We listen to obtain information. We listen to understand. We listen for enjoyment. We listen to learn. Given all the listening we do, you would think we’d be good at it. Unfortunately, we remember only 25-50% of what we hear.

One way to become a better listener is to practice active listening, especially when you are dealing with customers. This is where you make a conscious effort to hear not only the words that the customer is saying but, more importantly, to try and understand the total message being sent.

There are five key elements of active listening. They all help ensure that you hear the other person, and that the other person knows you are hearing what they are saying.

**Pay Attention**

Give the speaker your undivided attention and acknowledge the message. Recognize that what is not said also speaks loudly.

- Look at the speaker directly
- Avoid being distracted by outside factors
- Don’t mentally prepare a rebuttal
- “Listen” to the speaker’s body language
- Refrain from side conversations when listening in a group setting

**Show That You Are Listening**

Use your own body language and gestures to convey your attention.

- Nod occasionally
- Smile and use other facial expressions
- Note your posture and make sure it is open and inviting
- Encourage the speaker to continue with small verbal comments like “yes” or “uh huh”
Provide Feedback

Our personal filters, assumptions, judgments, and beliefs can distort what we hear. As a listener, your role is to understand what is being said. This may require you to reflect what is being said and ask questions.

~ Reflect what you have heard by paraphrasing
~ Ask questions to clarify certain points
~ Summarize the speaker’s comments when appropriate

Defer Judgement

Interrupting is a waste of time. It frustrates the speaker and limits full understanding of the message.

~ Allow the speaker to finish
~ Don’t interrupt with counter arguments

Respond Appropriately

Active listening is a model for respect and understanding. You are gaining information and perspective. You add nothing by attacking the speaker or otherwise putting him/her down.

~ Be candid, open, and honest in your response
~ Assert your opinions respectfully
~ Treat the other person as he/she would want to be treated

It takes a lot of concentration and determination to be an active listener but it’s worth it – you’ll find yourself becoming a better communicator and improving your relationships with customers and those around you.