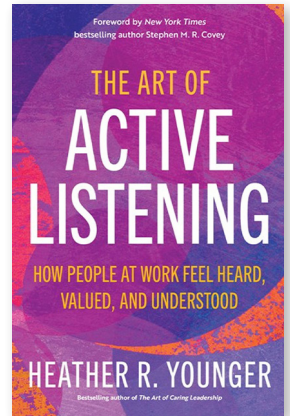


# The Art of Active Listening

How People at Work Feel Heard, Valued, and Understood

by **Heather R. Younger**



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## THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

When someone at work takes the time to listen to you, they make you feel important and that what you said matters. When someone shares something that is happening to them at home, they feel gratitude for being given the time and for being heard. When a customer vents about what a business could be doing better to serve them, they will thank the listener profusely for hearing them out. The more we get this listening thing right, the more all employees will feel a sense of belonging and want to stay, and the more customers will feel appreciated and supported by us.

Conversely, when people fail to listen, those who have something to say are left feeling confused, disconnected, or even helpless. Heather B. Younger wrote *The Art of Active Listening: How People at Work Feel Heard, Valued, and Understood* to address these missed opportunities. In it she explains the idea of being a supportive, caring leader who actually listens to people and works to protect them from harm. No one at work is excluded from the need to actively listen and can learn how to do so effectively with the process outlined in this book.

## IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- How to recognize the unsaid.
- The importance of seeking to understand.
- Three action steps for sustainable change.
- How to close the loop.

## The Cycle of Active Listening

When we listen to someone, they receive our attention like a gift. When we hold space for them, asking questions and leading with curiosity, we send them the message that their voice holds weight and a place of importance in our heart.

Being a good listener has the potential to heal so many of the divisions between us. When we think about it that way, we realize listening is our most important responsibility.

The premise of *The Art of Active Listening* is that listening at work is flawed because people don't feel safe telling the truth, and listening is usually one-sided so it rarely produces any results or the outcomes that we are looking for.

You might understand the importance of making a conscious effort to hear and restate what others are saying, which is certainly a big part of how we need to think about listening. But that's not all that is needed.

Active listening is more of a doubling down, with the purpose of not only understanding another person, but also addressing any issues they raise in a way that makes them realize their opinions matter. Active listening is the doorway to increased belonging, loyalty, profitability, innovation, and so much more. It is the difference between *thinking* we understand what people want and *knowing* what they want.

Of course, one reason we might not want to listen in the first place is because we worry that we'll hear something we'd prefer not to address. This internal resistance can often be the biggest obstacle to listening at work and it is why leaning in to understand isn't enough on its own.

Follow through is vital and can be accomplished with a model called the Cycle of Active Listening, which is a continuous, dynamic, and never-ending process.

The Cycle of Active Listening can move organizational culture forward, but it requires a strong commitment to change—not just changing how we currently think about active listening, but also how we *demonstrate* our understanding through actions.

The following sections lay out each of the five steps of the Cycle of Active Listening that we need to take if we want to learn how to listen well at work.

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## Recognize the Unsaid

Over thirty thousand engagement survey responses and

years of working with organizations to transform employee engagement have shown clearly that when you know how to listen, people will tell you *exactly* what they need to bring their full selves to work. This starts with the first step in the Active Listening Cycle: recognizing the unsaid.

Recognizing the unsaid means paying attention, so that you can pick up on important signals—like someone's facial expressions, body language, or tone of voice. You take time to sense what someone might be thinking but hasn't revealed out loud yet. When you make an effort to notice when someone is holding back their feelings, opinions, or ideas, you recognize the unsaid.

Here are some examples of things people might be thinking, but not saying out loud, at work:

- “I wish management would show me that I'm valued here because I feel like I'm just a number to them.”
- “The rapid pace of change seems disorganized, and it's stressing me out.”
- “I feel like my team doesn't like me and excludes me from important conversations.”
- “I'm your customer, but instead of providing what we need, you keep trying to sell us what we don't want.”
- “The way you miss deadlines, or reschedule calls all the time, makes me think that I'm not an important client to you.”

