

COMMUNICATION: ACTIVE LISTENING SKILLS

3-F



Job Performance
Situation 3:
Building Essential
Skills
in Facilitation,
Decision-Making, and
Communication

HEAD START
MOVING AHEAD
COMPETENCY-BASED TRAINING PROGRAM



Developed under delivery order number 105-97-2043, the Head Start Bureau, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Revised in 2000 by the American Institutes for Research under contract number 105-94-2020

Clip art contained in this document is used under license from Microsoft and is copyright © 1998 Microsoft and/or its suppliers, One Microsoft Way, Redmond, Washington 98052-6399 U.S.A. All rights reserved. The Head Start Blocks are a registered trademark of Head Start. The “Listening Test: Riddles” in 3–F is used with permission of the McGraw Hill companies. The Conflict Resolution Style Sheet in 5–C is used with permission of the National Association for Community Mediation. All other material appearing in this document is in the public domain. Citation of the source is appreciated.

This material was produced in 1998, by Education Development Center, Inc., and Circle Solutions, Inc.

REFERENCE

This activity develops skill competencies in *effective communication*. Participants will learn how to listen actively and establish rapport, two essential skills for improving job performance.

Related skill activities include 3–C, Facilitation: Fundamentals of Leading Meetings; 3–E, Communication: Effective Spoken Communication; 3–F, Communication: Active Listening Skills; and 3–G, Communication: Effective Written Communication.

Sources. Training Guides for the Head Start Learning Community, *Building Supportive Communities*, 1997, and *Communicating with Parents*, 1997. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Washington, DC. *Instructor's Guide for Facilitator Training*, 1993. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Washington, DC. *Facilitator's Skills Development Process*, 1994. U.S. Center for Substance Abuse Prevention, Washington, DC. *Community Partnership Training Program, Conflict Resolution Workshop*, November 1994. U.S. Center for Substance Abuse Prevention, Washington, DC. Newstrom, J., and Scannell, E. *Games Trainers Play*. 1980. New York: McGraw Hill.

Active Listening Skills

Outcomes. Participants who complete this activity will learn to

- determine their capacity as active listeners
- demonstrate active listening skills
- paraphrase to clarify meaning
- understand the barriers to effective listening

Materials. Newsprint and markers; copy of the Listening Test audiotape you have made from the script (see the Step 1 Handout) if you select that option; audiotape player.

Components

This activity can be done by one person, an informal group, or a formal workshop. We have provided suggested times, but participants and facilitators may wish to adjust these to their own timetables.

Step 1. Worksheet: The Listening Test Handouts: Audio Script and Listening Test Answer Key	30 min.
Step 2. Background Reading: Active Listening Handout: The HEAR Model for Active Listening	20 min. 10 min.
Step 3. Worksheet: Active Listening Exercise	50 min.
Step 4. Summary	10 min.
Suggested total time	2 hrs.

This activity contains 19 pages.

STEP 1. WORKSHEET: THE LISTENING TEST ¹



Suggested time: 30 min.

Purpose: To give participants an opportunity to test their active listening skills, and to experience the difficulty of active listening, even in a simple exercise.

Part I (10 min.) Use this worksheet in conjunction with the Listening Test audiotope. The script and directions for preparing the tape or for a staged reading of the script are contained in the handout at the end of this exercise.

The tape contains a series of questions and you will be asked to provide short answers. Record your answers in the spaces below.

1. Play the tape and listen carefully. Each question will be stated only once. You are not to rewind the tape to go back to a question. There will be a 30-second pause between questions. Please answer all 10 questions. A beep will sound on the tape when all 10 questions have been stated. Stop the play of the tape. Do not rewind or remove the tape at this time. You will use it again.
2. Take about 2 minutes to review your answers and check with others in the group to see how they responded. This is only a quick review. Do not start a discussion of the answers at this point.
3. Start the audiotape again: the question will be restated, followed by the appropriate response. Listen to the tape until you have heard responses to all 10 questions. A beep will sound on the tape after the last question.

Use the space below to record your responses to the Listening Test questions.

- 1.
- 2.

¹ Adapted from J. Newstrom and E. Scannell. *Games Trainers Play*. 1980. New York: McGraw Hill, Inc., pp. 219–221. This material is reproduced with permission of the McGraw-Hill Companies.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

9.

10.

Stop! Please complete this Worksheet
before turning the page.

Part II (15 min.) If you are working in pairs or in a small group, begin a discussion of the Listening Test by sharing with the group your responses to the following questions. If you are working alone, use the space provided to record your answers. You can consult the audio script in the handout at the end of this worksheet to inform your conversation.

What for you was the most difficult aspect (if any) of this exercise?

