

Active Listening

As far back as early Chinese civilization, the importance of listening was understood. The Chinese symbol for listening (below) illustrates key elements for active listening.



Showing Respect to the Speaker

Showing respect to the speaker (attending skills) includes:

1. Look at the speaker and always keep the other person in view, so you can observe reactions and body language and generally maintain eye contact with the speaker.
2. Show that you are interested in what the speaker is saying. Encourage by unobtrusive use of “yes,” “I see,” “um hum.” Use positive body cues at appropriate points, such as nods, smiles, note-taking, furrowed brow, etc.
3. Most of the time, lean slightly forward toward the speaker. Keep an open, relaxed posture and keep physical movement to a minimum.
4. Engage the speaker by looking for opportunities to subtly mirror his/her cues. Do not mimic but look for ways to be congruent. For example, if he/she speaks slowly, match that cadence.
5. Draw the speaker out. Say something like, “I’d like to hear a little more about that, could you elaborate?”
6. Try to listen to what is not being said — identify what’s missing that you might expect to hear in these circumstances.
7. Observe how things are said — the emotions, the attitudes behind the words may be more important than what is actually said. Look beyond the mere words the speaker uses and remember the importance of tone of voice and body language and posture.
8. Say little yourself. You cannot listen while you are talking.

9. Show that you are listening and interested by asking questions, and giving feedback, reframing, and summarizing. Be careful, however, in the early stages to not interrupt the speaker's flow.

Asking Questions

Questions serve three basic purposes:

1. To show you are listening, especially in the early, trust building stage.
2. To gather and organize information, particularly in the problem identification and solving stage.
3. To express in question form what otherwise might be an academic statement: for example, "Are you sure that can be done?"

Generally, questions should be open-ended, not closed-ended. Closed-ended questions can be answered "yes" or "no," or with a specific answer like "eight" or "November." Closed-ended questions may encourage the answerer to stop talking. While open-ended questions cannot be answered so simply, they encourage the speaker to talk and explain in complete sentences. Open-ended questions are good because they invite a person to open up and tell his/her story.

Feeding Back, Reframing, and Summarizing

When the speaker pauses it is an opportunity to confirm that you have been listening and that you understand by FEEDING BACK what you have heard or observed to the speaker. It is also a way to check that your perception of what you think you heard or observed is accurate, as well as a way to validate for the speaker what he/she is feeling.

To feed back, repeat or paraphrase what the speaker has said or displayed as unspoken feelings. Sometimes, repeating the last couple of words of a speaker will encourage him/her to continue, but you do not want to parrot the speaker's actual words and sound like a mimic. Paraphrase instead but be conscious of particular words that seem important to the speaker and use them, if appropriate, in your paraphrasing.

REFRAMING is a special way of feeding back, and is one of the listener's most important tools. It is restating what a party has said to capture the essence, remove negative overtones, and move the process forward. Reframing also is a way to translate a positional statement into a statement of interests or needs. An example of this is a manager or supervisor angrily saying, "He's so irresponsible, I can't rely on him to do the work I assign on schedule." Simple feedback might be, "so it really bothers you if he isn't on schedule"; while a reframed response would be, "so being on schedule and following instructions is important to you." Either response may be appropriate, and the difference is subtle; the first might be better at an early point in trust building, while the latter might be better stated later, during problem solving.

SUMMARIES are part of most feedback, but sometimes you may want to focus particularly on a summary. At major transitions, such as after one person has told his

version of how the matter in discussion is viewed, the listener may want to summarize pertinent and major points of interest or concern.

Managing the Flow of Communication

Stick to the speaker's subject. You may want to go somewhere else, but give the speaker time to finish. Don't be too quick to move on when the speaker repeats things.

Remember, repetition may indicate that:

1. The subject is very important to the speaker.
2. The speaker needs to feel that you've really heard him/her on the subject.

This is a cue that you should feedback what the speaker is saying. If repetition continues, ask if there is anything else as important that needs mentioning. Be comfortable with silence. People will talk when they have to, and silence can be a powerful tool in emotional dynamics.



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