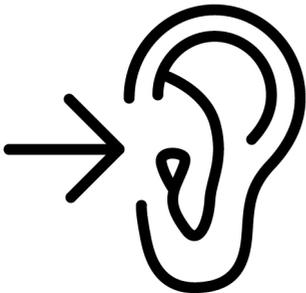


**Seeds for
Change
Short guide**



Active listening

A short guide on how to listen better and make our social and environmental justice groups more effective

Active listening

Listening is a skill that is often under-estimated and under-valued. However, it is an essential part of effective communication, and requires an active effort to do well.

The core of active listening is to really focus on understanding what someone is trying to put across. That sounds simple, but we often don't even realise when we aren't listening carefully!

The phrase 'active listening' comes from the psychologist Carl Rogers, but this guide is not for people who want to use the technique in a therapeutic context! It is for people in social change groups and co-ops who want to use better listening to improve their meetings, relationships and the work or campaigning they do together.

Listening well is key to many aspects of effective groups. It enables us to really understand what each other is saying to make collaborative decisions that take everyone's needs into account. It helps us take feedback on board and learn from it, which is essential for resolving conflict, tackling power dynamics and working more effectively. Paying real attention to what someone is saying increases trust and empathy.

Active listening can be challenging when we have strong disagreements or we're just too stressed and busy to concentrate. This can often be the case in campaigns and co-ops! This guide offers key tips for how we can listen actively in every day contexts like meetings, peer reviews or one-to-one chats.



How to actively listen

Key tips to listen as effectively as possible:

- **Minimise distractions** so as to give yourselves the best chance of focusing on what people are saying.
- **Listen!** Really focus on understanding what someone is saying. If your mind drifts off, bring it back. Show the speaker that you are listening.
- **Offer summaries** to check your understanding. In meetings this can also help people keep track of what's going on.
- **Ask questions** to get clearer on what someone is saying or to encourage them to expand.

Minimise distractions

Whether for a group meeting or a focused one-to-one chat, do everything you can to make it easier for people to concentrate.

Choose a suitable space. Do your best to find somewhere that is accessible and comfortable, and where you will be free from background noise and interruptions. Hiring a meeting space is a great use of group funds if it allows you to have effective meetings. And it is often cheaper than going to a cafe or bar where you're expected to buy drinks!

Set up the room. Adjust the lighting, heating and fresh air so that people can concentrate. Bring snacks and refreshments if possible.

Put aside unnecessary devices: switch off or silence mobile phones and laptops unless you're minuting.

Alcohol / drugs: Some groups choose to save alcohol for after meetings have ended or avoid it altogether in order to improve everyone's focus.

Prepare yourself: Give yourself a bit of time to get in a good head-space for listening. Do what you need to do to clear the distractions in your own

head, whether that's making notes of things you don't want to forget later, having a solitary cup of tea or calling a friend to vent your feelings.

Check ins: Starting a meeting with a chance for everyone to say how they are doing can be a useful way for everyone to set their own stuff aside and be ready to hear each other.

Listen!

Focus on the speaker: Active listening means making a genuine effort to give someone our attention. It is very common to spend our time waiting to speak, instead of listening.

Notice when your mind wanders: We cannot completely stop our mind from drifting away from the speaker. However, we can get better at noticing, and bring ourselves back.

It is usually better to ask someone to repeat themselves, or just to pause for you to process what they're saying, rather than pretending to listen!

Notice the assumptions you are making: Whenever we listen to someone, we make an interpretation of what they are saying. This may or may not be accurate! Our own emotional reactions can often get in the way of really hearing what someone is saying.

Try to check your understanding or ask questions to get a clearer picture. You can still share your own responses, but communication will be much more effective if this starts with a good understanding of what someone has actually said.

Show you're listening: Use body language to show that you are listening. Depending what is appropriate for the context, culture and individuals concerned, it can help to smile, nod, make eye contact, turn your body towards someone and 'make listening noises' like 'Mmmmm...' and 'Uh-huh'.

Summaries

A summary is a short version of the key points that have been raised. It can help to check your understanding is accurate and demonstrate that you have heard someone's points.

In meetings, a summary can help everyone focus on the parts of the discussion that are most relevant to the decision they are making. If you are using consensus decision making, summarising common ground and unresolved differences makes it easier to find a way forward.

Check your summary is accurate: A summary carries more weight than an average contribution to a discussion. For example, if you say "So we're all agreed that..." it makes it harder for someone to disagree! This makes it very important to give people a chance to correct you. Use phrases such as: "What I've heard people saying so far is... Did I miss anything out?", "The gist I am getting is ... Does that sound right?"

Choose your words carefully: Using your own words instead of repeating exactly what has been said makes the summary shorter, and helps people spot misunderstandings. However, sometimes a person will have chosen a word to put across a specific meaning, and if you use a different word in your summary they may not feel heard. For example, if they said they were "furious" and you described them as "annoyed", they may feel misunderstood or judged.

Questioning

Asking good questions can help get a better understanding of what someone is trying to put across. It can also support people to explore their reasoning or come up with new options.

In addition to offering summaries and checking them, you can clarify what's being said by asking people to expand on particular points.

Pick out generalisations, vagueness or things that are particularly open to misinterpretation. For example: "When you say that we 'aren't pulling our weight', can you say more about what you'd like us to do?" Or "A number of people have mentioned 'tensions' with the neighbours, is anyone up

for giving an example?"

Open and closed questions

Closed questions have a simple yes/no/single word answer. For example "Are you OK to meet at 6pm?"

Open questions give a lot more space for people to decide how to reply. Typically, an open question starts with a word like what, how or why. For example "What time shall we meet?"

Closed questions limit people's answers a lot and are good when you want to focus in on a particular point. Open questions are better when you want to give people more freedom to say what is important to them.

It can be helpful to think of open and closed as a spectrum. Some questions narrow down the possible answers a bit, without totally limiting the possibilities.

Type of question	Example
Closed question	"Is everyone happy with Katya's suggestion?"
'In between' question	"How does Katya's suggestion fit with the aims we agreed at the beginning of the meeting?"
Open question	"How does everyone feel about Katya's suggestion?"



Tools for better listening in meetings

The techniques below help participants in meetings listen to each other. You can find more tools, such as controlled dialogue and sharing withholds in our guide *Facilitation tools for meetings and workshops*.

Go-round: Each person in the meeting gets one turn to express their views on a topic while everyone else listens. That could be done in order round a circle, or 'pop-corn' - where people speak in any order as they are ready. Emphasise that the point is to listen to each person. Encourage people to leave little pauses after someone has spoken, so that they can plan what they want to say during their own turn, not while someone else is speaking!

Listening in pairs or threes: In the pair / three, each person gets a fixed time to think and talk about a topic. The speaker can choose whether they want their partner(s) to listen in silence, offer a summary at the end or ask follow-on questions. Remind listeners that the point is to create space for the speaker, and they should usually hold back from sharing their own thoughts and experiences until it's their turn!

Reflection pause: People usually need time to really process new information and deal with the feelings that it brings up. This can make it harder to keep on listening. Use a short period of silence to let everyone absorb what has been said already. This doesn't have to be the facilitator's responsibility, meeting participants can ask for it if they are feeling overloaded.



Active Listening

Listening is a skill that is often under-estimated and under-valued. However, it is an essential part of effective communication, and requires an active effort to do well.

This guide offers key tips aimed at people in social change groups and co-ops. It includes: how we can listen actively in every day contexts like meetings, peer reviews or one-to-one chats. It also offers how-tos on four key components of active listening: minimising distractions, listening, summarising and questioning.

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