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W23.1.1.B

**ACTIVE LISTENING AS PART OF
COMMUNICATION TOOLS IN
EMPOWERED WORKPLACES**

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Abstract:	This learning object illustrates what are the barriers to active listening. It explores the term “non-functional” listening and what is the inner judging voice. It explains why active listening is part of communication tools in empowered workplaces, since it encourages trust and respect of your peers and it can help you diffuse conflict.
Keywords:	<i>Active listening, inner judging voice, anticipation, prejudice, communication</i>



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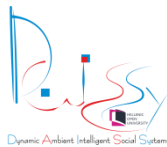
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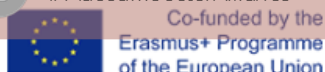


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Aim and objectives

This learning object illustrates what are the barriers to active listening. It illustrates the term “non-functional” listening and what is the inner judging voice. It explains why active listening is part of communication tools in empowered workplaces, since it encourages trust and respect of your peers and it can help you diffuse conflict.

In this article we will illustrate why listening is not passive and the mistakes we make that prevent us from really listening, including some tips that you can use to improve your listening skills.

Learning outcomes

After studying this resource, you will be able to: identify one element of non functional listening, and differentiate between active and passive listening.

Keywords

Active listening, inner judging voice, non functional listening, non-verbal communication, communication



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1. Introduction

We can consider **active listening as one of the fundamental tools** that every member of a cultural organization should use in their daily work life. It encourages **trust and respect of your peers** and it **can help you diffuse conflict**. However, it requires effort, self-awareness, and practice.

Active listening is an enhanced active state of listening. Most of the people consider listening as a passive activity. Something that we can do while we are doing something else. In this article we will explore the why listening is not passive and the mistakes we make that prevent us from really listening, **including some tips that you can use to improve your listening skills**.

2. Disruptive barriers to active listening

Active listening is a powerful tool because it allows a person to gain more insight and better information. It enables understanding in a more efficient way the issues that you are tackling, and also to communicate better inside of a team, with other departments and with external stakeholders.

Hence, the second element we want to introduce related to active listening, is the **suspension of the judgement** or as Bart Sayle (2006) says: **"low our internal voice"**.

As mentioned, active listening is an enhanced, active state of listening. By no means is a passive activity, something that we can do while we are doing something else.

Even when a person listens while maintaining eye contact, their thoughts could be engaged in something else. **People tend to listen and think at the same time**, formulating a response to what the other person is saying or filtering out any information they feel is irrelevant.



Part of what leads to **“non-functional” listening is the belief that you already know what the speaker is going to say, in other words: Anticipation and Prejudice.**

This very common behaviour affects our ability to truly listen to someone and prevents us from seeing things from a new perspective.



The most disruptive barrier to active listening is the distraction from the inner judging voice.

The inner voice asks questions and then answers them, **makes judgments** on what the other person is saying, **formulates responses**, and creates a to-do list based on what it is hearing.

Sometimes the inner **voice is listening with the aim of interrupting as soon as the speaker takes a breath.** It is easy to spot when a person is listening **to his inner voice instead of the speaker because its eyes, words or body language give them away.** If called on this, they would probably be defensive about it because of their low level of awareness.

Related to that, it is important to highlight the fact that **we tend to tailor our speech to the listener.** If we feel that someone isn't really listening to us, we become cautious and we will not give the listener as much information. If we think the listener has a low attention span, we will hold back information that's important to us, or too complex to discuss and go to someone else with it instead.



Therefore, an active listener gives the gift of their full attention, providing the speaker the space to express himself.



By doing so it will start the following process:

1. Earn the trust and respect of your peers. The museum workplace can often be fuelled by stress and pressure, and every person deals with this in their own unique way. *Needless to say, most people appreciate having supportive and understanding peers at work.*

Whether you are a manager or colleague, others will find great value in having a person around who reaches out and shows understanding. For example, **knowing and acknowledging some of the work-related or personal issues that face your team, will make everyone feel valued, and likely inspire confidence.**

2. Active listening can help you diffuse conflict. There are times in the museum workplace when you may have to deal with conflict. Although you may not always agree with others' opinions, **it is important to be open to the experiences and perspectives of your peers**, and the best way to demonstrate this is through active listening.

Conflict between two parties can make people defensive, but if a person feels that their concerns are being listened to and taken seriously, the chances of landing a resolution is high.

Thus, it is fundamental to pay attention to all layers of communication that are involved within a conversation to be able to understand the **"demand"** (Carli and Panicia, 2004) that is behind the formal verbal content. **The demand is led by the roles of each person and their related working culture** (artistic, conservation, technical, digital, logistics, etc.) that established the implicit "framework of rules" in which each one is acting.



An interview, a meeting or an informal talk within a museum workplace are all very **different settings** within which each person moves differently and consequently the content and the form of the discourses will vary a lot. It is fully important to understand and to consider these frameworks while we are listening and exchanging with an interlocutor. **The demand is often relational and emotional, recognizing it will enable you to avoid over-reaction and anticipation during the conversation.**

The question to be answered would be:

What kind of emotional and relational proposal the other person is acting here beyond the content of the conversation?

Answering this specific question will also help you to understand how other third parties are involved in the relationship.

In order to clarify all these different dimensions, it is important to paraphrase and **reformulate what you are listening**. At the end of a listening phase, you can try to reword what the other person has said according to your words and synthesizing it.

The interlocutor will feel acknowledged. Then it will give him/her the possibility **to clarify the content** of the speech if necessary and it is also an opportunity **to assess how his/her communication is efficient or not**.