We have the power to *recognize the unsaid* when those around us are struggling or trying to send us a message. The customer who hasn't been calling in new orders, the prospect who stops returning our calls, the coworker who has stopped contributing in meetings...all are examples of opportunities to recognize the unsaid.

If we don't do our part, these are the same folks who will leave, seemingly out of the blue—although if we'd recognized the unsaid, we'd have noticed the signs all along.

If you're interested in transforming your ability to recognize the unsaid, you must start by cultivating a listening mindset that puts you in the best position to uncover what's true—and that can require patience. This advice holds true no matter your position at work.

Leadership teams need to work to build people's trust every day—for example, meeting more regularly with employees one-on-one instead of in large groups, demonstrating a consistent willingness to confront hard truths, and using

# Recognizing the unsaid can be an uncomfortable experience, but there is necessary growth in that discomfort.

tough feedback to make changes.

If you can show that you value all opinions, all the time—and not just the ones people *think* you want to hear—people will feel safer speaking up in the long term.

We also need to recognize what we're personally leaving unsaid. If you work for a company with a culture that supports you to express yourself, and yet you don't speak up when something feels amiss, take the time to listen to what your gut is telling you before speaking to someone you trust.

By taking the time to go inward, you'll become more aware of what you personally need to thrive to work. You just have to be willing to listen closely, so that you can understand your needs and act accordingly.

Recognizing the unsaid often starts with facing the unknown and being prepared for whatever the truth may reveal—including when we need to take action in response to what we've learned.

The temptation can be to bury our heads in the sand because we don't feel prepared to deal with what could be an inconvenient reality. Recognizing the unsaid can be an uncomfortable experience, but there is necessary growth in that discomfort.

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## Seek to Understand

By recognizing what's not being said and then seeking to better understand the truth you uncover, you'll be in a position to move on to the next step in the Cycle of Active Listening.

To become a better listener at work, you must seek to understand. That means stepping outside those experiences that shaped how *you* see the world, so you can gain an understanding of what drives other people.

Several elements must be present if you want to be successful in seeking out understanding: curiosity, open-mindedness, empathy, presence of mind, and a courageous spirit.

## Lead with Curiosity

When you're seeking to better understand others in similar ways, let down your guard enough to allow a sense of curiosity to shine through. Set your ego aside and see if you can maintain a sense of childlike wonder when listening to others.

Put aside what you think might be true, and listen not for what you want to hear, but for what you want to learn. Not only can you gain a greater understanding of a situation by cultivating curiosity, but also you can put your listening skills to good use by ensuring that the other person feels *valued*.

## Be Open-Minded and Minimize Assumptions

When seeking to understand, throw out your assumptions. That means entering into a conversation as if you were a blank slate, ready to receive what might be revealed. If you're to truly give the gift of active listening, and not hijack it for your own purposes, you *have* to stop predicting what's next based on the knowledge you already have.

Stay open and learn something new. Minimizing assumptions means not relying on what you infer to be true when it's time to listen in, dive deeper, and clarify your understanding.

## Flex Your Empathy Muscle

When someone seeks to understand where we're coming from, it completely shifts the energy running through any subsequent interaction. It makes you feel like they understand how you feel. Empathy is sensing the feelings and pain of another. We do this to try to understand what they are experiencing.

When we insert empathy into the active listening process, it helps make the conversation more about the person we're speaking with. Leaning in with empathy has more to do with quality than quantity. It's much more important to be fully present and make sure that the empathy we display is genuine.

## Be Fully Present

When seeking to understand, we should aim to make the people on the other end of our interactions feel that we are being present. One of the most important things you can

do for those you lead is set aside uninterrupted time to sit with them, one-on-one, and hear their thoughts.

Help them appreciate how much you value them with your presence. There's no better way to get to know someone other than to spend quality time with them. If you want to be known as an active listener, carve out time to be present with the people who look to you for guidance and support, so that you can seek to understand them better.

### Build Your Professional Courage

When something is wrong, it requires summoning courage to run toward the discomfort to address it, rather than running away from it. Sit down and ask a few leading questions. Continue to dig deeper, reflecting back on what you hear the other person say.

When you leave the tough interaction, the other person will know you've taken their concerns seriously and understood them. It can be easy to overcomplicate active listening, but we don't need to. We just need to invite more courage into our interactions with people whose opinions, ideas, and insights we want to harness.

