

Introduction to Active Listening



Active listening is a key skill for trainers, facilitators and everyone involved in groups. More than that, active listening is a state of mind that we can work towards.

When we're in the right state of mind, active listening enables us to:

- Really hear what is being said and what is not being said
- Hear underlying issues before they escalate and cause disruption
- Stay in tune with a person or a group's needs and expectations
- Ensure that everyone feels a valued and respected part of the coaching, mediation, meeting or training process.



Photo: Tom Lowenthal; Creative Commons

"When you are listening to somebody, completely, attentively, then you are listening not only to the words, but also to the feeling of what is being conveyed, to the whole of it, not part of it."

Jiddu Krishnamurti, Active listening

Rhizome's top hints for active listening for consensus

During meetings we may be listening to a diverse range of views and opinions for ways towards a group consensus. To do this it can help to use active listening by:

- **Reflecting back and summarising** at regular intervals to help people deepen their understanding and show progress
- **Stating and re-stating the common ground**, however slight it may be, to remind people that everyone is trying to move towards agreement
- **Challenging assumptions of disagreement**; sometimes we focus on the relatively small details over which we disagree (because those are articulated most loudly) but if we actively listen we can sometimes hear that we agree on a whole lot more
- **Identifying the underlying issues** where there is disagreement to help focus on exploring differences most effectively.
- **Checking for apparent contradictions** between what is being said and the way that it is being said. Sometimes you may feel an emotional reaction that is not in keeping with the words that a person has used; exploring these contradictions might facilitate better understanding - if so, what's the best way to do so.

Some examples of active and non-active listening

Active listening	Non-active listening
Repeat conversationally back to someone, using their words if you can, what your understanding is of their meaning	Give the other person your version of what you heard
Don't talk about yourself, your own reactions or comments. However well intentioned, let the speaker take the lead	Give your own opinions, answers and advice. Talk about your experience of the issues being discussed
Ask for clarification	Concentrate on what to say next rather than listening
Reflect back tentatively - 'so what I think I heard you say was...' to allow room for you to be wrong, let them correct your feedback	Don't let them correct you
Don't advise; let them come to their own answers	Don't let them know you don't know what you're talking about, give them answers
Acknowledge and support their feelings, letting them know that you've heard what they feel e.g. 'You feel hopeless about it now'	Reassure them; 'it's not that bad' or talk them out of what they've said. Agree with generalisations: 'Yes, it is hopeless.'
Don't diagnose, reassure, encourage or criticise them. Reflect back to them, not only so they know you understand, but so that they can hear and understand themselves better	State your reflection as fact: 'So you believe that...'. Fix, change or improve what they've said, especially if you think you're right
Allow silences so that they can think and say what they want to say	Fill silences. Introduce new topics to get off the subject when it's uncomfortable
Breathe, understand your own responses to what is being said and maintain a centred and calm approach	Become emotionally involved

Risks of active listening

There are risks in reporting back what you think is going on for an individual or a group. You may be way off in your understanding so you risk looking out of step with the individual or the group. You may not have understood that someone has different abilities to you, or come from a different background or culture, and therefore have different ways of expressing themselves. You may be naming something that has been avoided being talked about for good reason, so you risk opening up 'a can of worms' that may not be possible to address in the time or with the skills available.

To sense what another person is experiencing and understand for ourselves what impact this would have on us is to risk being changed ourselves. It can be threatening for us to give up our view of the world, even temporarily, and start to see the world from someone else's perspective.