

## Chapter 4: Listening

*"The most basic of all human needs is the need to understand and be understood. The best way to understand people is to listen to them."*

*- Ralph Nichols*

Have you ever zoned out mid-conversation and nodded along as if you've been listening? You're not a jerk. It happens.

It can be embarrassing admitting that you slipped into zombie-mode but glossing over your inattentiveness essentially says you don't value the person you're talking with. Unless you ask them to please repeat what they said, you're compromising your connection.

What if you missed a crucial project detail from your co-worker? What if you didn't hear a friend share a special memory that defined their life? What if you spaced out when your partner told you important details for the party you're hosting together? Yikes.

What about the other way around? Have you ever noticed someone check-out and pretend to be listening to you? It's not a good feeling. You feel unimportant. You may as well be talking to a wall. You can't build a relationship with a wall.

New York Times columnist David Brooks aptly said, "There's nothing crueler than making somebody else feel invisible." Actively listening to people makes them feel seen and understood.

When you notice your mind wandering, you have to force yourself to refocus your attention on being present. Social psychologist Amy Cuddy said, “[presence] allows you to hear other people. And for them to feel heard.”

Instead of listening, we’re often preoccupied with formulating a response. Overcoming this ‘listen to reply’ tendency is one of the most challenging aspects of active listening.

When you listen to *understand*, you are actively (and actually) listening.

## **I Hear You, I See You**

“Heard!”

That’s what cooks yell back when a chef calls out new orders at a restaurant. It’s kitchen slang for, “I hear you and will do what you've asked” as a way to avoid mistakes.

In professional environments like restaurants or operating rooms, teams are trained to use this explicit “I hear you” exchange. It’s not how we naturally converse but what wonders it would do to help us understand one another better if we all communicated this way!

Listening isn’t passive. Communication is an interactive process; “active” being the operative word. It requires showing the speaker, non-verbally and verbally, that you hear them.

Imagine this: You’re at a restaurant your friends have been raving about. You order the hamburger special and specify a medium rare cook, no tomatoes and sauce on the side. As the server walks away, your stomach rumbles in excitement. You’re famished.

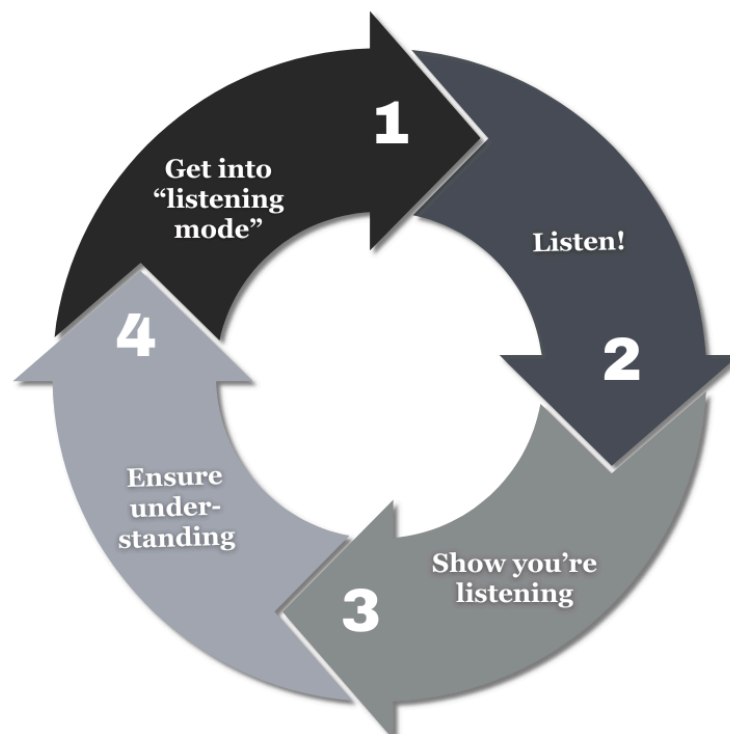
When your dish arrives, you discover that it’s well done, has loads of tomatoes and not a drop of sauce. Culinary devastation.

If the server had taken the step to repeat back your order and confirm they heard you correctly, perhaps you'd be chomping into a juicy, delicious burger made to your liking. Instead, the mixup leaves you with a bad taste in your mouth before you even take a bite.

This mistake isn't a big deal (depending on how hungry you are) but sometimes poor listening can result in significantly negative consequences. This chapter is intended to help you lessen those instances.

### **Ready, Set, Listen! (Four Steps for Effective Listening)**

As with speaking, listening is more complex and nuanced than a graphic or outline can convey. I've broken down the listening process into four key steps with a few essential elements to keep in mind for each.



