning of these key phrases is still fresh in your mind).

Ask Questions

As we previously explained, questions are a vital component of effective listening. Instead of interrupting the speaker, try jotting down a word or two that will help you recall the questions that come to mind while you are listening. Again, this should not interrupt your listening; rather enhance it. This way, when the speaker has finished talking, you have what you need to ask relative, informed questions, which will help ensure you interpret the sender's message correctly.

“Parroting” is a Must

Parroting, as we explained in detail in the last newsletter, is one of the strongest tools you can use to ensure you are an effective listener. You may remember, this includes repeating the message back to the sender. This allows the sender of the message to clarify any misunderstandings.

Follow-Up is Key

Once you are reasonably sure you have heard the message and understand the message sender's intent, you will undoubtedly find it beneficial to follow-up with a written clarification, one that serves to highlight the most important parts of the message, such as deadlines, project goals, costs, concerns, etc. This can be done in a quick email or memo. When doing this, it is most productive to request a reply. This is just one additional step you can take to ensure you heard the message and interpreted it correctly.

Remain Flexible and Observant (before, during and after communication process)

Most importantly, when working to optimize your listening skills, remain flexible and observant. Work to understand the reason the communication is taking place (considering the objectives of the sender, and taking into account any mental, emotional, physical or even environmental or cultural factors that may influence this). Observe the sender and be flexible and open to his or her needs. This may require agreeing on a meeting place that is quiet, or perhaps even neutral (not one of your personal office spaces, but a meeting or conference room) or even on a meeting time outside of the times you normally would attend meetings. For instance, if you know the sender of the message is at his or her best in the morning, consider adjusting your schedule ever so slightly to better accommodate this individual preference.

By taking extra steps such as this, you put the message sender at ease, which will help alleviate any confusion and allow you to hear loud and clear everything the sender is working to convey.

Balance Ensures Effective Listening Success

As always, balance is the key to effective listening. The conversation between the message sender and the message receiver is a delicate dance. And even though your goal may be to simply hear the message, it requires give and take from both parties, from the beginning stages of the communication process down to the last word.

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Best wishes, and enjoy using our material!



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