

# Active Listening: A Conflict Resolution Technique for the Brave of Heart

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What is active listening? Many years ago when I was a callow public involvement apprentice, I took a course from one of our icons, Jim Creighton, the founding president of The International Association for Public Participation (IAP2), on Active Listening. It was so intimidating on a personal level, and yet it changed my life in so many positive ways. As the organization Mind Tools puts it, “active listening is a model for respect and understanding.” The essence of the approach is to understand the personal values and emotions behind the words, and to respond in an encouraging and nonjudgmental way. Jim’s principles – and many others since – include these techniques on how to engage another person in a way that puts a damper on outrage and frustration.

## Engagement Techniques

- Stop talking.
- Prepare yourself to listen. Calm yourself; empty your mind.
- Put your personal feelings and prejudices aside.
- Put the speaker at ease. Removing distractions, the room and furniture setting, your body language are all important in this.
- Show that you’re listening. Pay attention, direct eye contact, manage your facial expressions, open body language.
- Listen to the speaker’s tone. Loud, reticent, scared, abrupt, threatening?
- Listen for what’s behind the words. Anger, frustration, confusion, sadness, terror.
- Observe non-verbal communication. Indicating the above.
- Be patient! Don’t rush them, finish their sentences, tap your foot, etc.
- Provide appropriate neutral responses and bridges to more explanation. “Yes?”, “Ah”, “...and then?”, “I can see how you think that”.
- Validate their feelings. “I can see that you’re angry.”, “I hear the frustration you’re expressing.”, “It sounds like you’re afraid for your children’s safety.”, “I’m understanding that this made you disappointed.” (This is the scariest part of all: if you’re wrong, you’ll hear about it loud and clear!)

Easy, huh? So try these active listening techniques out on your kid or your spouse before you try it out on the young woman in Flint who comes into your public meeting crying and carrying her baby.

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