



POSITIVE EMPLOYABILITY

PREPARING FOR FINANCIAL SUCCESS



University of Kentucky
College of Agriculture,
Food and Environment
Cooperative Extension Service

FRM-PE.003

COMMUNICATION SKILLS Listening and Inquiry



Effective communication requires skill not only in delivering a message, but also in hearing and interpreting a message. Learning and practicing active listening will enhance how you interpret messages. In addition, you can enhance your communication by asking effective questions.

.....
“When people talk,
listen completely.”
— ERNEST HEMINGWAY
.....

LISTENING

Hearing is easy! For most of us, our body does the work by interpreting the sounds that we hear into words. Listening, however, is far more difficult. Listening is the process

of looking at the words and the other factors around the words (such as our nonverbal communication), and then interpreting the entire message.

Seven tips to listening better today

Use these seven tips to become a better listener right now. You can start by picking a few of them and creating an action plan.

1. When you are listening, listen. Do not talk on the phone, text message, clean off your desk, or do anything else.
2. Avoid interruptions. If you think of something that needs to be done, make a mental or written note of it and forget about it until the conversation is over.



3. Aim to spend at least 90 percent of your time listening and less than 10 percent of your time talking.
4. When you do talk, make sure it is related to what the other person is saying. Asking questions to clarify, expand, and probe for more information will be key tools.
5. Do not offer advice unless the other person asks you for it. If you are not sure what they want, ask.
6. Make sure the physical environment is conducive to listening. Try to reduce noise and distractions. (“Would you mind stepping into my office where I can hear you better?” is a great line to use.) If possible, be seated comfortably. Be close enough to the person so that you can hear them, but not too close to make them uncomfortable.
7. If it is a conversation where you are required to take notes, try not to let the note-taking disturb the flow of the conversation. If you need a moment to catch up, choose an appropriate moment to ask for a break.

Understanding active listening

Although hearing is a passive activity, one must listen actively to listen effectively, and to truly hear what is being said.

There are three basic steps to actively listening.

1. Try to identify where the other person is coming from. This concept is also called the frame of reference. For example, your reaction to a bear will be very different whether you are viewing it in a zoo or from your tent at a campsite. Your approach to someone talking about a sick relative will differ depending on their relationship with that person.
2. Listen to what is being said closely and attentively.
3. Respond appropriately, either nonverbally (such as a nod to indicate you are listening), with a question (to ask for clarification), or by paraphrasing. Note that paraphrasing does not mean repeating the speaker’s words back to them like a parrot. It means repeating



what you think the speaker said in your own words. Some examples: “It sounds like you had a good meeting,” or, “It sounds like that cashier was not very nice to you.” (Using the “It sounds like...” precursor, or something similar, gives the speaker the opportunity to correct you if your interpretation is wrong.)

Sending good signals to others

When we are listening, we can give the speaker three types of cues. Using the right kind of cue at the right time is crucial for keeping good communication going.

- **Nonverbal:** Body language plays an important part in our communications with others. Head nods and an interested facial expression will show the speaker that you are listening.
- **Quasiverbal:** Filler words like, “yes,” and “okay,” show the speaker that you are awake and interested in the conversation.
- **Verbal:** Asking open questions, paraphrasing, and asking summary questions, are all key tools for active listening. (We will look at questioning skills in a moment.)

These cues should be used as part of active listening. Inserting an occasional, “uh-huh,” during a conversation may fool the person that you are communicating with in the short term, but you are fooling yourself if you feel that this is an effective communication approach.

Inquiry

Inquiry is the act of asking for information typically through questioning. Good questioning skills are another building block of successful communication. Asking questions helps us gather information, clarify facts, and communicate with others. We will look closer at questioning techniques you can use throughout the communication process.

Open questions

Open questions get their name because the response is open-ended; the answerer has a wide range of options to choose from when answering it.

Open questions use one of six words as a root:

- Who?
- What?
- Where?
- When?
- Why?
- How?

Open questions are like going fishing with a net — you never know what you are going to get. Open questions are great conversation starters, fact finders, and communication enhancers. Use them whenever possible.

Closed questions

Closed questions are the opposite of open questions; their very structure limits the answer to yes or no, or a specific piece of information. Some examples include:

- Do you like chocolate?
- Were you born in December?
- Is it five o'clock yet?

Although closed questions tend to shut down communication, they can be useful if you are searching for a particular piece of information or winding a conversation down.

If you use a closed question and it shuts down the conversation, simply use an open-ended question to get things started again. Here is an example:

- Do you like the Flaming Ducks hockey team?
- Yes.
- What do you like best about the team?

Probing questions

In addition to the basic open and closed questions, there is also a toolbox of probing questions that we can use. These questions can be open or closed, but each type serves a specific purpose.



.....
“The important thing is not to stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reason for existing.”

— ALBERT EINSTEIN
.....

CLARIFICATION

By probing for clarification, you invite the other person to share more information so you can fully understand their message. Clarification questions often look like this:

- “Please tell me more about...”
- “What did you mean by...”
- “What does ... look like?” (Any of the five senses can be used here)

COMPLETENESS AND CORRECTNESS

These types of questions can help ensure you have the full, true story. Having all the facts, in turn, can protect you from assuming and jumping to conclusions — two fatal barriers to communication.

Some examples of these questions include:

- “What else happened after that?”
- “Did that end the ...”

DETERMINING RELEVANCE

This category will help you determine how or if a point is related to the conversation at hand. It can also help you get the speaker back on track from a tangent.

Some good ways to frame relevance questions are:

- “How is that like...”
- “How does that relate to...”

DRILLING DOWN

Use these types of questions to nail down vague statements. Useful helpers include:

- “Describe...”
- “What do you mean by...?”
- “Could you please give an example?”

SUMMARIZING

These questions are framed more like a statement. They pull together all the relevant points. They can be used to confirm to the listener that you heard what was said, and to give them an opportunity to correct any misunderstandings.

Example: “So you picked out a dress, had to get it fitted three times, and missed the wedding in the end?”

Be careful to avoid repeating the speaker’s words back to them verbatim. Remember, paraphrasing means sharing what you think the speaker said in your own words.

In any conversation, active listening and effective questioning can help ensure positive, accurate communication. Using the tips and strategies highlighted, you can improve your communication skills. This will increase the effectiveness of your professional, casual, and social conversations.

Adapted with permission for use in Kentucky from Global Courseware Inc., 2016 by:

- **Kim Henken, MS**, Program Manager Senior
- **Jennifer Hunter, PhD**, Extension Specialist Family Finance and Resource Management
- **Janet Johnson, MS**, Extension Specialist Curriculum Development
- **Kelly May, BA**, Senior Extension Associate Family Finance and Resource Management
- **Mindy McCulley, MS**, Extension Specialist Instructional Support

Copyright © 2019 for materials developed by University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension. This publication may be reproduced in portions or its entirety for educational or nonprofit purposes only. Permitted users shall give credit to the author(s) and include this copyright notice. Educational programs of Kentucky Cooperative Extension serve all people regardless of economic or social status and will not discriminate on the basis of race, color, ethnic origin, national origin, creed, religion, political belief, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, pregnancy, marital status, genetic information, age, veteran status, or physical or mental disability.