



Active Listening

By Carl Rogers

In active listening the listener has a very definite responsibility. He does not passively absorb the words which are spoken, but rather actively tries to grasp both the facts and the words which are spoken, but rather actively tries to grasp both the facts and the feelings is what he hears.

To be effective, active listening must be firmly grounded in the basic attitudes of the user. It cannot be employed as a technique if the listener's fundamental attitudes are in conflict with the basic concepts of "active listening". These include a genuine respect for the individual's rights, his potential worth, and his capacity for growth.

Active listening is an important way to bring about changes in people. When people are listened to sensitively, they tend to listen to themselves with more care and make clear exactly what they are feeling and thinking. Group members tend to listen more to each other, become less argumentative, more ready to incorporate other points of view. Because listening reduces the threat of having one's ideas criticized, the person is better able to see them for what they are and is more likely to feel his contributions are worthwhile.

Not the least important result of listening is the change that occurs within the listener himself. Besides the fact that listening provides more information than any other activity, it builds deep, positive relationships and tends to alter constructively the attitudes of the listener. Listening is a growth experience.

THE GROWTH OF THE INDIVIDUAL: Through all of our lives, from early childhood on, we have learned to think of ourselves in certain definite ways – we have built up pictures of ourselves. Sometimes these self-pictures are pretty realistic, but at other times they are not.

All of us have experiences that fit the way we need to think about ourselves – these we accept. But it is much harder to accept experiences that don't fit and, sometimes, if it is very important for us to hang onto this self-picture, we don't admit these experiences at all.



These self-pictures are not necessarily attractive. A man, for example, may regard himself as incompetent and worthless. As long as he has these feelings about himself he must deny any experiences that would seem to fit this self-picture – in this case, any that might indicate to him that he is incompetent. It is so necessary for him to maintain this self-picture – that he is threatened by anything that would tend to change it. He must hold on to this self-picture because, bad or good, it is the only thing he has by which he can identify himself.

This is why direct attempts to change this individual or change his self-picture are particularly threatening. He is forced to defend himself or to completely deny the experience. This denial of experience and defense of his self-picture tend to bring on rigidity of behavior and create difficulties in personal adjustment.

The active-listening approach, on the other hand, does not present a threat to the individual's self-picture. He does not have to defend it. He is able to explore it, see it for what it is, and make his own decision as to how realistic it is. And he is then in a position to change.

If you want to help a man reduce his defensiveness and become more adaptive, you must try to remove the threat of yourself as his potential changer. As long as the atmosphere is threatening, there can be no effective communication. So you must create a climate that is neither critical, evaluative, nor moralizing. It must be an atmosphere of equality and freedom, permissiveness and understanding, acceptance and warmth. It is in this climate and this climate only, that the individual feels safe enough to incorporate new experiences and new values into his concept of himself. Active listening helps to create this climate.

When we encounter a person with a problem our usual response is to try to change his way of looking at things – to get him to see his situation the way we see it, or would like him to see it. We plead, reason, scold, encourage, insult, prod – anything to bring about a change in the desired direction – that is, in the direction WE want him to travel. What we seldom realize, however, is that, under these circumstances, we are usually responding to our own needs to see the world in certain ways. It is always difficult for us to tolerate and understand actions that are different from the way in which we believe we should act. If, however, we can free ourselves from the need to influence and direct others in our own paths, we enable ourselves to listen with understanding, and thereby employ the most potent available agent of change.



Our problem the listener faces is that of responding to demands for decisions, judgements, and evaluations. He is constantly being called upon to agree or disagree with someone or something. Yet, as he well knows, the question or challenge frequently is masked expression of feelings or needs which the speaker is far more anxious to communicate than he is to have the surface questions answered. Because he cannot speak these feelings openly, the speaker must disguise them to himself and to others in an acceptable form.

Passing judgement, whether critical or favorable, makes free expression difficult. Similarly, advice and information are almost always seen as efforts to change a person and thus serve as barriers to his self-expression and to the development of a creative relationship. Moreover, advice is seldom taken and information often is not used.

Interestingly, it is a difficult lesson to learn that positive evaluations are sometimes as blocking as negative ones. It is almost as destructive to the freedom of a relationship to tell a person that he is good or capable or right, as to tell him otherwise. To evaluate him positively may make it more difficult for him to tell of his faults, what distresses him, or the ways in which he believes he is not competent.

Encouragement also may be seen as an attempt to motivate the speaker in certain directions or hold him off rather than as support. "I'm sure everything will work out O.K." is not a helpful response to the person who is deeply discouraged about a problem.

In other words, most of the techniques and devices common to human relationships are found to be of little use in establishing the type of relationship we are seeking here. Just what does active listening entail? Basically, it requires that we get inside the speaker, than we grasp, from his point of view, just what it is he is trying to communicate to us. More than that, we must convey to the speaker that we are seeking things from his point of view.

LISTEN FOR TOTAL MEANING: Any message a person tries to send usually has two components – the concept of the message and the feeling or attitude underlying this content. Both are important – both give the message meaning. It is the total meaning of the message that we try to understand.

In some instances the content is far less important than the feeling that underlies it, in which case it is much more meaningful to respond to the feeling than to the content. Try to discover what the speaker is trying to say – what does it mean to him – how does he see this situation?



Not all communication is verbal, and therefore truly sensitive listening requires that we become aware of several kinds of communication besides verbal. The way the speaker hesitates, the inflection of his voice, his facial expressions, body posture, hand movements, eye movements, breathing – all of these help to convey his total message. The first reaction of most people when they consider listening as a possible method for dealing with human beings is that listening cannot be sufficient in itself. Because it is passive, they think listening does not communicate anything to the speaker.

