

The Power of Listening and Intentional Inquiry

What is Active Listening?

Active listening is hearing the significance of the message being communicated and responding with intentional inquiry. It is listening with genuine curiosity, pondering and asking purposeful and open-ended questions.

We can listen in multiple ways and different situations call for different levels of listening – The 3 Levels of Listening. We strive to consistently reach level three, but levels two and three are skillsets that take practice to develop.¹²

- **Level 1:** Internal Listening – Listen to Speak
 - When listening, you think of how the message relates to you and how you will respond.
- **Level 2:** Focused Listening – Listen to Hear
 - When listening, you put yourself in the shoes of the speaker and relate to them.
- **Level 3:** Global Listening – Listen to Understand
 - When listening, you focus on what the speaker is saying and also what they mean.¹

Asking the Right Questions

Depending on your role in listening and the goal of the conversation, ask open-ended questions to explore perspectives and ideas. Invite further discussion by paving a path with intentional questions. As you consider creating discussion questions, ask yourself:

- What do I intend to achieve by asking this question?
- Will this question invite or restrain responses?
- Is this question likely to stimulate fresh thinking?
- Do I have an answer in my mind when asking this question?
- Are my own assumptions embedded in this question?

¹ [Increasing Student Voice in High School Reform: Building Partnerships, Improving Outcomes](#) by Dana L. Mitra and Steven Jay Gross

² [Strategic Leadership: The Three Levels of Listening](#) by Matt Russel

There are many types of open-ended questions you can use to facilitate a discussion with another person or a group. Use them to create your own questions to drive conversations and explore new ideas.

Types of Questions	Purpose	Examples
Broadening questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are encouraging and non-threatening. • Invite further discussion. • Are useful for beginning a session or opening discussion. • Give the respondent latitude in what information they choose to share. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Tell me more about that...” • “What else happened?”
Clarifying questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help gain understanding of a term or concept. • Move from the general to specific. • Check your understanding of what is said. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “What do you mean by ‘always, every, never’?” • “What does ‘unreasonable’ mean to you?” • “What don’t you understand?” • “Who specifically doesn’t care?”
Explaining questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help gain understanding of the respondent’s reasoning. • Encourage reflection by the respondent and understanding by the questioner. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “How did you expect this to turn out?” • “What leads you to that conclusion?” • “What do you use the word ‘safe,’ and what do you mean?” • Ask these instead of asking “why?” since they are less confrontational.
Exploring questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help gain understanding of the other person’s interests, assumptions, fears, expectations and priorities. • Help shift the respondents thinking to what they are trying to accomplish. • Gets to the heart of the matter – a person’s values, fears, needs, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “What concerns you about...?” • “What do you most want me to understand about _____ that you don’t think I understand?” • “What is the best/worst that can come from this?”

Challenging questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Challenge a person’s line of reasoning. • Create a shift or change in a person’s position or point of view. • “Gently” challenge incongruities in a person’s behavior, position, interest, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “You say you’re interested in my suggestions, but I notice you turn away when I start to talk. What’s going on?” • “On the one hand you say... on the other hand...”
Brainstorming questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generate alternative options. • Develop new ideas. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “What is one thing you could do to accomplish that?” • “How else might that be done?”
Consequential questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reality-test a possible situation. • Explore the outcome of a choice or behavior. • Examine the consequences of a decision. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “How does that suggestion meet your criteria for fairness?” • “What would that be like for you?”

Asking intentional questions and collaborating with different perspectives will reveal dissenting opinions, attitudes and beliefs. This is a necessary first step to forming a shared understanding of the problem and vision for the solution. At times, discussions with dissenting opinions will become high stakes and/or filled with strong emotions. Whether in a group or between you and another person, these types of conversations require careful attention to find a mutual purpose and understanding.