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## Decode

Whether you consider yourself a leader or not, you need to manage expectations and communicate when you can't solve every problem at once. Discerning which action items you will act on first, if any, is something you need to think carefully about if you want to avoid overpromising or getting people's hopes up. This process of discernment is called *decoding*.

To ensure that you're actively listening, you must slow down and take the time to decipher what someone tells you. That means interpreting what you've heard. Decoding is your opportunity to connect the dots between what someone said and what you should do about it.

When you decode, you have the opportunity to identify those changes that are likely to have the greatest impact. In other words, decoding allows you to see the complete picture.

As you think about how to master the art of active listening, remember the importance of decoding before you take action, so that you know what to do next. You might be tempted to jump to conclusions, but instead give yourself space to interpret what someone shares with you.

Reflect on what you hear before choosing whether and how to act. This reflection period lets the people in your

presence see how important they are to you and helps you make informed decisions that will benefit more people in the long run.

The benefits of decoding are numerous. Here are two of them that demonstrate the critical role that decoding plays.

### Uncover Flawed Thinking

How many times have you left a meeting after a heated debate and realized you were on the wrong end of the argument? This happens to the best of us. When you discover that your assumptions were wrong, the first step is to release your initial desire to prove you were right, own your mistake, and reenter the conversation with more humility.

The second step is to admit your error to anyone who felt wronged by your assumptions, so that they see you're taking responsibility for your inaccurate thinking and behaviors. Approaching this type of situation from a place of vulnerability will help you build trust.

### Increase Collaboration

We can only get so far alone. When we embrace collaboration we are empowered to do more than we ever could by ourselves. Learning to relinquish control over different things on your plate helps you to learn to trust the gifts of others and enjoy more time for family and self-care.

The best part is, collaboration is a way to enlist the help of experts who help you stay on the leading edge. When you include more people in the process of decoding the information you receive, you have the chance to uncover connected problems and gain additional insights. Certain problems may never surface if you choose to act alone instead of collaborating.

It can be hard to find the patience to decode effectively but doing so is worthwhile. When you fail to interpret what you hear from people at work as a leader, you send them the message that they are inconsequential cogs in a big machine and not important to you or your organization.

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## Act

There is a time to decode, and then there is a time to act—in that order. Taking action after you've followed the first three steps is the difference maker when it comes to active listening. That means signaling to others your commitment to help them. One act alone can send someone the message that they are valued, important, and more than just a means to an end.

When you're responsible for leading change in your organization, you'll see other people go through their own versions of resistance.

We need to remember that for every action we take, there is an equal and opposite reaction. When someone at work voices their concerns, and you act by hearing them out, you're likely to receive a positive reaction—such as a strengthened relationship and maybe even increased productivity or engagement.

On the other hand, if you choose not to address that person's concerns, the consequences of your inaction will likely entail a negative reaction—such as weakened relationships, low morale, a lost customer contract, or even someone's resignation.

It's not the size of the action that counts but the intent behind it—and the alignment of those actions to the person's original request. This is what determines an action's impact. That means your impact could be the same whether the action you take is big or small. The question to ask is, “Do my actions align with the person's expectations and meet their needs?”

No matter how committed you are to taking action, you have to be sure you can sustain it. Here are three proactive steps you can take to ensure that the changes you implement are sustainable.

### 1. Recognize the Need for Change

Whichever problem you're experiencing, even if you're aware of the issue but unsure of its origins, be assured that *someone* knows the root cause. Other people can be your greatest asset when it comes to diagnosing a problem and its source.

That's why it's imperative to ask the right questions and listen to what people tell you. Accept that people may not be saying out loud what could make the workplace culture better. Lean into the Cycle of Active Listening to meet that need to change head-on.

### 2. Cultivate a Desire for Change

We're hardwired to resist change. In fact, our bodies want to protect us from it—hence the release of stress-induced hormones that make us fight, flee, or freeze. When you're

responsible for leading change in your organization, you'll see other people go through their own versions of resistance.

