



Exploring Leadership

COMMUNICATION: ACTIVE LISTENING

Most people think effective communication is all about talking, but active listening plays an even bigger role. Surprisingly, we spend more time listening than speaking, but do we truly engage? Active listening is one of the most valuable skills you can learn, especially as a young leader. Through this activity, you'll explore active listening by practicing it and see how it can transform the way you connect with others.

CONVERSATION STARTER:

Hold up a book or piece of paper and, in an excited voice, say, "Hey, listen to this!" Pause dramatically, as if you're about to share something exciting, but don't speak. Wait quietly for about 30 seconds (or until someone speaks). Then say, "Did you notice what you were doing? You were listening!"

Have you ever responded, 'Yeah, yeah, I hear you,' only to realize you weren't truly paying attention? Active listening isn't just sitting quietly or nodding along—it's about fully engaging. This means listening not only to the words but also to what's behind them—the emotions, intentions, and unspoken cues. Active listening shows respect, builds understanding, and fosters collaboration, making it easier to communicate more effectively and solve problems together.

KEY OBJECTIVES:

- Practice strategies to become better at active listening.
- Learn how observing others can improve your listening skills.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED:

- A book or a piece of paper
- Copies of 'Strategies for Active Listening' (Appendix)
- Optional: A computer and a projector to display the handout
- Timer or stopwatch
- Paper and pencils

EXPLORATION ACTIVITY:

This activity builds your listening and problem-solving skills by helping you hear, understand, and respond to challenges.

FACILITATOR TIPS:

- Emphasize that the Active Listener's role is to focus on listening, not solving the speaker's problem.
- Explain that the evaluator should focus on what strategies the listener uses, not critique the listener personally.
- Ask each participant to think of a past or present challenge they've faced, like forgetting an assignment, arguing with a sibling, or missing out on an opportunity.
- Review the 'Strategies for Active Listening' handout (Appendix A).
- Divide participants into groups of three and assign roles:
 - Solution Seeker: Share the challenge for 60–90 seconds.
 - Active Listener: Practice using the "Strategies for Active Listening" handout to engage with the speaker.
 - Evaluator: Observe and note which active listening strategies were used.
- Once each round is complete, rotate roles, so everyone has a turn as the Solution Seeker, Active Listener, and Evaluator.
- Afterward, reflect as a group on the Evaluator's observations, which strategies worked best, and how it felt to be truly heard.



REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

- Overall, what did you learn about your listening skills during this activity?
- As the active listener, was it challenging to focus on listening without adding your own thoughts? Why?
- As the solution-seeker, how did it feel to be heard and understood by the listener?
- As the evaluator, what did you learn about your listening strengths and where you can improve?

APPLICATION DISCUSSION:

- Why is Active Listening an essential skill for leaders? What happens when leaders fail to listen?
- How could practicing Active Listening strengthen your relationships with friends, family, or teammates?



CONCLUSION:

When people feel truly heard, they are more likely to trust you and work together toward meaningful shared goals. Active listening isn't just polite—it's powerful. Practicing active listening helps you improve communication, build stronger relationships, and show others that they are valued. It's a skill that will benefit you well in all areas of your life, from teamwork to leadership to personal growth.

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REFERENCES

- Mind Tools - Active Listening: <https://www.mindtools.com/CommSkill/ActiveListening.htm>
- Improve Your Listening Skills with Active Listening: <https://youtu.be/t2z9mdX1j4A> (2:39 minutes)
- Ask IFAS: https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/department_4-h_youth_development



APPENDIX:

STRATEGIES FOR ACTIVE LISTENING

- Let the speaker have the spotlight.
 - Pay attention.
 - Don't interrupt or start planning your response while the speaker is talking.
- Focus on the speaker's message, not their presentation.
 - Ignore distractions such as nervousness, blushing, or filler words such as 'um' or 'uh.'
 - Don't make judgments.
- Look at the speaker.
 - Show you're listening with focused body language and attention.
 - Use your eyes and ears to fully engage with the speaker.
 - Be alert and attentive.
- Encourage the speaker with nonverbal cues.
 - Lean forward.
 - Make eye contact.
 - Nod occasionally and use gestures or expressions to show you're engaged.
- Confirm your understanding to the speaker.
 - Provide feedback (but avoid offering solutions unless asked).
 - Say things like 'I see,' 'I understand,' or 'That makes sense.'
 - Paraphrase to confirm understanding by saying something like, 'What I hear you saying is...'
 - Ask clarifying questions like, 'Do I have that right?' or 'Can you explain a bit more?'
 - Wrap up the conversation by summarizing the main points.