



Active Listening



In the book of James, the author proclaims that ‘...every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, but no one can tame the tongue...’ (James 3. 7-8a).

This biblical caution, coupled with the old adage ‘two ears and one mouth, and we should use them in that proportion’,¹ reminds us that it is easy for the tongue to get carried away, and that it is wise to listen more often than we speak - twice as much, even!

Power of Active Listening

But what exactly is active listening? I’m sure that many readers will have attended training courses that have included ‘Active Listening’ and will have been involved in practising the techniques. It involves the listener feeding back to the speaker, paraphrasing what they have heard in order to ensure shared understanding between the two parties.

Why is this an important skill to develop for Office Bearers? Communication is such an important aspect of leadership, whether within the church or outside it. Good communication means that individuals feel included in decision making; they feel that their views have been heard and valued; they understand why a course of action has been adopted. Active listening as part of good communication means that the leader is able to check out their own understanding of what has been said - a double check on what you think you heard.

Active listening requires us to show that we are listening in a non-verbal way too. To reinforce the technique we might nod our heads, smile, perhaps lean forward to show that we are listening. It is not only the words you speak which are important, but also the way in which you speak them, and your facial expressions and body language.

While we understand the benefits of active listening there are, unfortunately, many barriers. Depending on the speaker, we sometimes just listen with half an ear. Do you ever find yourself thinking about what your response will be, rather than listening fully to what a colleague is saying to you? Being human, it can be difficult to listen fully attentively.

¹ Rudyard Kipling, *Just So Stories for Little Children* (London: Macmillan and Company, 1902), 77.



Suggested Technique

1. Ask probing questions

And now for the technique. If an elder colleague or member of the congregation comes to you with an idea for changing a process, the first stage in active listening is to ask probing questions that will help you to understand more fully the nature of the change. You might like to use Rudyard Kipling's 'Six Honest Serving Men'² which are What, Why, When, How, Where and Who – these words at the start of sentences will help you elicit much more information about the suggestion.

2. Reflect and paraphrase what has been said

The second stage in active listening is to reflect and paraphrase what has been said. This will confirm that you understand what your colleague has suggested. 'So, it seems to me that what you're saying is.....' It also allows your colleague to clarify further in light of your attentiveness. Don't forget to pay attention to non-verbal communication.

3. Summarise the main points

And, finally, the third part of the technique is to summarise the main points of your discussion, as you draw the conversation to an end. This provides your colleague with a final opportunity to correct your understanding.