

## Exercise Four: Active Listening

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### EXERCISE 4 Active Listening

Think back to those few friends, mentors, counselors, or family members who have had the biggest impact on you. How would you characterize the communication between you? Was it helpful, meaningful, telepathic, or inspirational?

In one-to-one relationships with someone who knows us well, we are often in such complete synchronization that communication flows between us almost without words. Or so we feel. If this is the case, is it because we excel at expressing ourselves, or because we are masters of listening? Naturally, both are important, but, to turn a phrase, talk is cheap and listening is rare.

Chances are that those who influence us most are powerful listeners. Whether instinctively or through practice, they have developed the skill of empathy.

A University of Maine researcher, Dr. Marisue Pickering, identifies four characteristics of empathetic listeners:

1. Desire to be other-directed, rather than to project one's own feelings and ideas onto the other.
2. Desire to be non-defensive, rather than to protect the self. When the self is being protected, it is difficult to focus on another person.
3. Desire to imagine the roles, perspectives, or experiences of the other, rather than assuming they are the same as one's own.
4. Desire to listen as a receiver, not as a critic, and desire to understand the other person rather than to achieve either agreement from or change in that person.

Further, she identifies ten discrete skills for empathetic listening, shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Skills Associated with Empathy

SKILLS	EXPLANATION
1. Attending, acknowledging	1. Providing verbal or non-verbal awareness of the other, ie, eye contact

- |                              |   |
|------------------------------|---|
| 2. Restating, paraphrasing   | 2. Responding to person's basic verbal message  |
| 3. Reflecting                | 3. Reflecting feelings, experiences, or content that has been heard or perceived through cues             |
| 4. Interpreting              | 4. Offering a tentative interpretation about the other's feelings, desires, or meanings                   |
| 5. Summarizing, synthesizing | 5. Bringing together in some way feelings and experiences; providing a focus                              |
| 6. Probing                   | 6. Questioning in a supportive way that requests more information or that attempts to clear up confusions |
| 7. Giving feedback           | 7. Sharing perceptions of the other's ideas or feelings; disclosing relevant personal information         |
| 8. Supporting                | 8. Showing warmth and caring in one's own individual way  |
| 9. Checking perceptions      | 9. Finding out if interpretations and perceptions are valid and accurate                                  |
| 10. Being quiet              | 10. Giving the other time to think as well as to talk   |

SOURCE: Pickering, Marisue, "Communication" in EXPLORATIONS, A Journal of Research of the University of Maine, Vol. 3, No. 1, Fall 1986, pp 16-19.

These skills, like those of self-expression, can be learned, practiced, and mastered. Our society places much more attention on the spoken side of the communication equation, but if you think about who influences you, are they good talkers or good listeners?

As we come to understand ourselves and our relationships with others better, we rediscover that "communication is not just saying words; it is creating true understanding." Active listening is an important skill in that process.

## LISTENING SKILLS

> Notes to leaders who wish to place greater emphasis on active listening skills and effective self-expression:

Using the materials from The Interactive Skills Program, Dalva Hedlund and L. Bryn Freedman, Cornell University Cooperative Extension Service, 1981, provides participants with background on communication skills noted in the following outline and the exercises that follow:

### 1. Communicating that we are listening:

a. Non-verbal attending: eye contact  
body language  
use of silence

verbal attending: minimal encouragers

### b. The art of questions

Open questions: how? what? could? would?

Closed questions: is? are? do? did?

Why questions: sometimes open, sometimes closed

### c. Focus--be aware that the conversation may take on a variety of focuses:

speaker focus	topic focus
other(s) focus	listener focus

### d. Reflections:

reinforce and support the speaker  
clarify the meaning of communications  
reflect factual content  
reflect feeling content  
under-reflected vs. distorted reflections  
leave reflections tentative

### e. Summary:

recapitulation for easier remembering, better understanding, showing relationship of main points:  
beginning discussion (remembering where we left off) summarizing in mid-discussion, drawing together main points, ending a discussion, a sense of what happened

### 2. Summary of effective self-expression

#### a. Sharing information--the basis for expression:

Information:  
from other sources

from our experiences  
based on our beliefs  
based on our feelings  
based on our wants

- b. Using first-person pronoun--making "I" statements
- c. Factual self-expression vs. feeling self-expression
- d. Keeping the focus and avoiding "topic jumps"
- e. Using past-present-future tenses in self expression
- f. Encouraging others to see themselves with clarity--  
confrontation
- g. Giving directions--achieving clarity
- h. Summarizing--its uses in self-expression
- i. Structuring purposeful interaction

#### Activities for Developing Interactive Communication Skills

Use the directions on the sheets that follow to practice some of the basic active listening skills:

- 1) Attending Skills (verbal and non-verbal)
- 2) Questions, Reflections, Summarization
- 3) Skills of Self-Expression: "1-2-3 Pattern"
- 4) Practice Session on Effective Confrontation

#### LISTENING SKILLS Minimal Encourages

The group should be divided into subgroups of three. There will be three roles in each subgroup: speaker, listener, and observer. Everyone will take each role once in this practice, so divide into your subgroup and decide who is going to take which role first.

> Directions: [??]

> Objective--The point of the practice session is to give each person the opportunity to learn how to use verbal and non-verbal minimal encouragers and become a better listener.

> To the speaker--Your task is to talk about something that is important to you: your job, your family, a decision, or a question. The practice will be more helpful if you talk about something you really care about, although role-playing is possible. You may find

yourself in the midst of discussing something important when the allotted time runs out. If this happens, you could make an agreement with the person listening to carry on later, after work or during a break.

