

these situations the whole group may end up confused about what is being said. Listen, then offer a summary of the speaker's contribution. This clarifies the contribution for the rest of the group, and may also clarify it for the speaker as well!

## Listening for synthesis

Facilitators often use their active listening skills to pull together and highlight threads of a discussion. We call this *synthesis*. Here are two examples of when you might use synthesis:

**Finding common ground and resolving differences.** Listen for the areas of common ground (what's agreed) and of unresolved differences (what's not yet agreed) and summarise them. This can help the group to focus and move towards agreement. Often disagreement within a group is resolved when people simply actively listen to each other. They will often find that they are close to agreement, and that their differences are small compared to their similarities. As a facilitator you can actively listen and help untangle the situation to bring about a resolution.

On the other hand listening for shades of agreement is equally important. It can be easy to say: "so we're all agreed! Let's move on". But if you take the time to listen to the more subtle differences in what's being said you might discover that a group may have broad agreement but to reach a high quality and lasting decision there will need to be more discussion.

**Moving the discussion on.** There comes a point in most discussions when someone needs to pull everything together and move on to the next stage of the process, or to the next agenda item. An actively listening facilitator might summarise where the discussion has got to and where it still needs to go to meet the aims of the meeting or workshop.

For more briefings and training workshops see:  
[www.seedsforchange.org.uk](http://www.seedsforchange.org.uk)

### Top Tip:

When writing down other people's thoughts and ideas you need to be actively listening. If you accidentally misrepresent what's said not only might their idea be lost, but they may well be offended. If you're unsure check with the person that your wording is right.



# Active Listening

short guide



**Active listening is a useful skill for all sorts of situations – whether you're taking part in meetings and workshops or dealing with conflict. By actively listening we can come to understand how the speaker feels about a subject or situation – we hear through their words and tune into their underlying emotions, concerns and tensions.**

Active Listening is about suspending our own thought processes and making a conscious effort to understand another person's position. Using our body language, eye contact, and where appropriate, verbal cues – short questions or comments – we can help the speaker formulate their thoughts and reassure them they are being listened to.

This is in contrast to how we listen in normal conversation when we often only lend half an ear to the speaker and continue to think about what we want to say next.

## Why actively listen?

**Active listening** means hearing what the speaker is actually saying to us, not what we want to hear. Normally our understanding of a conversation is coloured by our own interpretations, experience and point of view. Our subjective view of what we've just heard might differ significantly from what the speaker wanted us to hear.

**Active listening** shows the speaker that we respect and value them and what they have to say.

**Active listening** allows us to focus on the core issues of a person's message and to understand them better as a result.

### Top Tip:

You've got two ears and one mouth – use them in those proportions!



## How to actively listen

To actively listen you need to:

- ★ Create a safe atmosphere for the speaker. Find a suitable space and deal with any distractions (turn off mobile phones, televisions, computers etc).
- ★ Show that you're listening. Stop talking and be aware of your body language. Signs of listening are: *leaning toward the speaker, an interested facial expression, and maintaining good eye contact.* Facial gestures and small movements such as nodding our heads can show interest and support. Avoid signs of impatience such as looking at your watch.
- ★ Make the mental space. Don't think about what you want to say but focus on your speaker.
- ★ Use verbal cues to draw out your speaker's thoughts, e.g.: *how did you feel about that? Tell me more.*
- ★ Summarise and restate what's been said. We can show people that we've heard them properly, and understood their point by rephrasing the core of what they said and offering it back to them. It's important that we don't simply parrot what they said, but show that we've understood any emotion or key concepts they've expressed. You might say something like: *it sounds like you feel very frustrated with the situation, or that must be exciting!*
- ★ Make any limits to your listening clear from the start – if you've only got a certain amount of time, say so. If you're expecting a phone call you just have to take, apologise in advance.
- ★ Finally, active listening needs constant practice. The more you do the better you'll be able to do it.



## Summarising and restating

After listening to someone we can offer them a short summary of what we've heard. This is a way to show that we've listened and is a good way to check whether we've understood them. If we get it wrong it gives them the opportunity to correct us.

- ★ Wait until the speaker has finished.
- ★ Offer the summary tentatively – use phrases such as: *you seem to feel that..., what I hear you saying is... is that right? Would it be fair to say that you feel...* If we restate in bold terms such as: *so you feel that...* and we're wrong, not only do we show we haven't been listening, but we risk offending the speaker by misrepresenting them.
- ★ Summarise succinctly – boil things down into one or two short sentences. This is essential if your summary is intended to clarify a situation and move a discussion on.

## Active listening and facilitation

Active listening is an essential facilitation tool. There are many situations in meetings or workshops when active listening will help you spot and deal with an emerging problem.

### Dealing with disruptive behaviour

Sometimes particular behaviour by participants can be seen as disruptive to the meeting or workshop. The participant may not even be aware that their behaviour could be perceived this way, but it can still affect the whole group. Actively listen to discover the underlying issues so that you can deal with the root causes, not just surface symptoms.

**Interruptions:** If someone constantly interrupts, or repeats a point it's often a sign that the participant doesn't feel their idea or opinion is being appreciated. Taking time to actively listen and offer a tentative restatement of their point can be all that is needed to make them feel heard and valued.

**Rambling speakers:** not everyone can be concise. Some of us use speaking to shape our thoughts. Some of us lack the confidence to commit to a clear idea or opinion and this may be reflected in the way we speak. In