



# OVERCOMING ROADBLOCKS TO LISTENING

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*The ability to listen can be learned, developed and, like any skill, must be honed to increase your proficiency. Listening is not simply hearing someone. It is the art of being present with them in such a meaningful way that they feel understood. It involves facial expression, eye contact, body posture, attention, attitude, and purpose. Good communication seeks to understand. Poor communication tries to win the point or be right. In this lesson, we'll explore roadblocks to listening and present ways to change how you communicate*

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## OVERCOMING ROADBLOCKS TO LISTENING

### IN THIS CHAPTER

- *Identify 12 common communication difficulties*
- *Develop steps to improve listening skills*
- *Practice effective communication using conversation starters*

Leadership expert Thomas Gordon realized the importance of active listening and developed the **12 Roadblocks to Communication**. These roadblocks are worth learning, as listening to others is important and can make all the difference in establishing and maintaining healthy relationships. The twelve roadblocks are common responses that get in the way of good listening. They are not necessarily wrong, but they are not listening. They interrupt a person's own exploration. To get back to his or her own process, they must go around them, hence the term "roadblock."

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### COMMUNICATION ROADBLOCKS

The following roadblocks identify what good listening is and is not.

#### **1** Ordering, directing, or commanding

Direction is given with the force of authority behind it. There may be actual authority (as with a parent or employer), or the words may simply be phrased with authority. Some examples might include:

- Don't say that.
- You've got to face up to reality.
- Go back and tell her you're sorry!

### **2** Warning or threatening

These messages are similar to directing, but they also carry a threat of impending negative consequences or punishment if the advice or direction is not followed. The threat may be clear or hidden and may be an action carried out or simply a prediction of bad results if the other does not obey.

- If you don't start treating him better, you'll lose him.
- You'd better listen to me or you'll be sorry.
- You're really asking for trouble when you do that.

### **3** Giving advice, making suggestions, providing solutions

The individual draws on their knowledge and experience to recommend a course of action. They often begin with the words:

- What I would do is...
- Why don't you...
- Have you tried...

### **4** Persuading with logic, arguing, lecturing

The underlying assumption is the person has not adequately thought things through and needs help doing so. Uninvited advice is given. An example of this response is seen in the character Spock from Star Trek. Such responses may begin:

- The facts are...
- Yes, but...
- Let's think this through...

### **5** Moralizing, preaching, telling them their duty

An underlying moral code is quoted here with "should" or "ought" language. The hidden communication is instruction of proper conduct. Such communication might start:

- You should...
- You really ought to...
- It's your duty as a \_\_\_\_\_ to...



## 6 Judging, criticizing, disagreeing, blaming

The common element here is the suggestion something is wrong with the person or with what they said. Simple disagreement is included in this group.

- It's your own fault.
- You're being too selfish.
- You are wrong.

## 7 Agreeing, approving, praising

Some people are surprised to find this included with the roadblocks. This message approves what has been said, but stops the communication process and may also imply an uneven relationship between speaker and listener. True listening does not require approval.

- I think you're absolutely right...
- That's what I would do...
- You're a good \_\_\_\_\_.

## 8 Shaming, ridiculing, labeling, name-calling

Disapproval is more open-ended and directed at the individual with the hope of shaming or correcting a behavior or attitude.

- That's really stupid.
- You should be ashamed of yourself.
- How could you do such a thing?

## 9 Interpreting, analyzing

This roadblock awkwardly seeks out the hidden meaning behind what someone is saying and offers an interpretation.

- You don't really mean that.
- Do you know what your real problem is?
- You are trying to make me look bad.

## 10 Reassuring, sympathizing, consoling

The intent is usually to help someone feel better. While there is nothing wrong with helping someone, it is not listening and becomes a roadblock because it interferes with the spontaneous flow of communication. For example:

- It's okay; it's not that bad.
- I'm sure things are going to work out all right.
- Don't worry, you'll look back on this in a year and laugh.

## 11 Questioning, probing

Asking questions is not always listening. When the intent is to probe and find out more information, the hidden communication from the questioner is that they will be able to find a solution once enough questions have been asked. Questions can interrupt and interfere with the speaker's train of thought

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and communication flow. This diverts the conversation toward the questioner's interest and away from the speaker and their concerns.

- What makes you feel that way?
- You're going to do that?
- Why?