### 1. Get into “listening mode”

- a. Commit to giving the speaker your 100% attention
- b. Eliminate distractions (put away devices, find a quiet space)
- c. Be open to new ideas and different viewpoints

### 2. Listen!

- a. Focus on the speaker, not on preparing your response
- b. Hold off on assumptions and judgment
- c. Empathize and put yourself in their shoes

### 3. Show you’re listening

- a. Nonverbally: maintain eye contact, lean in, nod your head, etc.
- b. Verbally: say things like “uh huh,” “yep,” “got it,” “ok” etc.
- c. Avoid interrupting and wait for natural pauses to respond

### 4. Ensure understanding

- a. Summarize what you heard to confirm understanding
- b. Ask relevant open-ended questions to clarify or delve deeper
- c. Give them time to respond after asking questions

Do you notice a common theme running through each step?

Self-awareness! I know, shocker.

Mindfulness is a vital ingredient for effective listening. Without it, you can’t make a connection and without a connection, you can kiss understanding goodbye.

But reaching an understanding isn't a black-and-white process. There's a lot of gray area you have to wade through to get there.

## **I'm Glad You Asked**

What's a surefire way to understand someone better, you ask?

Ask open-ended questions.

Closed questions stunt conversations. They typically call for yes/no answers and begin with words like:

- Are
- Did
- Do
- Should
- Could

Whereas, open-ended questions entice richer conversation. They stem from curiosity and begin with words like:

- How
- What
- When
- Why
- Which
- Explain
- Describe

Say you're talking to a friend who's upset because they had a fight with their partner. You want to support them and ask questions to learn more about the situation. Here are

a couple of examples illustrating how each type of question—closed vs. open— steers the conversation:

1. Closed: “Did you make up?”  
Open: “How are you feeling about the fight?”
2. Closed: “Are you going to end the relationship?”  
Open: “What do you want to do moving forward?”

Do you see how closed questions curtail and redirect conversation? They’re rooted in assumption. Maybe your friend doesn’t want to salvage the relationship? Or maybe they weren’t considering ending it?

On the other hand, open questions convey empathy. They create space for your friend to express themselves and you to have a deeper understanding of their experience. As author Warren Berger said, “The questions we ask determine what we find.” If you ask a closed question, you get a closed answer.

But asking open-ended questions doesn’t necessarily result in responses that delve deeper. You also need to create a safe space and establish trust so others feel comfortable being open and honest. Empathic listening is the agent for casting that space.

There’s a third possibility when it comes to asking questions and that is to not ask at all. Maybe you don’t want to seem nosy or you’re embarrassed that you’ll come across as lacking knowledge? But if you don’t ask, you won’t know.

So, ask questions even when you feel uncomfortable! Vulnerability and humility will help you enrich your conversations and relationships and that’s what you want to do, right?

## 5 Tips to Sharpen Your Listening Skills

The first rule of Listening Club is: Don't assume you understand what someone says.

The second rule of Listening Club is: Don't assume that they know you've heard them.

American writer Robert McCloskey sums it up well: "I know that you believe you understand what you think I said, but I'm not sure you realize that what you heard is not what I meant."

These key tips will help you follow the Listening Club rules:

1. Put your judgments aside:

Your beliefs, opinions, prejudices, and fears will arise in conversations but you can't let them cloud your ability to listen. The payoff is avoiding potential misunderstanding and conflict. The name of the game is understanding others and it starts with putting your judgments aside.

2. Avoid interrupting:

Don't be a sentence grabber. When you interrupt, you're following *your* train of thought instead of learning where others are headed. You're essentially communicating that you don't care what they have to say. We all think and speak at different rates. Let people talk at their own pace.

3. Try to feel what they feel:

Empathy is the heart and soul of good listening. Listen from a place of care, curiosity and interest. Try to stand in others' shoes and imagine what it feels like to be them in that moment. Practicing empathy is a super power.

4. Avoid suggesting solutions:

You may think you're being supportive when you offer unsolicited solutions but

some people just want an open ear. Let *them* ask for your advice. If you're bursting with ideas you're anxious to share, listen first, then ask if they want to hear them.

5. Wait for pauses to respond:

If thoughts and questions arise as someone's speaking, keep them in your mental queue until they finish what they have to say. Give them the time and space to speak as you would like them to give you the time and space to respond.

### **The Benefits of Skilled Listening**

I could go on about the pluses of listening but I'll spare you and list as many benefits as I provided in Chapter 3 for speaking. You'll notice some overlap, which makes sense since speaking and listening go hand-in-hand.

- Learn new perspectives and ideas
- Challenge your assumptions
- Spark creativity and innovation
- Get to the heart of complex problems
- Build trust
- Strengthen relationships
- Make others feel valued
- Convey respect
- Lesson or avoid arguments
- Deepen connections
- Better understand others
- Increase self-awareness
- Practice humility
- Recognize your biases and preconceptions
- Improve empathy



## Chapter 4: Exercises

These are written as solo exercises but if you have a partner or friend who you can practice and process with, go for it.



