

Active Listening and Critical Thinking

Brief: Active listening allows people to collect information in a way that promotes critical thinking and successful communication.

Learning Objective: Identify and understand how to apply techniques of active listening to improve critical thinking and successful communication.

Key Terms:

- Active listening: An engaged listening process that requires concentrating, understanding, responding to, and then remembering what is being said.
- Critical thinking: The process by which people qualitatively and quantitatively assess the information they have accumulated.

Active Listening

The ability to actively listen demonstrates sincerity, and that nothing is being assumed or taken for granted. A technique often used in counseling, training, and solving disputes or conflicts, active listening requires that the listener engage in the full listening process—concentrating, understanding, responding to, and then remembering what is being said.

In addition to listening to words a speaker says, active listeners observe the speaker's behavior and body language. Having the ability to interpret a person's body language lets the listener develop a more accurate understanding of the speaker's message. Having heard the message, the listener is able to paraphrase the speaker's words. It is important to note that when the listener restates the speaker's words he or she is not necessarily agreeing with the speaker—simply demonstrating an understanding of what was said.

In his book *Leader Effectiveness Training*, Thomas Gordon, who coined the term "active listening" states: "Active listening is certainly not complex. Listeners need only restate, in their own language, their impression of the expression of the sender. ... Still, learning to do Active Listening well is a rather difficult task"

Paraphrasing

Active listening requires listeners to paraphrase what they have heard in their own words. The goal here is to confirm understanding.

Repeating messages involves using exactly the same words used by the speaker. Paraphrasing, on the other hand, goes one step further, as it involves expressing the message in one's own words.

Since we can think at about four times the speed that speakers can speak, our brains have a lot of capacity that can be used to process the meaning of what's being said. When we paraphrase back to the speaker what they said, we need to guard against sounding phony or like a parrot, which takes creativity and lots of practice.

When speakers hear our paraphrase, they are able to correct any misunderstanding that we have. For this reason, paraphrasing is a technique that truly does clarify communication.

Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is the process by which people qualitatively and quantitatively assess the information they have accumulated. It allows people to use information to solve problems and forge new patterns of understanding.

One definition for critical thinking is “the intellectually disciplined process of actively and skillfully conceptualizing, applying, analyzing, synthesizing, and/or evaluating information gathered from, or generated by, observation, experience, reflection, reasoning, or communication, as a guide to belief and action.” Critical thinking involves observation, interpretation, analysis, inference, evaluation, and explanation.

Active Listening and Critical Thinking

Critical thinkers must first engage in highly active listening. Active listening provides critical thinkers with what is needed to organize the information they hear, understand its context or relevance, recognize unstated assumptions, make logical connections between ideas, and draw conclusions.

To be a successful public speaker, you'll use active listening and critical thinking skills all the time. Here are some examples of scenarios that require active listening and critical thinking:

- Recognizing problems and finding workable solutions to those problems
- Gathering relevant information
- Using language clearly, efficiently, and effectively
- Interpreting data and forming conclusions based on that data
- Making sound conclusions and/or generalizations based on given data
- Testing conclusions and generalizations

From Concept to Action

The perfect time to practice active listening is the next time someone provides detailed instructions. Begin by concentrating and trying to understand what they are really saying. When their message is complete, confirm that you've understood by offering them a paraphrase.

Absorb their feedback. If they offer you corrections, don't respond defensively. Welcome the corrections and try the paraphrase again.

OER TEXT SOURCES:

"Active listening." Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Active_listening. Accessed 27 March 2019. [CC BY-SA 3.0]

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