



Active Listening

Overview: Conflicts are exacerbated by poor communication. Active listening skills help people learn how to listen and ask questions to clarify their understanding of another person's ideas, feelings and points of view. It is a mutual process that helps people express themselves more clearly, listen more attentively and avoid misunderstandings that lead to conflict.

Purpose: We use this exercise to help people deepen their skills in communication so they can better understand each other and reduce confusion and misunderstandings leading to conflict and bad decision making. It helps them identify some of the communication challenges they face and provides some suggested question formats to practice this set of skills.

Time: 45 minutes to 1 hour

Credit: Training for Transformation

Materials:

- Flip chart
- Different colored markers
- Masking tape
- Handout with guiding questions

Process

In Plenary:

- Introduce the purpose of the exercise and the steps.
- As a facilitator, you might want to include some of the following points: Listening carefully and interpreting meaning effectively are very important not only in communicating with one another but in conflict prevention and resolution. Such skills promote empowerment and confidence and encourage solidarity. They can also improve decision-making and conflict management by encouraging ideas to be expressed with clarity and mutual understanding. Yet most people are not good listeners. Too often we are more focused on what we are going to say next and on our own viewpoints than in





- paying close attention to the other person's opinions. This stifles critical understanding, learning and thoughtful action.
- Have participants divide in pairs with the person next to them and then give the following instructions and description of process: Each person will get a chance to talk and to listen and ask questions. Everyone gets five minutes to talk about something they have accomplished that was challenging and caused worry or distress. The listener's job is to listen attentively and respectfully, to express interest, to clarify their own understanding of what their partner is saying by asking occasional questions and to probe for more information when it is needed. After five minutes, the listener synthesizes the main points and asks the speaker if she has correctly interpreted what was said. The speaker gives the listener quick feedback on whether her summary reflected what was said. Then roles are reversed and the process is repeated.
- Ask everyone to take a minute or so to think of an accomplishment that was challenging and stressful, jot it down.
- Provide handout and review some of the guiding questions to help people think about the kinds of questions they may want to ask when they are listeners.

In Pairs:

- Groups carry out exercise.
- *Note: As facilitator you may want indicate when half the time has expired and, most importantly, when one minute is remaining so the listener can sum up the speaker's comments and the speaker can respond.*

In Plenary:

- The facilitator asks what participants learned from the conversation and about their own active listening skills. She writes the main ideas on the flip chart (if possible with the help of participants):
 - *What was the most difficult aspect of being an active listener?*
 - *What was most satisfying for the speakers?*
 - *What was most useful and least useful for the listener and for the speaker?*
- Ask participants to think of an ideal situation when they are speaking with another person.
 - *How would you like the listener to react and behave?*
- Jot down on the flip chart a list of answers regarding desirable behaviors.
- Now ask participants to think about: *We usually have opinions about what other people share with us and want to give "advice" before the other person asks for it, when sometimes the other person just needs to express herself:*
 - When talking to another person, do we generally hear or listen to what she is saying? What's the difference between listening and hearing?
 - Why is this difference important?
 - What changes could we make to deepen our listening abilities?



- Summarize the ideas and emphasize that active listening and communication can also vary by culture, or due to our personal experiences and our gender. Just one example, in some contexts, eye contact is considered very important as an expression of interest and connection; in other places, it may be seen as disrespectful. *Have we seen this? In the next few days, let's focus our attention on these aspects and jot down our observations to share with others.*

ACTIVE LISTENING:

FRAMING RESPONSES TO ENCOURAGE UNDERSTANDING

TYPES	PURPOSE	POSSIBLE RESPONSES
Clarifying	To get at additional facts. To clarify understanding.	<i>Can you clarify that? Do you mean this...? Can you give me an example? Is this the problem as you see it now? Let me see if I'm understanding....</i>
Paraphrasing/ Restatement	To check our meaning and interpretation with the other. To show you are listening and that you understand what the other has said.	<i>As I understand it then, your plan/suggestion/idea is... It sounds like what you're saying is... This is what I'm hearing you say...</i>
Encouraging	To convey that you are interested and listening. To encourage the person to continue talking.	<i>I see. That's very interesting. I understand. Hmmmmm...</i>
Reflective	To show that you understand how the other feels about what s/he is saying. To help the person to evaluate	<i>You feel that... It was a disturbing thing, as you saw it. You felt like you didn't get a fair shake.</i>



WE RISE



	or temper their feelings as expressed by someone else.	
Probing	To help explore all sides of a problem.	<i>This is what you have decided to do....and the reasons are? What other ways are there to look at it? How do you think other people see it? What other info might help?</i>
Summarizing	To bring all the discussion into focus To serve as springboard for discussion of new aspects of the problem	<i>These are the key ideas I have heard you express. If I understand, you are feeling/thinking....</i>

Credit: A New Weave of Power, People and Politics, p.335