> To the listener--Your task is to practice the skills of the session: eye contact, body language, silences, and verbal minimal encouragers. Don't panic! Just concentrate on following the speaker's train of thought. Try to limit your responses to the skills discussed in this session.

> To the observer--Your task is to observe the listener's verbal and non-verbal skills. Observe and count only as many behaviors (eye contact, body posture, verbal minimal encouragers, topic jumps) as you can manage and still be relatively accurate.

> Procedure:

The first speaker will talk with the listener for three or four minutes. The listener will then discuss the listening experience with the two other members of the subgroup. (To the listener: What was comfortable? Difficult? Did you stay with the speaker?) Then the speaker will share his or her feelings about the listener's listening. (To the speaker: Did you feel listened to? Was it helpful? Did the listener have any habits you found distracting?) The observer will then share observations. This sharing process should take about three or four minutes.

Now everyone change places. Have the listener become the speaker, the speaker the observer, and the observer the listener. Go through the five minutes of talking and listening and five minutes of exchanging remarks twice more so that each person takes each role once. The entire practice session should take about 25 minutes.

When you are finished, form the large group. Your facilitator will help you share your practice experiences. How are these skills relevant to your work? Where else would they be useful? Go around the group so that participants have a chance to share at least one thing they have learned about themselves in this practice session.

Source: Interactive Skills Program: Helping Through Listening and Influencing, Hedlund and Freedman, Cornell University Cooperative Extension Service, 1981.

#### LISTENING SKILLS Questions, Reflections, Summarization

Form subgroups of three and practice using question asking as a listening skills. Each member of your subgroup should take turns being the speaker, the listener (who practices the skill of questioning), and the observer.

> To the speaker: In the speaker role, we ask you to share something that is a real concern to you. Obviously, we are not asking that you share anything that is very private or that might be embarrassing. Sharing a real part of your life, however, will make this practice both interesting and useful. (And you might find it helpful to have someone carefully listen to your concern). Or, you can tell of situations that occur in work--we all have a storehouse of work problems that give us difficulty.

The qualifier on being "real" in the practice sessions, however, is that we are here to give the listener a chance to practice interactive skills. If you, as the speaker, take all of the practice time in a monologue about yourself, the listener will not have a chance to practice listening skills. So, be sure to pause often to encourage the listener to respond, even though this may seem a bit unnatural. Try to share information that allows the speaker to practice the skill of the session--the art of questioning. If you give the complete details of your concern, for example, it may be difficult for the listener to find anything to ask questions about. Or, if your story is completely factual and does not include your personal feelings or opinions, the listener may have difficulty asking questions with a speaker focus. As the speaker in the practice session, part of your job is to help your listener practice listening skills.

> To the listener: In this session try to concentrate on asking questions, reflecting, and, at the end, summarizing even though this may seem difficult. You may use minimal encouragers occasionally, as long as your primary responses are questions. Vary your responses between open and closed questions and vary the focus of your questions (i.e., on speaker, topic, or others). By using both open and closed questions you will also see how your question and its focus can determine the course of the conversation.

> To the observer: Keep track of the listener's responses. Include the number of open and closed questions used by the listener and the focus of each question; note the use of feeling and factual reflection, and the effectiveness of the listener's summary.

> Procedure

The speaker and listener will have a conversation of three or four minutes duration. The observer can also time the conversation, gently announcing "stop" when the time is up.

After the conversation, take a few minutes: First, the listener will share thoughts about how they used questions; second; the speaker will comment on his/her experience during the conversation and the listener's use of the skill; finally, the observer will share observations and comment on the conversation.

Now trade roles and repeat the practice.

Each listener practice should take eight to ten minutes: three or four minutes for the initial conversation and three or four minutes to review it--to share the listener's and the

speaker's impressions and the observer's reactions (1/2 hour).

When exchanging observations about a conversation, please give the listener accurate feedback about how he or she used the skills. If the listener is having difficulty asking open questions, reflecting, or summarizing, say so and help him/her learn how to do so better. Remember that the purpose of practice is for the listener to learn the listening skill. Feedback and suggestions from both speaker and observer are essential to the learning process.

Source: Interactive Skills Program: Helping Through Listening and Influencing, Hedlund and Freedman, Cornell University Cooperative Extension Service, 1981.

#### LISTENING SKILLS

##### Self-Expression: "1-2-3" Pattern

###### > Procedure

The group should be divided into sub groups of three, with three roles in each sub-group: speaker, listener, and observer.

The speaker should make a statement about something of personal concern or role play someone who is troubled and seeking information.

The listener uses active listening skills to understand what the speaker is saying and responds with factual or feeling content, and then checks to see that he/she was understood.

The observer concentrates on the person in the listener role, looking for as many self-expression skills as possible (using first person pronouns, factual vs. feeling expression, maintaining focus, use of tenses, etc.)

The first interchange should take three to four minutes, with a couple of minutes to share observation. If time permits the exercise can be repeated twice, after changing roles.

#### EFFECTIVE CONFRONTATION

> Procedure: The group should break into sub-groups of four or five people. Go around the group, with each person taking time speaking about some personal concern for a few minutes. The next person in line is the listener, who responds to the speaker with a confrontation. The group can then discuss the listener response-- was it a confrontation? Was it effective? What was the focus? What are some alternative confrontations which could be made? After discussing the response, the listener becomes the next speaker. Move around the circle as time permits, hopefully allowing each person to practice responding with a confrontation.

If there is time, discuss the use of confrontation as a skill of self-expression. What are the possible risks in using this skill?

Where might you use this skill in your work or daily life? How could you improve your capacity for self-confrontation (not self-depreciation). What are the benefits of confronting yourself?

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