

ACTIVE LISTENING CAN MAKE YOU A BETTER SPEAKER: PART 1



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“The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.” – [George Bernard Shaw](#)

When we think of being a good communicator or public presenter, we often think it's about the speaker. But a major component of great communication is whether you and the audience are engaged in “active listening.”

In this and the next blog, we will look at what you as the speaker can do to make active listening an integral part of your presentation style.

First, what IS active listening? For you and your audience, active listening [means fully concentrating, understanding, responding, and then remembering what is being said](#). Active listening necessitates putting all other thoughts aside, physically and mentally letting go of any pre-judgement, asking questions to gain clarity, paraphrasing to ensure understanding, and paying full attention to the speaker. A great speaker makes this easy for the listeners to do.

As all great presenters should do, let's focus first on your audience and what they need. To get your audience to listen actively, your presentation must be clear and interesting, and you need to intentionally engage the audience. Here are a few tips on how to accomplish this.

- 1. Demonstrate appropriate passion and conviction.** Hold eye contact so that the listener knows you are speaking to him or her. When speaking to a large audience, break the room into quadrants, find a friendly face in each section and deliver a full thought to that person before breaking eye contact to speak to someone else. You'll be amazed at how many people begin nodding when you speak directly to them. Vary your pitch, and remember to pause to let information sink in. When speaking, pauses are powerful tools – they're the commas, periods, and new paragraphs of the spoken word. Gesture as you speak; this adds emphasis to your voice and makes you look more natural, comfortable, and confident.
- 2. Consider the needs of your listener.** You may have heard the acronym, WIIFM: What's In It For Me. Generally, people pay more attention when speakers address their needs. Be brutal in analyzing your presentation. Ask yourself: So what? Who cares? and What's in it for them? And don't be subtle about it; be explicit about stating why your listeners should care about your presentation. Once audiences understand why the information can be important to them, they are much more invested in paying attention, making sure they understand it, and asking for clarification if they don't.

3. **State the bottom line up front.** Start with your conclusion(s). This will guide the audience to focus on what's important. When you "bury the lead" in your presentation, the person listening may discover too late that he or she should have been paying attention. Support that bottom line with both facts and examples – facts for credibility, and examples to make it more visual and personal for the audience. Then, return to the bottom line to reinforce what you need your audience to remember.
4. **Less is more – much more.** Limit the amount of information you present – don't data dump! The more information presented, the less control you have over what your audience retains. Great speakers [follow the "Rule of Three."](#) Study after study show that people distort information when they are provided with more than three messages. What's important isn't how much you "send" – it's how much the audience "receives."
5. **Maximize people's senses.** People have different dominant senses, such as visual, auditory, or kinesthetic. A good listener in a one-on-one situation can often identify someone's dominant sense just by paying attention to how the speaker phrases his or her comments or questions; for example: Do you see what I mean? How does this sound? How do you feel about moving forward? The field of Neurolinguistics has found that mirroring back the type of phrases a person uses rapidly engages the listeners, because it takes into account the way they most dominantly relate to their world through their senses. When you are speaking to a large audience, just assume you have listeners with different dominant senses and incorporate all of these various phrases into your presentation. (For more insight on that, check out [this book](#) or [this book](#).)
6. **Ask questions.** Good communication is not a one-way street. If you want to engage an audience, you need to be interactive. No matter the size of your audience, you can ask open-ended or probing questions that give listeners the chance to express themselves. You don't have to actually get people talking to get them involved. For example, ask reflective or hypothetical questions such as, "How do you see yourself using this information? Think about it." This gives the audience the chance to reflect on how what you're saying matters to them. Graduate to asking questions like, "How many of you....?" or "Raise your hands if you...." Asking for raised hands eliminates any fear of "nobody answering the question." Do this at the beginning of a presentation, and you will find it makes both you and the audience more engaged and more comfortable.

At the end of the day, you can't control things happening in your listeners' lives that may be taking precedence over anything you have to say. What you can do is provide the open and non-judgmental opportunity, style, and atmosphere to make active listening easy. This, in turn, builds retention and drives action.

In "Active Listening Can Make You a Better Speaker: Part 2," Marie-Claude Stockl will discuss how you as the speaker can practice active listening during your presentation.

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