

Active listening is the most cited skill in conflict work — and the most frequently misunderstood. Most people believe they are better listeners than they are. This handout describes what active listening actually requires, why it is harder than it looks, and how to build it deliberately.

## WHAT ACTIVE LISTENING IS NOT

### It is not waiting to speak

If you are preparing your response while the other person is talking, you are not listening. You are performing listening.

### It is not agreeing

Listening does not mean accepting what someone says. It means understanding it — fully, before you respond.

### It is not nodding and making eye contact

These are signals of listening, not listening itself. The signals without the substance are patronizing and people feel it.

### It is not summarizing back

Summarizing is a product of listening — it demonstrates that you heard. But you can summarize accurately without having genuinely listened.

## WHAT ACTIVE LISTENING ACTUALLY IS

Active listening is the deliberate suspension of your own frame of reference in order to inhabit someone else's. It requires three things simultaneously: attending to the words, attending to the emotion, and attending to what is not being said.

LEVEL	WHAT YOU ARE ATTENDING TO	WHAT IT PRODUCES
Words	The content — the facts, positions, and claims	Accurate understanding of the stated message
Emotion	The feeling underneath — frustration, fear, hurt, hope	Empathy and the speaker's sense of being genuinely seen
Silence	What is being withheld, circled around, or suggested but not said	Access to the real conversation beneath the surface one

## FIVE PRACTICES TO BUILD YOUR LISTENING

### The No-Preparation Rule

In your next important conversation, commit to not preparing your response while the other person is speaking. When you notice yourself drafting internally, bring your attention back to their exact words.

**The Emotion Label**

After someone speaks, name the feeling you heard before responding to the content. 'That sounds really frustrating' before you say anything else.

**The Silence Hold**

When someone finishes speaking, wait three seconds before responding. Count them. The space you create often produces the most important thing they say.

**The Follow-Up Question**

After someone answers a question, ask one follow-up before moving on. 'Can you say more about that?' goes deeper than any prepared question.

**The Summary Check**

At the end of a significant exchange, summarize what you heard and ask if it is accurate. The gaps between your summary and their correction tell you exactly where your listening needs to develop.

**THE DEEPER TRUTH**

The reason active listening is rare is not that it is technically difficult. It is that it requires a genuine interest in someone else's experience — including people you disagree with or find difficult. That genuine interest cannot be faked. Developing it is as much a personal practice as a professional one.