The best thing you can do in these situations is communicate. People are often more receptive than we think they are and more likely to embrace change if they feel their opinion is valued. If you lead a team, think about how the members might respond if you present the change to them in detail and ask for their opinion.

### 3. Build the Stamina Needed to Persist

One of the reasons people are so resistant to change is that the process can be drawn out, like a long and tedious race. Real change at work takes time, in the same way a new habit takes months to establish. You must show up to work prepared to take the actions necessary for change to take root.

Gathering as much input from employees as possible before changing anything is great, but that won't necessarily correlate to lasting impact. Once you've taken action, involve others by asking questions like, “What would be helpful to you in terms of next steps?” That will enable you to act based upon what they need as a priority to keep going.

You must believe in your organization's ability to achieve sustainable change. You must have faith in your ability to not only take action but also overcome any obstacles in your path.

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## Close the Loop

The fifth step in the five-step process we follow if we want to listen effectively and positively engage those around us is to close the loop. Closing the loop is the connecting piece and it's easy for us to forget because it requires intentional effort. Closing the loop says the following:

- “I acted. Thank you for your feedback, and here's what I did about it.”
- “I can't do anything about what you brought to my attention now, but I might be able to do something later.”

- “I can’t do anything about X, but I can do Y.”

The same goes for customers. You can say, “We heard what you had to say, and here’s what we’re going to do about it,” or “We heard what you had to say, and here’s the end result.”

You go back to the person who gave you the feedback—whether in a survey or in a one-on-one interaction or small group meeting—and let them know, “Thank you for your feedback. By the way, we heard you and here’s what’s next.”

Closing the loop means you’re communicating that you are planning to act on the input you received, are in the process of acting on that input, or already have acted. A little gratitude here goes a long way. When you genuinely thank someone for their input, they feel your appreciation and are likely to feel more connected to you as a result.

This step completes the Cycle of Active Listening, but then the cycle starts over again. Yes, you read that correctly. To be known as a great active listener, you have to be committed to doing it well, with everyone you encounter, and demonstrate your listening skills often.

This is not a one-and-done proposition but something that should be an ongoing part of all your interactions. You simply keep working the steps.

When exploring how they might apply the Cycle of Active Listening, people often find that closing the loop is one of the hardest for many at work.

This is because people don’t realize that listening to someone requires any action at all and that following up with those who have given feedback is like the period at the end of a sentence. It completes the active listening process.

Many of us tend to be check-the-box people. We think the effort toward something, without full commitment, should be good enough. Our check-the-box-thinking causes us to mistakenly assume there is one quick-and-simple solution to solve a particular workplace challenge. But the answer is rarely quick and simple.

When organizations get listening to employees and customers right, it positively impacts customer loyalty, employee morale, and a company’s bottom line. Embrace the entire process of active listening, and don’t consider it done until you’ve closed the loop on all feedback.

The very act of closing the loop makes others feel a part of the change they seek, a part of something bigger.

### Are You Ready to Become a Better Active Listener?

We’re at a difficult time in our history. We’ve become oblivious to the needs of others because we fail to listen. People everywhere feel helpless, ignored, and unimportant to the people they work with.

This, in some ways, was heightened by the move to more remote work, but it has been its own epidemic for some time. Listening at work is the single most important thing we can do to create more hope, a deeper sense of importance and belonging, and a desire to stay invested for the long haul.

Listening is not only a way to connect with people. We give others at work their power back when we commit to listening to them in the way outlined in *The Art of Active Listening*.

This is true in all areas of our lives.

Those in our presence no longer feel like numbers on a spreadsheet or a means to an end—they finally feel heard, valued, and understood for who they are as people.

People often don’t want us to fix or solve a problem for them. Most times, people come to us simply because they need an ear. They long to form relationships with people interested enough to give them their undivided attention.

In a world focused on action, there are many cases that can’t be fixed. There are many times when people don’t need a solution from us. Sometimes, just hearing someone out is all we need to do.

This is true as leaders of teams, as leaders of households, and as leaders in our communities. You can be the spark. Go out and change your little corner of the world by demonstrating the art of active listening.

Active listening is the doorway to increased belonging, loyalty, profitability, innovation, and so much more. It is the difference between thinking we understand what people want and knowing what they want.



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