The key task in mediation is active listening. In many disputes, the message people want to give is not heard the way they intended and misunderstandings exacerbate the conflict. Listening with attention and respect shows that what people are saying is important. This is reinforced with reflection and clarification.

### Listening well means:

**Giving your full attention**

Your mind does not wander. You notice both the emotion and content conveyed by the speaker. You aren’t thinking what to say next.

**Withholding judgement**

While you are listening, you put aside thoughts of what the person ‘should’ or ‘must’ do, of who is right, of what you would have done in that situation.

### Impartiality and openness

Your face and posture show that you are listening. You look at others as well as the speaker to see how each person is reacting, also to keep people from feeling that you are biased or totally gullible! You are careful that nods and murmurs are not misinterpreted as signs of agreement with the speaker.

### Caring

You are aware of the speaker as a person and are interested in his or her concerns.

### Active listening

Active listening is a risky business. To sense what another person is experiencing and understand for ourselves what impact this would have on us, is to risk being changed ourselves. It is extremely threatening for us to give up our view of the world, even temporarily, and start to see the world from someone else’s perspective.

A core skill for a mediator is to be an active listener. The mediation process encourages active listening, because it is about the parties’ world view, not the mediator’s. If you can help people to listen to each other then they will be better able to understand the other person’s perspective, rather than trying to score points over them. An active listener will tune into how the other person is feeling, by matching the feelings of the other person. This helps to ensure that you focus on the other person’s response rather than your own. An active listener does not interrupt and does not judge the other person either explicitly or in their mind.

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“**I know that you believe you understand what you think I said, but I’m not sure you realise that what you heard is not what I meant**”

– Robert McCloskey

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*Photo: (CC) Flat Earth Theatre*
Key stages for Active Listening: Listen, Reflect, Clarify, Summarise, Explore, Test

**Listen** – Your attention is with the speaker, not your internal dialogue. Your task is to hear what people say from their perspective without trying to interpret it. This is tricky, as we often interpret what we heard and then respond accordingly. Which is why in mediation we also:

**Reflect** using people’s key words and phrases. Mediators do this to ensure that they have understood what has been said, but also so that the people being listened to know that you have heard what they have said. It also spaces out the conversation and enables reflection time, as well as building confidence in the mediator. But you probably also need to -

**Clarify** – Words and phrases may have information missing or be otherwise unclear. For example, someone might say, “I am very unhappy with the way X is behaving”. You need to clarify what they mean by unhappy and find out what behaviour X is displaying that causes this unhappiness.

**Summarise** – Every now and again you need to summarise what has been said by people. This helps you manage the conversation, but also gives the parties confidence that you are listening and helping the momentum of the conversation. You can also reflect or summarise the behaviours of the parties – in a descriptive way. For example, “I notice that whenever we talk about Y, both of your voices rise, but I am not clear about why yet? Can you tell me?”

**Explore** – Once it is clear what the dispute is about, how people feel about it and the impacts it is having, you should get the parties to start thinking about solutions that each of them could live with. And again go through the cycle of listening, clarifying, reflecting and summarising.

**Test** – Once you have some clear potential solutions, you work with the parties to understand how it might work and who needs to do what and when. This may also include some mechanism for reviewing the solutions.

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**Mindset**

- Create the climate for mediation by being informal, accepting of people, friendly and relaxed.
- Set a positive tone and expect work on the issues, and people to act in good faith.
- Make it clear that the disputants are responsible for sorting out their business, not you.
- The mediator’s role is to facilitate the process that the parties direct.
- Keep your language plain and don’t use jargon. If you do use jargon, explain yourself.
- Keep your eyes and ears open for signs of change or movement.

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**Out of control**

- If it gets ‘out of control’, what do the parties want to do about it?
- Chaos. It happens. Let it. Then summarise what’s happening and ask them if they want to continue?
- Ask each person in turn, “Do you want to continue?”. Only continue if you get a “Yes” from everyone.
- Call for a break or separate meetings.
- Stop the mediation.
- Acknowledge the desire to get even or right a wrong, but be clear that mediation cannot do this.
- If people accuse each other of lying, say that you cannot judge this or take sides and that mediation can only work on the basis of trust.
Sometimes it might be necessary to ask closed questions

For example, “Am I right in thinking that you want to change the way things work around here?” The response is likely to be ‘Yes’ or ‘No’, but the questioner is seeking clarity about purpose and is still summarising the speaker in the question.
Making the most of opportunities

There are many moments when opportunities for empowerment and recognition arise. Behaviour to look out for includes -

Offers - “You’ve got no idea how this affects me. You’ve never asked.” (I want you to ask me.)

Concessions - “Well I could probably listen to your ideas a bit more.”

Expression of regret or apology - “I’m sorry, I had no idea it was causing such a problem for you.”

Recognising the other’s point of view - “Yeah, I hadn’t thought of it that way.”

Emphasising commonalities - “I suppose we both want peace and quiet.”

Accepting responsibility for self - “I do get upset when I feel I’ve not been listened to.”

Improvements in communication - People saying clearly what it is they want, giving new information and listening.

Constructive changes in behaviour - Changing negative patterns, such as shouting, repeating allegations, ignoring new information or offers.

Summary of active listening skills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Active listening</th>
<th>Non-active listening</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>repeat conversationally back to them, in their words, your understanding of their meaning</td>
<td>give the other person your version of what you heard</td>
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<tr>
<td>don’t talk about yourself</td>
<td>give your own opinions and advice. Talk about your experience</td>
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<tr>
<td>don’t introduce your own reactions or well intentioned comments</td>
<td>if you’re helping with a problem, try hard, make sure you know what to say next</td>
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<tr>
<td>let the speaker take the lead</td>
<td>introduce new topics to get off the subject if it’s uncomfortable</td>
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<tr>
<td>ask for clarification</td>
<td>don’t let them know, you don’t know what you’re talking about</td>
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<td>let them correct your feedback</td>
<td>don’t let them correct you</td>
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<tr>
<td>let them come to their own answer. Don’t advise</td>
<td>give them your answers and advice</td>
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<tr>
<td>acknowledge their feelings. Don’t diagnose, reassure, encourage or criticise them</td>
<td>reassure them; ‘it’s not that bad’ or talk them out of it</td>
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<tr>
<td>reflect back to them, not only so they know you understand, but so that they can hear and understand themselves</td>
<td>make sure you fix, change or improve what they’ve said, especially if you know you’re right</td>
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<tr>
<td>support their feelings. ‘You feel hopeless about it now’</td>
<td>agree with generalisations. ‘Yes, it is hopeless.’</td>
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<td>allow silences. Breathe</td>
<td>fill silences</td>
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<tr>
<td>reflect back tentatively - ‘so what I think I heard you say was...’ to allow room for you to be wrong.</td>
<td>state your reflection as fact: ‘so you believe that...’</td>
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Rhizome is a co-operative of experienced facilitators, trainers and mediators.
We work with co-ops, and campaigning and community groups across the UK, and with those national organisations that support activism and participation in all its forms.

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