Based on this very simple “test,” what would you say are the most important criteria for being a good listener?

How do the riddles used in this test mirror real-life communications?

Part III (5 min.) Listen to the Listening Test answer key on the audiotape or read the answer key in the following Handout to confirm your answers.



HANDOUT: AUDIO SCRIPT AND LISTENING TEST ANSWER KEY

The audio script below can be used in two ways.

Making a local audiotape: Using a tape recorder, record the audio script as follows:

- Read each question once, leaving a 30-second pause between questions. After you have read all 10 questions, sound a beep to signal the end of this part of the tape. Stop the tape.
- Start the tape again. This time read each question, then read the corresponding answer from the answer key. After you have read all 10 sets of questions and answers, sound a beep to signal the end of the tape.

Reading the script: If it is not possible to record the questions ahead of time, a facilitator can read the questions out loud, being careful to read the statements in an even voice and to allow 30 seconds between each question. Participants are not to read the audio script before hearing the test.

AUDIO SCRIPT

1. Is there a federal law against a man marrying his widow's sister?
2. If you went to bed in September 1962 at eight o'clock and set the alarm to wake up at nine o'clock in the morning, how many hours of sleep would you get?
3. Do they have a 4th of July in England?
4. If you had only one match and entered a cold room that had a kerosene lamp, an oil heater, and a wood stove, which would you light first for maximum heat?
5. How many animals of each species did Moses take aboard the Ark with him before the great flood?
6. The Yankees and the Tigers play five baseball games. They each win three games. No ties or disputed games are involved. How come?
7. How many birthdays does the average man have? The average woman?
8. According to international law, if an airplane should crash on the exact border between two countries, would unidentified survivors be buried

in the country they were traveling to or the country they were traveling from?

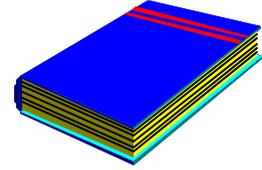
9. An archeologist claims he has dug up a coin that is clearly dated 46 BC. How do you know he is a liar?
10. A man builds an ordinary house with four sides, except that each side has a southern exposure. A bear comes to the door and rings the doorbell. What color is the bear?

Stop! Please complete this Worksheet
before turning the page.

LISTENING TEST ANSWER KEY

1. There is no law against a man marrying his widow's sister. But to have a widow, he would have to be dead!
2. You would get one hour of sleep. The vast majority of alarm clocks in 1962 did not distinguish between morning and night.
3. Yes, they do have the 4th of July in England, as well as the 5th, 6th, 7th...and so on.
4. The first thing to do would be to light the match.
5. Moses took no animals. It was Noah who took two of each on the Ark.
6. No one said that the Yankees and the Tigers were playing against each other in those five games.
7. The average man and woman have only one birthday. All the rest are birthday anniversaries.
8. By law you cannot bury "survivors."
9. The archeologist is a liar because BC means "Before Christ" and who could have guessed in advance when Christ would be born?
10. The bear that rang the doorbell would have to be a white bear. The only place you could build a house with four southern exposures is the North Pole, where every direction is south.

STEP 2. BACKGROUND READING: ACTIVE LISTENING



Suggested time: 20 min.

I. IMPORTANCE OF ACTIVE LISTENING

Communicating effectively enables Head Start federal and program staff to perform optimally as individuals and as part of a team. The process of communication requires not only effective speaking, but active listening, with purpose and intent. Only by combining active listening with effective speaking is it possible to gain understanding and promote open communication.

Effective listening involves more than hearing the words someone says. It takes effort to understand the ideas and feelings that another person is trying to communicate. Effective listening means paying attention to a person's words and body language (facial expressions, eye contact, posture, voice tone, and gestures). If the listener lacks interest, has a closed mind, becomes distracted, or interprets the message incorrectly, the communication is ineffective. The listener and the sender are equally responsible for effective communication.

Think of a time when you felt that someone was not really listening to you. What let you know that the other person was not listening, and how did that make you feel?

Reflecting on your own experiences may help you understand the importance of active listening. Trying to communicate with someone who is not listening attentively can be frustrating and unproductive, and can lead to misunderstanding, conflict, or impaired job performance.

Becoming a good listener means being attentive to the person speaking and actively seeking clarification and understanding of what is said.

Becoming a good listener involves three essential elements:

1. You must be open to the conversation—that is, you must be willing, and appear willing, to listen, demonstrating an open and respectful demeanor.
2. You must pay attention—focus on what is being said and show that you are really listening, through verbal affirmation and body language.
3. You must seek clarification for things you do not understand, and restate or paraphrase what you have heard to make sure that the speaker knows you are truly listening and that you understood what was said.

