

Feedback in Active Listening

Effective listening isn't just about passively absorbing information. It's also about actively engaging with the speaker by giving this person the right feedback. The speaker needs to know that you're listening and that you either do or don't understand the message.

Types of feedback

There are two main types of feedback you can give as a listener:

- use feedback to demonstrate or clarify your understanding of facts, and,
- use feedback to clarify or show that you understand the speaker's feelings – the emotional content of this person's message.

You should provide feedback about the factual content of a speaker's message if you haven't fully understood the message, it's ambiguous or it seems incomplete. You should also provide feedback to confirm your understanding of facts if the speaker's message is complex or it's particularly important that you understand it. Feedback about facts isn't needed for short, simple factual messages.

When part or all of a message is designed to express emotion, it's important to give feedback about the speaker's feelings. Beyond just showing empathy, you do this to encourage people to express themselves fully. In turn, this encourages the flow of information and allows them to release tensions that might otherwise lead to conflict. Feedback about feelings is unnecessary if a speaker's message is neutral.

Remember that your body language, facial expression and tone of voice also provide a speaker with feedback. If you express interest verbally but your body language shows you're bored, the speaker will feel you're being dishonest.

Feedback strategies

Each of three main types of feedback strategies is appropriate for different circumstances. The feedback strategies are as follows:

- **Paraphrasing what the speaker has said** – Paraphrasing what the speaker has said involves repeating the message in your own words. This is useful for confirming your understanding of both the facts and feelings conveyed in the message, when you're confident that you've understood them. So paraphrasing reflects the message

back to the speaker and indicates that you discerned the intent behind it. When you paraphrase, you should focus on repeating only the gist of what the speaker has said – even if you don't agree with the speaker. Your purpose is to ensure you've understood the message by reflecting it back to the speaker. You should express yourself in a way that invites the speaker to correct you if your paraphrasing is inaccurate, or if you've missed the point.

- **Asking closed-ended questions** – A closed-ended question is one that has only a limited set of possible short answers like "yes" or "no." You can use this type of question to clarify a particular fact when you're not sure you've understood the message. When using a closed-ended question to clarify a message, you might ask something like "When you say 'soon,' do you mean by the end of the day?" This invites a brief, targeted answer like "yes" or "no." Or you could ask, "What exactly do you mean by 'a large team'?"
- **Asking open-ended questions** – Open-ended questions require more than a simple, brief response. They encourage the speaker to elaborate. These questions are particularly good for clarifying the speaker's feelings when the emotional content of a message is unclear. They allow the speaker to expand on what has been said or to reflect on their feelings or motives. Using an open-ended question to encourage the speaker, you might say "I'm not sure I understand. Why are you so upset?" Or you could say, "Can you tell me more about that?" To encourage reflection, you might ask "What do you think would have resolved the conflict?"

To determine which feedback to use, first ask yourself if the speaker has delivered a clear message. If so, paraphrase the key content. If not, ask yourself whether the message is largely factual or largely emotional. If factual, ask a closed-ended question to clarify facts. If emotional, ask an open-ended question to clarify feelings.

Knowing when and how to use each type of feedback will enable you to complete the process of active listening. When you provide appropriate feedback, you show the speaker that you're determined to understand what they are telling you.

Listening actively involves giving a speaker appropriate feedback to confirm your understanding of both the factual and emotional content of the speaker's message. Strategies for giving feedback include paraphrasing the speaker's message and asking closed-ended or open-ended questions.