When people talk, they want to be heard and understood. This isn’t possible when two people are talking but not listening to each other. As each person tries to make his own point, the other believes he wasn’t heard at all. As messages are sent but not received, voices and frustrations rise. People may feel disrespected. Relationships can break down.

Two people in a conversation can be heard and understood, just not at the same time. A skilled communicator listens as a strategy to improve communication. He delays his own need to be heard and listens first to the other person. By doing so, he sets himself up to get what he wants—to be heard and understood.

**THE CHALLENGE**
To listen actively, you must suspend your own need to be heard and understood.

**THE REWARD**
When you listen actively, you increase the chance the other person will hear you.

When someone believes he has been listened to and understood, he is no longer focused only on his own thoughts and feelings. By listening to others, you free them up to be able to hear you.

**HERE ARE 5 STEPS TO LISTEN ACTIVELY AND TRULY HEAR WHAT SOMEONE HAS TO SAY:**

**STEP 1: ASK**
Ask the other person to tell you what he has to say. It is best to ask an open question that gets him to tell you the whole story. An open question would be something like: “What is going on for you?” This question is meant to open him up and tell you a lot. Your goal is to listen both to what he says and how he feels about things. Don’t interrupt.

**STEP 2: CONNECT**
While the other person is talking, send signals that you are listening and understanding. Your facial expressions, how you hold your body, brief words and head nods send signals that you are listening. Even if the other person whines, complains or brings up things that happened long ago, let him. Your goal right now is to listen.

If something doesn’t make sense, avoid interrupting or disagreeing. Instead, let him keep talking. Keep good eye contact. You might say, “oh,” or “I see” or “OK” as a signal that you are listening. As the other person continues to talk, you may worry that you won’t get the chance to have your say. Resist that worry. Let the person tell his story.

Eventually, the person will have said all he needed to say. When he begins to repeat himself, you can prepare to move to the next step.

**STEP 3: RETELL**
Send a clear signal that you listened well by telling the person what you heard. Be sure to include the things that seemed important to him—because he either got louder or more emotional. These are the things that matter most to the other person. When you tell him you heard the things that mattered most, he will know that you heard him. You have gone a long way in gaining some goodwill.
STEP 4: CLARIFY
If something seems missing or confusing, ask a clarifying question. A clarifying question may get at who was involved or when, how or where something happened. You are seeking to get clear on the details by asking this type of question. You don’t want to come off like you are investigating the other person or challenging his honesty. So, you might begin by saying something like, “I want to be sure I understand. Can I ask you a few questions?”

There are many benefits to asking clarifying questions. You can get better-quality information. You can help the other person become rational and reasonable. You can show you care about what he is saying. You can slow things down long enough to guide a good discussion. You can uncover hidden agendas or unspoken needs.

STEP 5: SUMMARIZE
To make certain that you truly understand, summarize back what you heard. “So, if I understand correctly, this is what happened.” Summarizing is important in two ways: (1) It corrects incorrect or completes missing information and (2) it shows that you are being serious about trying to understand. Getting the best information and showing real interest in the other person sets you up for good communication. You have improved your chances of being heard and understood and you may have even improved your relationship.

When you ask, connect, retell, clarify and summarize, you take strategic steps to improve your communication. You give the other person something he really wants—to be heard and understood. And you set yourself up to be heard and understood. Good communication is a two-way deal, with listening a critical part. Now that you have listened actively, it is your turn to speak about what matters to you!