Taken together, these elements distinguish someone who listens from someone who actively listens.

II. KEY CONCEPTS OF ACTIVE LISTENING²

Listening can mean simply hearing what was said. Active listening is a learned behavior that requires skill and practice.

These suggestions can promote active listening:

1. *Display involvement in what the person is saying.* Show interest verbally by encouraging the speaker to say what is on her mind. Show interest nonverbally by focusing on the person who is speaking. Use body posture that shows that the person has your full attention (e.g., lean forward in the chair with hands in your lap; don't lean back in the chair with arms crossed over your chest).
2. *Carefully observe the person speaking.* Observe his words and body language to learn more about how he feels about the situation he is describing.
3. *Resist distractions.* Stay focused on the conversation and avoid doing anything else (answering the phone, starting another conversation) other than listening to what is being said.
4. *Try to stay focused on what is being said.* Notice the speaker's behavior (e.g., nervousness or anger during the conversation), but work at not being distracted by it.
5. *Ask for clarification of anything that you do not fully understand.* Ask questions regarding meaning or intent. Restate or paraphrase what the other person said.
6. *Avoid making judgments about what is said.* Expressing personal views or biases can cloud the communication.

The HEAR model in the Step 2 Handout offers a tool for thinking about active listening.

² Adapted from Training Guides for the Head Start Learning Community, *Building Supportive Communities*. 1997. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Washington, DC, pp. 61–62.

III. PARAPHRASING FOR CLARITY AND UNDERSTANDING³

A statement may mean something specific to you and something completely different to the speaker. One way to develop a shared understanding is paraphrasing—stating in your own way what another’s remarks **mean** to you. Paraphrasing “tests” your understanding of what is being said.

When you paraphrase, **reveal the meaning** a comment has for you rather than just restating what you heard the person say. Check whether what you heard matches the intention of the speaker. This is especially important when the speaker uses general evaluative words like *dumb*, *stupid*, *lousy*, *poor*, *awful*, *good*, *bad*, or *wonderful*.

Tom: I think it was a bad review team meeting.

You: Bad. You mean nothing got done?

Tom: No, we all got our assignments, but I felt we were being talked down to.

Conversely, a specific comment may mean something more general:

Carol: Do you have 20 pencils I can borrow for the meeting?

You: Do you just need something the participants can write with? I have a dozen pens and about that many pencils.

Carol: Great. Anything that will write will do.

By helping the speaker focus on the meaning of her statement, you gain a better understanding of her intent and are less likely to make erroneous assumptions.

Try different ways of paraphrasing. You will discover which responses are most helpful, particularly when someone expresses an opinion different from your own or shares a work-related concern.

IV. ACTIVE LISTENING AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION⁴

When we don’t listen well or communicate clearly, we run the risk of creating unnecessary conflict. Here are a few scenarios that can lead to conflict:

³ Adapted from *Facilitator’s Skills Development Process*. 1994. U.S. Center for Substance Abuse Prevention, Washington, DC.

⁴ Adapted from *Community Partnership Training Program, Conflict Resolution Workshop*. November 1994. U.S. Center for Substance Abuse Prevention, Washington, DC.

- The parties to the conversation are not speaking to be heard but to gain support for their position or to say what they think others want to hear. The intent is not to reach agreement but to gain ground or avoid disagreement.
- One person is speaking clearly but the other does not hear what is being said. The listener is focusing on formulating a response while the speaker is still explaining the point. In seeking to defend her position, the listener concentrates on the argument or justification she will use to convince the other party.
- The parties do not understand the intent of what is being said and fail to seek clarification. For example, one person perceives a situation as a data conflict while another perceives it as a value conflict. Without an attempt to resolve the misunderstanding, the conflict goes deeper, preventing the parties from reaching agreement or working together in the future.

Communication problems like these can escalate conflict while preventing parties from truly listening and understanding. However, through active listening we can

- ensure that we fully understand the source and the nature of the conflict
- seek clarification of what we do not understand
- seek a basis for conflict resolution by listening for common areas of agreement and understanding
- avoid formulating responses for the purpose of validating or protecting our own positions

For more information about resolving conflicts, see 5–C, Conflict Resolution: Understanding the Elements.

HANDOUT: THE *HEAR* MODEL FOR ACTIVE LISTENING⁵



Suggested time: 10 min.

The HEAR model stands for *hear*, *empathize*, *analyze*, and *respond*, all essential to active listening. Use it to better understand the facts, ideas, and feelings of the speaker, and to help the speaker clarify her own thoughts, problems, and solutions.

H—Hear the speaker’s words.

