



## Active listening to build a sense of connection and trust

A powerful communication tool, active listening creates a supportive space in which employees can feel heard as they share what's important to them. Being a *great* listener takes practice, and it pays off for both the listener and the relationship between the listener and the speaker.

### Active listening:

- Seeks a clear understanding of the speaker's message
- Communicates the listener's interest in the speaker's message
- Strives for empathy, understanding, and attentiveness

### Engaging in active listening:

- Engenders trust
- Shows appreciation and respect
- Enhances collaboration, teamwork, creativity, and problem solving
- Helps with conflict resolution
- Supports a diverse and inclusive culture
- Enables informed responses and actions

## How to Listen Actively

### 1. Pay Attention

- Be intentional: choose to listen
- Select a good place and time to listen
- Put aside distracting thoughts; avoid being distracted by environmental factors (or acknowledge them and refocus)
- Stay focused on what they are communicating, without preparing your response or rebuttal
- "Listen" to the speaker's body language, tone, etc. for indications of how they feel and what they mean

### 2. Show You Are Listening

- Look at the speaker directly and make eye contact
- Smile and use other supportive, attentive facial expressions (e.g., nodding your head)
- Make sure your posture is open and inviting (facing them, arms unfolded)
- Encourage the speaker to continue with small verbal comments like "I see" and "uh huh"

### 3. Focus on Understanding Before Seeking to be Understood

- Use open-ended questions, rather than limited response questions, to elicit the speaker's perspective
- Reflect what has been said by paraphrasing or parroting back to them
- Ask questions to clarify certain points; ask for examples for your understanding, not for them to prove their points
- Regularly summarize to check understanding

### 4. Defer Judgment

- Set aside your assumptions and preconceptions
- Allow the speaker to finish each point before asking questions
- Don't interrupt and don't offer counter arguments
- Focus on understanding where they are coming from before coming to conclusions

### 5. Respond intentionally rather than react instinctively

- Once the speaker has finished sharing, offer a final summative statement of what you understand
- Acknowledge what they've shared in terms of their facts, feelings, and meaning (what matters to them)
- Ask them what they need in general, and from you specifically, to help them address the situation
- Determine to yourself first whether this is the right time for you to respond
- Consider before you speak whether your words will convey mutual understanding and respect



### Open-ended Questions:

When used in a conversation, open-ended questions can help people get to know each other better and build or deepen a sense of connection and trust. Examples of open-ended questions:

- What's on your mind?
- How are you doing today?
- In what ways are you feeling connected to your manager, colleagues, and MIT?
- What could we be doing to help you feel more connected?
- Tell me something about your work, a recent accomplishment, something you are proud of.
- What challenges or barriers are you experiencing to being successful or feeling effective?
- What would you like me to know about your interests, hopes, and goals for your career at MIT?

When actively listening, it is important to respond versus react and focus on short-circuiting your own reactions.

- It can be hard to listen actively because our preconceptions, assumptions, and emotions can prompt our own reactions. In turn, these reactions can affect our responses throughout the conversation. Your most important response is your acknowledgement, which closes the loop in what the speaker has shared with you and helps them feel heard. And in turn, you can share something of your own story.
- Acknowledge the value of learning from one another's perspective. Keep in mind that it is not just saying "I see" or "I understand." It might be something like:

"What I've heard you say is that [this situation] has been [painful, inspiring, maddening, etc.] and that you would like [something different] to happen going forward. Is that right?"

Note that acknowledgement is not the same as agreement. You don't have to see things the same way; you simply need to see things *their* way at this moment.