Quite the contrary: By consistently listening to a speaker, you are conveying the idea that “I’m interested in you as a person – what you feel is important to me. I respect your thoughts and, even if I don’t agree with them, I know that they are valid for you. I’m sure you have a contribution to make. I’m not trying to change you or evaluate you. I just want to understand you. I think you’re worth listening to, and I want you to know that I’m the kind of person you can talk to.”

The subtle but most important aspect of this is that it is the demonstration of the message that works. While it is most difficult to convince someone that you respect him by telling him so, you are much more likely to get this message across by really behaving that way – by actually having and demonstrating respect for this person. Listening does this most effectively.

Like other behavior, listening behavior is contagious. This has implications for all communication problems, whether between two people, or within a large organization.

The one who consistently listens with understanding is the one who eventually is most likely to be listened to. If you really want to be heard and understood by another, you can develop yourself in these ways and sincerely listen with understanding and respect.

TESTING FOR UNDERSTANDING: Because understanding another person is actually far more difficult than it at first seems, it is important to test constantly your ability to see the world in the way the speaker sees it. You can do this by reflecting in your own words what the speaker seems to mean by his words and actions. His response to this will tell you whether or not he feels understood.

The next time you become involved in a lively or controversial discussion with another person, stop for a moment and suggest the following ground rule. Before either participant can make a point or express an opinion of his own, he must first restate aloud the previous point, position, and meaning of the other person. This must be in the



responder's own words and be accurate enough to satisfy the speaker, so that he believes he has been understood. Then the listener can be allowed to speak for himself. This may seem tedious at first, but it can be very rewarding. Note the changes in the emotional climate and quality of the discussion when you try this.

PROBLEMS IN ACTIVE LISTENING: Active listening is not an easy skill to acquire – it demands practice and, more important, it may require changes in our own basic attitudes. These changes come slowly and sometimes with considerable difficulty.

1. The personal risk: To be effective in active listening, one must have a sincere interest in the speaker. If we are only pretending to be interested, the other person will pick this up and will no longer express himself freely.
2. Active listening carries a strong element of personal risk. If we sense deeply the feelings of another person, understand the meaning his experiences have for threatening to give up, even momentarily, what we believe and start thinking in someone else's terms. It takes a great deal of inner security and courage to be able to risk one's self in understanding another.
3. Sometimes, if the discussion is a personal one, you may have to see yourself as the other person sees or experiences you, and this can be very threatening to your "self-image". However, if you can accomplish this, it can be extremely valuable for you to discover the discrepancy between how you see yourself and how another sees you.

EMOTIONAL DANGER SIGNALS: The listener's own emotions are sometimes a barrier to active listening. When emotions are at their height, when listening is most necessary, it is most difficult to set aside one's own concerns and be understanding. The more involved we are in a particular situation or problem, the less we are likely to be willing or able to listen to the feelings and attitudes of others. That is, the more we find it necessary to respond to our own needs, the less we are able to respond to the needs of another.

1. Defensiveness: The points about which one is most vocal and dogmatic, the points which one is most anxious to impose on others – these are always the points one is trying to talk oneself into believing. When you are stressing a point or trying to convince another person, you are likely to be less secure and therefore less able to listen.



2. Resentment of opposition: It is always easier to listen to an idea which is similar to your own than to an opposing view.
3. Clash of personalities: Genuine expression of feelings on the part of the listener will be more helpful in developing a sound relationship than the suppression of them – whether they be resentment, hostility, threat, or admiration. A basically honest relationship, whatever the nature of it, is the most productive of all. The other party becomes secure when he learns that the listener can express his feelings honestly and openly to him. Keep this in mind when you begin to fear a clash of personalities in the listening relationship – otherwise, fear of your own emotions will choke off full expression of feelings.
4. Listening to ourselves: This is a prerequisite to listening to others. When we are most aroused, excited and demanding, we are least able to understand our own feelings and attitudes. Yet, in dealing with the problems of others, it becomes most important to be sure of one's own position, values and needs. The ability to recognize and understand the meaning which a particular episode has for you, with all the feelings which it stimulates in you, and the ability to express this meaning when you find it getting in the way of active listening, will clear the air and enable you once again to be free to listen. That is, if some person or situation touches off feelings within you which tend to block your attempts to listen with understanding, begin listening to yourself.

It is much more helpful in developing effective relationships to avoid suppressing these feelings. Speak them out as clearly as you can, and try to enlist the other person as a listener to your feelings. **A PERSON'S ABILITY IS LIMITED BY HIS ABILITY TO LISTEN TO HIMSELF.**



ACTIVE LISTENING HOMEWORK

Practice active listening with your partner (or another person such as a family member or friend), using the following techniques:

1. Ask the person to express their feelings about any subject for three minutes. Listen quietly and do not interrupt. When the person is finished, repeat back what was said as accurately as you can.

ASK IF YOU GOT IT RIGHT.

Watch your body language: Sit up straight, make eye contact, face the person, look interested, nod to show you are listening.

2. **PARAPHRASING:** Try to sum up in your own words what the other person was saying. Ask if you understand correctly.
3. **REFLECT FEELINGS:** If you sense some feelings behind what the other person is saying, say so: "You sound _____." (sad, frustrated, angry, happy)

You have just done an exercise in active listening!

Answer the following:

1. Ask how your partner felt about having your full attention and write a sentence about it.
2. Think about how difficult it was to focus and remember what was being said. Write a sentence about how it felt.
3. What was your self-talk during the exercise?