This is also confirmed by a study of Lynn Cooper (1997), that argues that an important factor in active listening is "**listening with accuracy that involves discriminating facts from opinions, analyzing facts to understand messages, and remembering significant details from conversations.**" As well as "**Listening to show support**, which includes giving **attention to the individual and showing involvement with verbal and nonverbal behaviors** as well as **the ability to make the other person comfortable**.

3. Guidelines to help you become an effective and attentive listener in your museum workplace

Even those of us who feel that we're good listeners can sometimes catch ourselves planning **on what we'll say next rather than really hearing what the other person is saying**. Like any skill, active listening can be developed with practice and following these guidelines can help you to become an effective and attentive listener.

3.1 The importance of non-verbal listening skills

Giving our full attention to others relies to a considerable extent on **our use of non-verbal communication** (also known as body language). In fact, some studies like Albert Mehrabian's rule, 7/38/55 have suggested that body language is more influential when **communicating than the actual words we use**:

- 55% of what we communicate is through our *body language*
- 38% of what we communicate is through our use of *voice*
- 7% of what we communicate is through the content or ideas of words we use

Although the Albert Mehrabian's rule doesn't relate to all type of communication. It is context-specific. These figures mainly relate to a situation where we are forming an attitude (like or dislike) of someone.

3.2 Active listening tactics – from the HBR Guide to Coaching Employees



Finally, we summarise here some active listening tactics by Candice Frankovelgia “Shift Your Thinking to Coach Effectively” extrapolated from the HBR Guide to Coaching employee (2015), to build your active listening skills:

Pay attention: Build rapport by giving full attention. Maintain comfortable eye contact and an open posture (avoid bending, crossing your legs, or crawling behind a desk). Be genuinely curious. Allow time and opportunity for the other person to speak. Avoid distractions.

Notice nonverbal cues. “Hear the speaker’s nonverbal messages and body language. Do the tone of voice and facial expression match what’s being said. If not, comment on what you notice.

Affirm what you hear. Indicate understanding: “I hear what you are saying” or “I’m following you. Could you say more? This simply means that you are listening closely – not that you agree.

Reflect what you hear. Reflect (like a mirror) the other person’s emotions without agreeing or disagreeing: “You seem worried about...” This encourages the speaker to express feelings and deep exploration.

Rephrase what you hear. Periodically restate basic ideas.

Summarize key themes. Briefly sum up the other person’s point of view to show you’ve listened and to check your understanding: “It sounds like your main concern is...” or “these seem to be your main points... is that right?”.

3.3 Tip: Ask for more details

The article “These Emotionally Intelligent Habits Can Make You A Better Listener,” (Humphrey, 2018) explains the notion of emotional

intelligence, which is about reinforcing what people feel, not just what they say. It is a way of listening which is both verbal and non-verbal, because you ask questions based on non-verbal clues.

In a museum meeting, someone might say that they agree with a decision, while their body language shows that they are uncomfortable. In this case, you, as listener, can ask direct questions like 'I can see you seem uncomfortable. Is there something you are unhappy with or would like to be different?' Emotional listening requires you to be empathetic in the conversation and react to non-verbal clues.

What is interesting in this article is that it gives some practical advice when you are not sure of what other people are feeling. If you are in this situation it's best to ask for more information. Hence, it lists some useful questions to help you gather more insight without accusing anybody of misrepresenting themselves:

- "How are you feeling about this situation?"
- "Would you have preferred a different outcome?"
- "I sense you have a concern about this decision."
- "Can you tell me more?"
- "Are you happy with this project?"
- "Are there any issues I'm not aware of?"

You'll notice these are all extremely brief and straightforward. All you're trying to do is clear some room for someone to elaborate on what's going through their head.

3.4 Using non-verbal skills to aid listening

SOLER (Egan, 1986) is a technique often used by healthcare professionals although it's applicable in *any* profession. The SOLER method helps others to feel heard and valued, while ensuring that their messages are fully understood by the listener. By following the



SOLER guidelines, you'll find that your listening skills improve and become much more effective.

S	Square	Face the speaker squarely resisting the urge to lean back or to the side. - If you're sitting across from each other at a table or desk, clear all papers and other distractions before you begin so that there are no psychological or physical barriers between you.
O	Open	Maintain an open and accepting posture by keeping your legs uncrossed and your arms unfolded. Resist the urge to play with pens or mobile phones and put all distracting objects away before you begin the conversation.
L	Leaning	Lean towards the speaker slightly without invading their personal space; this indicates to them that you're involved and interested. Remember that leaning back can convey the opposite message so try and watch your body language.
E	Eye contact	Maintain good eye contact with the speaker and resist the natural urge to look around the room or away. Be aware however that sustained direct eye contact can be intimidating for some people and may be seen as aggressive. When listening, slight nodding can be useful to show the other person that you're paying attention to what's being said.
R	Relaxed	Be yourself and treat the other person as you would like to be treated. Turn off your phone, and don't fidget, look at emails or check the time. This form of non-verbal communication can really influence our tone of voice. For example, if we're distracted by the clock, our tone will likely sound tense and anxious.



4. List of references

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Lynn O. Cooper, *Listening Competency in the Workplace: A Model for Training Wheaton College, Wheaton IL, Business Communication quarterly*, 1997.

5. Glossary

Non-functional listening: is the belief that you already know what the speaker is going to say, in other words: Anticipation and Prejudice.

Inner judging voice: when we are not fully listening our mind makes judgments on what the other person is saying, formulates responses, and creates a to-do list based on what it is hearing.

Non-verbal communication: is related to our body language. Being aware of our body and our interlocutors' body language is an important part of active listening.

