Paraphrase back what you hear to improve understanding

Why do it?

Paraphrasing what you've just heard is a triple threat communication tool — not only does it help illuminate gaps in understanding, it demonstrates your engagement as a listener, and can help the other person refine their thoughts. It's a great way to make sure everyone in a conversation walks away on the same page. The technique can be particularly helpful when speaking with people from different departments (marketing and engineering, for example) or cultural backgrounds as a way to make sure nothing gets lost in translation.

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"Let me see if I'm misunderstanding this correctly…"

How to do it:

1. Listen with the intention of deep understanding.

You can't paraphrase back if you weren't listening carefully in the first place. Put away any distractions like phones and computer screens, and don't half-listen while thinking about what you'll say next. Instead, really focus on the meaning of what the other person is saying.

2. Home in on the most important information, then paraphrase it back to the speaker.

Try starting your recap with phrases like:

- *"What I'm hearing you say is…" "If I understand this correctly, you need…" "It sounds like you're saying that…"*

3. When you paraphrase, put the idea in your own words.

Resist the urge to repeat verbatim what you just heard. While repeating shows you've got a great memory, it doesn't necessarily mean you've understood and synthesized what's been said. By explaining your understanding of the idea in your own words, you can both concentrate on making sure the concepts are the same, not just the words.

4. Ask for confirmation that your understanding is accurate and complete.

A simple "Do I have that right?" opens the door for the other person to clarify or correct anything you're missing.

5. If there are still gaps in understanding, ask clarifying questions.

Dig down into the pieces that you don't completely understand, and ask questions like:

- *"Could you tell me more about…" "Are there any examples you could show me to help me understand?"*
- *"I'm still not clear on the timeline. Can you clarify the deadlines for me?"*

More on conversations and understanding:

- [6 key lessons for difficult conversations](#) [5 ways to boost your emotional intelligence](#)