

A photograph of two chefs in a professional kitchen. The chef on the left has curly hair and a beard, wearing a white chef's coat. The chef on the right has short hair, wears glasses and a white chef's coat with a dark apron. They are both smiling and looking at each other. The background shows kitchen equipment and a bright, modern interior.

Active Listening Guide

In the high-paced environment of a professional kitchen, effective communication is key. One of the main ingredients for smooth operations, reduced stress, and high performance is active listening.



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Effective Listening Tips & Techniques to Beat the Heat

Active listening isn't just about hearing words, it's about understanding, engaging, and responding thoughtfully. This guide will give you actionable steps to become a better listener, improve your team dynamics, and drive business success.

01. Be Fully Attentive

02. Clarify & Ask Questions

03. Stay Calm Under Pressure

04. Reflect Before Responding

05. Encourage and Act on Feedback





Be *Fully* Attentive

When someone speaks to you, give them your full

attention. This shows you're actively engaged and respect their input. When you're fully present, you process information more accurately, and you can catch subtle cues about issues that can be solved before they escalate.

Do:

- ☒ Pause what you're doing and focus on the speaker
- ☒ Use body language to show attentiveness (e.g., leaning slightly forward, nodding)

Don't:

- ☒ Continue working or look away while someone's talking
- ☒ Interrupt or try finishing their sentences

Listen with your eyes as well as your ears. Make eye contact and acknowledge what's being said with a simple "Got it" or nod.

“

To listen effectively as a leader, *be present*, focus on the speaker, ask open-ended questions, paraphrase, don't interrupt, and show empathy.

I encourage everyone in the kitchen to share their ideas and opinions. This can help create an inclusive environment where everyone feels valued and respected.

”

Chef Nawaf Al Mhamid,
Shakespeare & Co.



Clarify and Ask Questions

If something's unclear, ask for clarification before jumping to conclusions. Whether it's an order change or feedback on a dish, being an active listener also means asking the right questions for clarity. This prevents making mistakes.

Do:

- ☒ Ask open-ended questions to get more detail
- ☒ Repeat the main point back to ensure you understand it correctly

Don't:

- ☒ Assume you understand. Ask for clarification if needed
- ☒ Hesitate to ask questions, even in the middle of a rush

Don't be afraid to ask for specifics—clarifying questions helps create clear communication and avoid mistakes.

“

It takes strength to show your softer side and have empathy for your team. It's worth it, as it *fosters a safe space* for people to ask for help.”

”

Chef Kenneth Cacho,
Unilever Food Solutions Philippines.



Stay Calm Under Pressure

When things are heating up, take a moment to breathe and process what's being said. Kitchens are fast-paced, and it's easy to become reactive when under pressure. If a colleague is stressed or overwhelmed, **pause and listen to their concerns.**

Do:

- ☒ Take a moment to breathe and remain calm before responding
- ☒ Let the speaker finish their point before offering your response

Don't:

- ☒ Respond impulsively or emotionally
- ☒ Dismiss concerns or speak over people when they're under pressure

Mindfulness is key. Stay calm and listen first, then react.

“

Take a step back, listen, learn
and make the effort to
change. Listening rather than
offering your opinion, is the
first step in being a good ally.

”

Kim-Maree Moore,
Kimiko Projects



Reflect Before Responding

Active listening is all about considering the full context before replying. **Take a moment to process information** so you can give thoughtful responses that address the root of the problem.

Do:

- ☒ Pause and think for a moment before offering a solution
- ☒ Show that you've considered their perspective before responding

Don't:

- ☒ Jump in with an answer before they've finished speaking
- ☒ Dismiss ideas without careful consideration

Reflecting before you respond leads to more effective communication and less back-and-forth confusion.

“

When you can openly share ideas and concerns, it creates an *atmosphere of trust*. This is essential in a high-pressure environment like the kitchen.

”

Chef Mariana Morales,
Unilever Food Solutions Mexico



Encourage and Act on Feedback

Foster an environment where team members feel comfortable providing feedback. Active listening involves not just receiving input but using it to make improvements. **A kitchen that values feedback fosters a culture of growth and accountability.**

Do:

- ☒ Encourage feedback during downtime or after service
- ☒ Act on the feedback, even if it's just a small change

Don't:

- ☒ Ignore or brush off constructive criticism
- ☒ Avoid difficult conversations—these often lead to improvements

Make time to ask your team for feedback after service and identify what went well and what could be improved. This will show that you value their thoughts and that you're willing to listen and make adjustments.

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Active listening is the secret sauce to a happier, smoother service and an *effective team*.

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