Objectives:

- Listen without judgment
- Summarize what you hear
- Learn how and when to ask questions
- Show you're listening without saying a word

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### Exercise 1: Here's What I Don't Think

The goal of this exercise is to practice setting aside your knee-jerk judgments so you can concentrate on what's being said. It allows you to be more empathetic and understanding so it's particularly important in emotional conversations.

1. Spend a few days observing your assumptions and judgments that arise during conversations. Be on alert when the context or person you're talking to makes you more susceptible to snap judgments.
2. Take note of your judgments and try not to react. Don't assume that your understanding is correct. Ask yourself:
  - How did I come to form this opinion?
  - What assumptions am I making?
  - Do I have the whole story?
  - What might be a plausible alternative view?

3. Ask open-ended questions to clarify or gain perspective, especially if the conversation elicited negative thoughts or feelings.
  4. Reflect on your conversations.
    - What might have contributed to your reaction? Were you feeling insecure? Judged? Hurt? Tired? Hungry? Angry?
    - What was the response when you asked questions?
    - What was the most difficult part of this exercise?
    - What do you want to improve?
  5. Continue mindfulness of your judgments. Reign them in and remind yourself that acting on judgment can lead to miscommunication and distrust.
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## **Exercise 2: Organize, Summarize, Empathize**

Reflecting back a summary of what you hear lets others know you're listening. The benefits are two-pronged: it helps you to get on the same page and is a powerful way to convey empathy.

For example:

A friend tells you, "I've been feeling really overwhelmed at work. My boss keeps adding new projects, I'm staying late every night, and I barely see my family. I'm thinking about looking for a new job."

You summarize, "It sounds like you're feeling stressed because your workload is affecting your work-life balance. You must feel really overloaded if you're considering a job change."

This exercise will help you get into the habit of reflecting back what you hear people tell you.

1. Spend a few days looking for opportunities to summarize what you hear and summarize! Some suggestions to begin your summary are:

“My understanding is...”

“What you’re saying is...”

“It sounds like...”

2. If you missed the mark, ask open-ended questions to be sure you’ve rounded out your understanding.
  3. Reflect on your conversations.
    - How did it feel to reflect what you heard?
    - How often were you hearing people correctly?
    - How did people respond?
    - Did it feel like you were empathizing more?
  4. Continue summarizing in your conversations. Remind yourself that reflecting back what you hear helps to practice empathy and avoid disconnections.
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### **Exercise 3: May I Ask?**

There’s a saying that goes: There is no such thing as a bad question.

I beg to differ.

Asking someone a question while they’re speaking: bad. Asking a question that diverts the course of a conversation someone started: bad.

For example:

A coworker is excitedly telling you about a trip they took with a mutual friend, Alice. You interrupt, “Alice! How is she?”

*Screeeeech.* You’ve cut them off and changed the direction of the conversation. Thankfully, you have the self-awareness to realize what you’ve done because you read this book.

You self-correct and say, “Sorry. Tell me more about your trip!”

Sometimes we interrupt with questions when we don’t understand what someone is saying. Chances are, your question would have been answered if you waited.

This exercise aims to get you into the habit of waiting for a speaker to pause before asking questions.

1. Spend a few days paying attention to when you interrupt or have the urge to interrupt with a question. This could be when you need clarification or general curiosity like the example of interrupting your coworker to ask how Alice is doing.
2. Hold off on asking questions until the speaker pauses. Put your questions aside and focus on listening to the speaker.
3. If you do interrupt and notice that you’ve changed the subject, take responsibility for getting the conversation back on track.
4. Reflect on your habit of interrupting.
  - How often did you interrupt or have the urge to?
  - How did it impact your conversations?

You can also reflect on what it’s like to be on the receiving end.

- How did it feel to be interrupted?

- How did it impact your conversation?
5. Continue practicing patient listening. Remind yourself that sometimes curiosity kills conversations. Wait for pauses to ask questions.
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#### 👉 **Exercise 4: Is Your Body Listening?**

You know when you can tell that someone's not listening because of their body language? Listening isn't just about your ears.

This activity is intended to help you improve your body language listening skills.

1. Spend a few days paying attention to your non-verbal communication as you listen to people. Be aware of what you're physically doing as people speak to you.

Consider:

- Are you in close proximity to the speaker?
  - Are you facing them?
  - Do you have an open posture? (e.g. not crossing your arms)
  - Are you leaning in?
  - Are you making eye contact?
  - Are you nodding or using verbal indicators that you're listening?
  - Do your facial expressions convey that you're interested in what the speaker has to say?
2. As you engage with people, concentrate on using your non-verbal listening skills. You can also observe how others "listen" to you with their body language.

3. Reflect on your conversations.
  - Did it feel like you listened better?
  - Did it unearth how important body language is to listening?
  - How did it impact your conversations?
  - How did people respond?
4. Continue including your body language in your listening practice. Remind yourself that your body speaks, too, and sometimes it tells others that you're not listening.