

# ACTIVE LISTENING: Short-Circuit An Angry Confrontation

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## Reflect, Don't React

Someone comes at you, seemingly out of the blue, absolutely furious.

You are stunned and want to fight back.

Instead, you can diffuse the other person's anger by simply responding in an Active Listening way:

- “Wow, something is really upsetting you...”
- “You're saying you are absolutely furious that I forgot to show up for lunch”
- “You are really upset because you are not getting the service you expected”
- “You are really mad that you've had to go through four other departments just to reach me”
- “It really bothers you when you have to go through all those mechanical phoneresponses just to get to a human being”

Yes, this is the behavior which I wish customer service representatives had all been taughts of that; when I call them, furious, they would just respond,” I'm sorry that you are so upset. Tell me more about what is bothering you so we can fix it,” instead of adopting that rigid, “I'm just following the rules,” “We never make mistakes,” “There's really not

anything I can do for you”. This attitude that just makes me more and more angry!

### Bottom Line:

deflect and diffuse anger by simply responding with empathy:

- “Boy, I can see how this is hard for you,”
- “I’m really hearing how frustrating this has been for you.”
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Maybe this seems like the same-old “reflective listening” that Carl Rogers and others have been advocating since the 1950’s – but, let’s face it, has it entered our world as a Core Skill of “human literacy,” the center of “emotional intelligence”?

Let’s give this another try, really incorporating Active Listening into our every day home and work situations!

### Reflect the Words...and the Feeling Tone...

As opposed to Passive Listening, where you simply give your silent attention to the other, at the most saying “Ummmhmmm” or “Ah, hah!” or “Wow!”, in Active Listening, you set aside all your typical responses (advice, argument, opinions, problem-solving, judgments) and simply try to say back what the other person is saying, with an emphasis on the feeling tone, if you pick up any:

### *Example One: Customer*

Customer: "I've just had to wade through 16 phone messages to get to you, and I was cut off and had to start all over. It's taken me ten minutes already."

Customer Service: "Wow! I'm so sorry! You've already been through ten minutes of frustration, and I'm the first person you've gotten to talk to."

Customer: "Why can't there just be a simple way to talk to a human being?!! I hate these phone messages!!"

Customer Service: "It is so frustrating to you to have to go through this waiting and confusion everywhere you go."

Customer: "Damn right! Okay, let's get on with it. This is the problem. I changed my mailing address for my bills, and they are still going to the wrong address, and then I end up getting late fees."

Customer Service: "Okay, let me take a look at your account right now and see what we can do."

### *Example Two: Spouse*

Wife: "How could you have forgotten that we had a dinner engagement at 6 PM with the Smiths???!!!!!!!!"

Husband: "Wow! You are really angry. I must have slipped up somewhere. You're saying I forgot a dinner engagement with the Smiths?"

Wife: "Yes, you idiot! It was at 6PM, and I've been trying to reach you on your cell phone. How humiliating!!!!!! Where were you?!!!!!!!"

Husband: "So you've been trying to reach me ever since 6PM, and it's been embarrassing for you, having to make excuses to the Smiths. And you're wondering where I was."

Wife: "How could you not answer your cell phone!!!!!! That is what they are for, emergencies like this one!!!!!!!"

Husband: “So, to you, this really was an emergency, and no way to get through to me. You’re wondering why I didn’t answer my cell phone and where was I anyway!!!!!!”

Wife: “Yes, that is exactly right! So, where were you?”

Husband: “Okay, I am so sorry. Let’s try to figure out how this happened. I got held up at an emergency meeting with my boss, and I couldn’t answer my cell phone. He would have gotten even madder at me....I guess I was so upset by this confrontation with him that I just absolutely forgot about the Smiths.....I should have had the dinner in my Palm Pilot, but I guess I didn’t hear that either...I was just driving and thinking about what to do with the work situation. What can I do to make this better now? Do you want me to call the Smiths and make another plan?”

Wife: “Oh, that’s okay. It’s over now. Why don’t you tell me what happened at work while I find you something to eat....”

### *Example Three: Child*

Child: “I hate school, and I’m never going again. Teachers are all idiots!!!!”

Parent: “Wow, something is really upsetting you today. Sounds like a teacher did something stupid that bothered you...”

Child: “No, it didn’t bother me!!!! I’m not going to get bothered by fools like that. I don’t care what they think!!!! I’m just not going anymore!!!!!!”

Parent: “So, it didn’t bother you. You’re not going to be bothered by fools like that. You don’t even care what they think. And, right now, you’re saying you are never going again.”

Child: (tears of hurt coming) “She said I’ll never be a writer...that I don’t even knowpunctuation (crying).”

Parent: “So your teacher said, ‘You’ll never be a writer...you can’t even do punctuation,’ and that is really hurting you. Writing is very important to you.’

Child: (more tears) “There is more to writing than punctuation....what I’m saying is way more important....I’m pouring my heart out.”

Parent: “So, for you, writing is not about punctuation but about what you are saying, that you can really pour your heart out. That’s what’s important.”

Child: “Yes (fewer tears)...that’s what matters to me. Next time, will you help me with the punctuation so that she can’t make fun of me?”

Believe it or not, this diffusion of anger, usually to hurt, will happen. And what have you got to lose by trying? There really isn’t any other miracle way in these situations! Perhaps the idea of just “reflecting” the other person seems silly to you, like a parrot. However, when you are on the receiving end, just hearing your own words back without judgment or “fixing,” you will be amazed at what a rare blessing and relief it is just to be heard.