

# [HANDOUT] Tips to improve active listening skills

Active listening is an important communication technique that lets you show you are attentive, you understand, and you are taking a person's issue/situation seriously. Active listening is an important element in building trust between the speaker and listener.

## 1. Minimize distractions

Your mobile phone is distraction number one. Put it in your pocket and out of sight. Physical sensations - pain or discomfort such as hunger, feeling cold, or fatigue - can also easily divert your attention. Distractions can also include emotional clutter in your head - be aware of your mind wandering so that you can bring your attention back quickly to the person you are talking to. The only distraction you should allow yourself is to use pen and paper to make short quick notes on the issues you need to remember.

## 2. Take your time and ask questions

Time constraints can be a barrier to effective active listening (this is a particularly common problem in less secure areas). We can find ourselves focusing on (being distracted by) questions such as: How long do we have in this community? How much time do I have left? Am I giving too much time to this person when I really need to talk with this other person? That's why it is important that you do your essential groundwork before visiting a place. You will know clearly who you need to prioritise. Once you are with someone, however, let them speak and ask questions and give them your full attention. Encourage people to talk and ask questions to clarify your understanding of what they mean. Remember that open questions (who, what, when where, and why and how) give you *information*; closed questions (questions inviting Yes/No answers) give you *confirmation*.

## 3. Don't interrupt

You listen best when you are not talking, so refrain from interrupting the person you are talking to. Let her/him finish what they are saying; interruptions are frustrating, and may break their train of thought. However, if the person has gone off topic, try to bring them back on track with comments like "That is interesting. But if you have time, I'd really like to know more about [the priority topic]."

## 4. Don't assume you already know the answer

The biggest step towards effective listening is humility. You may have dealt with a similar issue before - even today - and you could assume you already have the right solution. But what if this particular person has circumstances that mean your solution won't work for her/him? Remember that one size doesn't fit all. Question your assumptions. Try to put aside your own experience and biases and focus on what the person is telling you. Try to listen without judging (see next point), interrupting, or planning their/your next sentence/question while they speak. Give them your full attention and be respectful.

## 5. Beware of stereotypes: acknowledge your own unconscious bias

Avoid stereotyping individuals by making assumptions about who they are, how you expect them to act and what you expect them to say. This will bias your listening and may negatively affect your decision-making. Remember that each person is different and has a unique situation and deserves our undivided attention and respect, regardless of their gender, race, religion or background. In a nutshell, be generous and try hard to see the world from their point of view.

## 6. Recap key facts

Summarise what you have heard and reflect it back to check you have heard and understood the key facts and content of the conversation correctly. This practice also reassures the person that you are truly paying attention and that you have understood them. Statements such as "What I'm hearing is..." and "Sounds like you are saying..." are great ways to reflect back and summarise. You can also be more clear and say "May I repeat what you said so I am fully clear about your situation?"