- Listen attentively to her words *and* feelings.
- Keep an open mind. Avoid letting your own feelings, attitudes, or opinions interfere with your ability to listen.
- Do not evaluate, censor, or try to monopolize the conversation.
- Do not interrupt. It is important to listen to the speaker’s entire thought before you respond.

E—Empathize with the speaker; put yourself in her shoes.

- Display an interest in her point of view, even, or maybe especially, if it differs from your own.
- Listen for facts, ideas, and feelings.
- Listen for the thoughts behind the words.
- Check for understanding, by paraphrasing the facts as well as the speaker’s position. (“Are you saying that we need to improve our data collection systems based on the records you looked at and the conversations you’ve had with staff across the organization?”)

A—Analyze the speaker’s words and thoughts.

- Listen for the thoughts behind the words. Thinking is faster than speech. Use your extra “thought time” to summarize, review, and anticipate.

⁵ Adapted from *Instructor’s Guide for Facilitator Training*. 1993. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Washington, DC.

R—Respond is the last stage of hearing.

- Pay attention and show it
- Include statements such as “I see,” “yes,” and “I understand.”
- Hold off on your evaluation. Hear the speaker out. Avoid premature advice.
- Do respond. It is especially difficult to talk to someone when there is no apparent reaction.
- Check to be sure the speaker understands your response.

STEP 3. WORKSHEET: ACTIVE LISTENING EXERCISE



Suggested time: 50 min.

Purpose: To allow participants to demonstrate and assess their active listening skills. They also engage participants in a structured discussion of active listening in relation to job performance. Participants will role play both speaker and listener as well as observer if group size permits.

Part I (15 min.) Divide into groups of three if group size permits. Within each triad, assign each person a speaker, listener, or observer role. Note: if necessary, work in pairs by eliminating the observer role. If you are doing this exercise on your own, enlist a friend or colleague to do it with you.

If your group contains three people, work through Rounds 1 through 3 below. If you are working in pairs, choose two of the three rounds to complete.

The Speaker completes the sentence begun in Round 1, 2, or 3 and speaks on that topic for 3 minutes.

The Listener attentively listens. She asks questions to clarify her understanding of what is being shared.

The Observer carefully observes the verbal and nonverbal interchange between the Speaker and the Listener, making note of body language. The Observer also serves as the timekeeper, notifying the speaker when 3 minutes is up.

At the end of each round participants switch roles so that everyone has a chance to be a Speaker, Listener, or Observer.

Begin Round 1. Place two chairs face to face for the Speaker and the Listener. If there is an Observer, he sits in a third chair placed nearby.

The Speaker starts the communication by completing the following sentence: “The most exciting thing about Head Start is...”

At the end of the 3 minutes the Speaker, Listener, and Observer take 2 minutes to reflect and to record notes about their experience in the first round.

Round 1

Role: _____

Notes: _____

Switch roles and begin Round 2.

The Speaker starts by completing following sentence:

“The most difficult part of my job is...”

Allow 2 minutes for reflection and notes.

Round 2

My Role: _____

Notes: _____

Switch roles again and begin Round 3.

The Speaker starts by completing following sentence:

“My fondest childhood memory is...”

Allow 2 minutes for reflection and notes.

Round 3

My Role: _____

Notes: _____

Part II (10 min.) Remain in your groups and allow each person to briefly share his experiences and observations in the roles. The following questions may be helpful in prompting the discussion:

Speaker—How did you feel about sharing what you did? Did you feel that the Listener fully understood the meaning of what you shared?

Listener—Did you have any difficulty listening to what was being shared, and if so why? Were things said that you did not understand, and did you ask for clarification? If you felt a need for clarification but did not request it, why not? How did it feel to have to listen and not engage in conversation?

Observer—What did you notice about the Listener's and the Speaker's body language? In your opinion, did the Listener demonstrate interest in what was being said?

Part III (25 min.) Return to the larger activity group and begin a discussion of the following questions:

What is the most difficult aspect of effective listening ?

How does the content or nature of what is being said affect your ability to actively listen? Is it easier to listen to less personal communication? More difficult to listen to communication that deals with sensitive issues?

Within this job performance situation or others, how can you use active listening to move toward mutual understanding of program guidelines and practices? For example, how can you use active listening to determine the basis for an individual's interpretation of information?

How do you plan to use the HEAR model to be a better communicator?



STEP 4. SUMMARY

Suggested time: 15 min.

Key Points

- Tips for engaging—active listening
- Preventing conflict through active listening
- The HEAR model

Personal Review

What did you learn from this activity?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

How will you use your new knowledge and skills in your work?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

What else do you think you might need to learn in order to master the skill of active listening?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