## **12** **Withdrawing, distracting, humoring, changing the subject**

This very obvious roadblock is an attempt to take the speaker's mind off their concern and divert communication. It implies what they were saying is not important and should not be pursued.

- Let's talk about that some other time.
- That reminds me of the time when I...
- I hear it's going to be a nice day tomorrow.

(Miller and Rollnick, 2013)

## **NOTES**

Which of the 12 roadblocks most often compromises your ability to listen?

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When you are speaking, how do you feel when you run into a roadblock?

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We are often so busy thinking about what we want to say we forget to listen. Describe a time this happened to you.

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How can you develop better listening skills?

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## **ACTIVE LISTENING**

Communication is crucial to every aspect of life and developing active listening skills is an important part of being a good communicator. The more you work on these skills, the more you will find them helpful as you speak with, and listen to, others. The skill of active listening is helpful in your home and personal life.

## CHANGING THE WAY YOU COMMUNICATE

The following four steps will help you listen in a way that increases understanding. Review these points and then practice, using the conversation starters that follow.

### 1 Pay attention to the person talking.

Give the speaker your undivided attention, focusing your eyes and attention on them. Listen to them without thinking about what you will say next. Notice body language, both theirs and yours. Listen to the message, not just the words. If possible, limit side conversations and other distractions, and acknowledge their message.

### 2 Communicate by listening.

Use nods and gestures to show the speaker you are paying attention and following what they are saying. Facial expressions, such as smiling, also communicate interest and understanding. Use your body posture to say you are open to what is being said. You can use small verbal comments like “uh huh” to show the speaker you are getting the message.

### 3 Reflect back what you are hearing.

Using paraphrasing statements such as “It sounds like you...” or “What I hear you saying is...” or “If I’m understanding correctly, you are saying...” This helps the speaker stay focused in their communication and helps you, as the listener, stay attentive as well. You can also ask questions to clarify meaning, but be careful not to use questions to steer the conversation in a direction the speaker did not want to go. Do not hijack the conversation to tell your own story. Let their story be their own and let them know they have been heard and understood.

### 4 Present your response.

This is a time to reflect on what the speaker said and clarify any concerns. You are still increasing your understanding, not trying to win a point or be right. In presenting your response, be careful not to interrupt the speaker. Be honest without being rude, defiant, or sarcastic. This is not the time to counter each statement or argue every point.

## PRACTICING EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

The following set of prompts can help you practice good listening skills and help you get to know each other. Without advising, lecturing, commanding, arguing, or shaming, you can practice listening to someone else. Pick five to seven topics from the following list. Listen to your partner, being mindful of the listening roadblocks. Then switch the listener/speaker roles. You will be heard without shame, condemnation, or criticism, and can be acknowledged and understood in a safe and supportive environment.

Remember to listen to discover, without telling your story, until it’s your turn to speak.



**GOOD LISTENING  
ENCOURAGES  
EXPLORATION**  
*and produces  
interpersonal  
connection.*

## NOTES

An accomplishment

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One of your prized possessions

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A personal value

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A lie you tell yourself

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Something about your family

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One thing you like about your mom

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One thing you like about your dad

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A favorite childhood memory

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Your proudest moment

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A time you helped someone

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Something you want to be known for

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Something most people don't know about you

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One thing you hope to accomplish in the future

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Something you are changing about yourself

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A talent you have

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A memory that still makes you laugh

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A favorite birthday memory

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A smell that reminds you of childhood

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Something you are afraid of sharing

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Something you've had on your mind for a long time

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The book that has affected you positively

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A personality trait you find attractive

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## NOTES



You love it when people ask you

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A movie that affected you positively

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If you had a plane ticket to go anywhere in the world, where would you go?

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An event that positively affected you

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## NOTES

If you had extra money, what would you spend it on?

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If you could ask God one question, what would it be?

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Your most important goal right now

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## LISTENING IS AN ACT OF LOVE

Listening is the foundation of good communication and a skill to be developed. It is filled with anticipation as a listener gives the speaker the gift of their full attention. Good communication seeks to understand the other person and starts with careful listening. Poor communication tries to win the point or be right. Good listening encourages exploration and produces interpersonal connection. Underneath the act of listening is someone who says, "I care enough about you to try to understand."

### SOURCE

Miller, W.R. and Rollnick, S. (2013). *Motivational interviewing: Helping people change*. New York: Guilford Press.