



FIVE WAYS TO BE A BETTER LISTENER

By **John Sturtevant**, Writer and Communication Coach

"Most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply."

- Stephen R. Covey

Listening is an essential skill for all community leaders. How well you listen plays a huge role in your ability to understand issues, collaborate with colleagues and residents, and make confident decisions.

It's important to consider how listening is different from hearing. Listening is active, hearing is passive. For many people, conversations are one person waiting for the other person to finish, so they can talk. But that often results in misunderstandings and frustration.

On the other hand, actively listening during a conversation leads to cooperation and consensus. Learning to listen well requires that you tap into your patience and self-awareness – and it takes practice.

I acted in a few plays in college many years ago. But I still remember the opening night of my first play. I was standing backstage, waiting for my cue to open the door

and enter the scene. Suddenly my mind went blank. I had no idea what I was supposed to say when I got on stage.

Just then, the director, Sam Havens, appeared at my side. He looked at me and smiled.

"*Professor Havens,*" I whispered, "*I have no idea what my line is. I can't go on stage!*"

"*Just listen,*" he said, and he disappeared into the darkness behind the curtains.

I had no time to think about what he meant. There was my cue. I opened the door, stepped into the scene, and listened. I was actively aware of the other characters. I let go of my need to say something, and paid attention to what was going on around me. In an instant, I was in the scene and listening to the other actors. My lines became a conversation, rather than reciting the script.

That was a great lesson for me. I still use active listening as a writer, a teacher, and even in my personal relationships. Active listening helps me consider facts and data from different perspectives, and better understand the various points of view – not just my own.

So how do you learn to listen?

A tourist was walking down 5th Avenue in New York City, when he stopped a fellow passing by and asked: "*Excuse me sir, how do I get to Carnegie Hall?*"

"*Practice, practice, practice,*" replied the New Yorker.

Here are five ways you can practice active listening:

1. Acknowledge the speaker with simple phrases.

Acknowledging the person you are listening to can be as simple as saying: "*Thank you for describing your concern with such detail.*" or "*That is exactly the kind of example I was looking for.*"

2. Repeat what the speaker says by paraphrasing or asking questions.

You can show you are listening and dig deeper into the

topic by asking questions like: "What other ways will this issue affect traffic in the area?," or "It sounds like this will increase costs for you, is that right?"

3. Do not interrupt.

This is a delicate balance. Sometimes, interrupting with an affirmation like "That makes sense." or "Wow, that sounds like a big challenge." can be effective ways to show you are listening. But when you interrupt just to get your point across, you've stopped listening, and you've signaled to the other person that you're not interested.

4. Avoid judgment statements.

It's easy to project our own beliefs and values on others. But this doesn't demonstrate good listening. Empathy and compassion are important parts of active listening. Instead of replying with something like "Oh, don't let that bother you," try a statement like "I imagine that was difficult at the time. How do you feel about it now?"

5. Recognize how emotion affects understanding.

Emotions often impact our ability to communicate. If you sense that emotions are affecting what someone said, ask for clarification. "I may not be understanding you correctly, it sounds like you're saying [example]...is that what you mean?" You'll often uncover unrelated details that are influencing the speaker at the moment but have nothing to do with the actual topic.

By learning to listen, you will reinforce your role as a collaborator with your colleagues and residents and gather details and insight that will help you make more confident decisions as a leader.

So, the next time you're preparing for a city council meeting, or planning

a weekly update with your staff, remember the simple and profound words I heard backstage many years ago: "Just listen!"

John Sturtevant is a communication coach who helps business and community leaders learn to think clearly and communicate with confidence. Learn more at <https://johnsturtevant.com>. ★



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