

How Good are your Listening Skills?

Poor listeners "hear" what's being said, but they rarely "listen" to the whole message. They get distracted by their own thoughts or by what's going on around them, and they formulate their responses before the person they're talking to has finished speaking. Because of this, they miss crucial information.

Good listeners, on the other hand, enjoy better relationships, because they fully understand what other people are saying. Their team members are also more productive, because they feel that they can discuss problems easily, and talk through solutions.

You can learn to be a better listener. Test your skills below, and then find out how you can improve. Evaluate each statement as you actually are, rather than as you think you should be. When you've finished, add up your score and use the table that follows to think about next steps.

		Not at all (1)	Rarely (2)	Sometimes (3)	Often (4)	Very Often (5)
1	To be more productive, I respond to emails and instant messages while I'm speaking to people on the phone.					
2	I repeat points back during a conversation to clarify my understanding of what the other person is saying.					
3	When people speak to me about sensitive subjects, I make an effort to put them at ease.					
4	I feel uncomfortable with silence during conversations.					
5	As I listen, I compare the other person's viewpoint with my own.					
6	To get people to elaborate on their point, I ask open questions (ones that can't be answered with "yes" or "no").					
7	When someone is speaking to me, I nod and say things like "OK" and "uh-huh" occasionally.					
8	I play "devil's advocate" to prompt responses from the other person.					
9	I catch myself asking leading questions to encourage the other person to agree with my viewpoint.					
10	I interrupt people.					
11	When people speak to me, I stay completely still so that I don't distract them.					
12	I try to read the other person's body language as I listen.					
13	If the other person is struggling to explain something, I jump in with my own suggestions.					
14	If I'm busy, I let others talk to me as long as they're quick.					

Total:	
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Score Interpretation

Score	Comment
14–29	<p>You need to improve your listening skills. The people around you probably feel that you don't pay attention to them when they talk to you, and they may feel that you don't understand them.</p> <p>You can boost your listening skills with some simple steps. (Read below to get started.)</p>
30–49	<p>Your listening skills are OK, but you can definitely improve them further.</p> <p>Use the tools that we suggest below to develop your listening skills. Pay special attention to the advice on empathic listening – this is great for taking your listening skills to the next level. (Read below to get started.)</p>
50–70	<p>You have good listening skills. People know that they can approach you if they need someone to listen, and they trust that you'll give them your full attention. They also know that you'll give them space to talk freely, without interrupting or talking too much about yourself.</p> <p>But don't stop here – read our guidance below to see if you can develop your skills even further. You may also want to help others develop their listening skills through coaching or mentoring. (Read below to get started.)</p>

Preparing to Listen (Questions 1, 3, 14)

Good preparation is essential for effective listening. Without it, it's hard to listen to people successfully. Before you have an important conversation, remove anything that may distract you from it, so that you can focus, and so that you can show the other person that she has your full attention. Switch off your cell phone, turn off instant messaging and email alerts, put your work away, close your meeting room door, and do what you can to make sure that you won't be interrupted.

If you know that you won't be able to offer the other person your full attention – for example, if you're working on an urgent task – schedule a better time to speak. However, make sure that the other person knows that the conversation is important to you.

Also, do what you can to make the other person feel at ease. Use open body language, and a friendly tone.

If he indicates that he wants to speak about a sensitive subject, and if this is appropriate, remind him that the conversation is in confidence, and that he can be honest with you.

(If you're a manager, there may be some things that you cannot keep confidential. If your conversation is beginning to encroach on these, make this clear to the other person.)

Active Listening (Questions 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12)

When you listen actively, you not only make a conscious effort to hear the other person's words, but, more importantly, you try to understand their whole message.

To do this, learn how to read people's body language and tone, so that you can identify "hidden" nonverbal messages.

Also, don't interrupt people, and don't allow yourself to become distracted by your own thoughts or opinions. Instead, focus completely on what the other person is saying. Nod or say "OK" occasionally to acknowledge that you're listening.

If you don't understand something, wait for people to finish what they're saying before you ask for clarification.

Above all, don't formulate a response until people have communicated their whole message, and avoid any judgment or criticism until it's your turn to speak. If you argue or "play devil's advocate" while you listen, you may discourage them from opening up to you.

Empathic Listening (Questions 2, 4, 6, and 13)

When you demonstrate empathy, you recognize other people's emotions, and you do what you can to understand their perspectives. As such, it really helps you take active listening to the next level.

To listen empathically, put yourself "in other people's shoes," and try to see things from their point of view. Then, summarize what they say, in your own words, to show them that you understand their perspectives.

Also, ask open questions to help people articulate themselves fully, and avoid using leading questions that "put words in people's mouths." This gives them the opportunity to add further detail, and to talk about their feelings.

Importantly, don't fear moments of silence when you listen. Instead, embrace pauses as a way to give people time to finish their point, and to allow them to reflect on what they have said.

Key Points

When you have good listening skills, you not only "hear" what's being said, but you listen to the whole message as well. Because of this, you help others express themselves fully.

When you need to listen, make sure that you're prepared, and ensure that things in your environment will not distract you. Also, do what you can to put people at ease.

Next, use active listening techniques so that you give people your full attention, and so that you can understand the nonverbal elements of their message.

Then, take your listening skills to the next level with empathic listening. When appropriate, embrace silence, and make an effort to see things from other people's perspectives.