

Active Listening

Here are some methods of practicing and encouraging active listening.

Minimal Encouragements

Sounds made, especially on the phone, to let one person know the other is there and listening; such as, “Oh?”, “When?”, and “Really?” They are questions, comments, or sounds that do not interfere with the flow of conversation, but do let the speaker know that you are there and listening. They help build rapport and encourage the speaker to continue talking.

Paraphrasing

A summary in your own words of what you were told. Demonstrates listening, creates empathy and establishes rapport because it is evident that you have heard and understood. Usually, paraphrasing begins with the words, “Are you telling me...” or “Are you saying...” Paraphrasing also clarifies content, highlights issues and promotes give and take between you and the speaker. It tends to make the speaker a better listener.

Emotion Labeling

This is often the first active listening skill to be used in a stressful interaction. It is important to be attuned to the emotion behind the words and facts. Trying to solve problems too early is doomed to failure because the speaker is often not ready to open up and you have not listened enough to get all of the information you need to help them solve the problem. Common phrases for you to use are, “You sound...”, “You seem...”, “I hear...” (emotion heard by you). You do not tell people how they are feeling, but how they sound to you as if they are feeling.

Mirroring (or Reflecting)

This is the technique of repeating the last word or phrase and putting a question mark after it. This provides very exact responses because you are using the speaker’s own words. Reflecting or mirroring asks for more input without guiding the direction of the speaker’s thoughts and elicits information when you do not have enough to ask a pertinent question. It is useful when you are at a loss for words and it provides an opportunity for the speaker to think about what you have said.

Open-Ended Questions

The primary use of open-ended questions is to help a speaker start talking. Asking open-ended questions encourages the person to say more without actually directing the conversation. They are questions that cannot be answered with a single word such as “yes” or “no”. Open-ended questions get information for you with fewer questions, those that usually begin with how, what, when and where. Note that “why” questions are not asked directly. “Why” questions tend to steer the conversation toward blame and shut down communication. “Why” questions also tend to pass judgment.

Closed-end questions give a feeling of interrogation that makes rapport building difficult. They also cause you to work too hard at thinking up new questions.

“I” Messages

“I” messages enable you to let the speaker know how he is making you feel, why you feel that way, and what the speaker can do to remedy the situation. This is a non-threatening approach and does not put the speaker on the defensive. “I” messages are used when communication is difficult because of the intense emotions being directed at you. It is also used when the speaker is trying to manipulate you and you want him to stop the attempts.

Effective Pauses

Silence can be very effective on a number of levels. Most people are not comfortable with silence and will fill it with talk. It is to your advantage to keep the speaker talking. Silence can also be used to emphasize a point. You can use silence just before or just after saying something important.

There are some common misconceptions about listening that can influence how we feel and can make the listening process ineffective. It’s important that we understand these misconceptions and dismiss them so we can comprehend our listening better.