

Active Listening

Good listening is important in all interactions, and can be a powerful key to handling conflict effectively. The following are some key elements of active listening.

Encouraging

Show an interest in what the speaker is saying. Ask for more information.

"Can you tell me more...?"

"What do you think about...?"

Validating

Affirm the worth of the speaker, and the validity of his or her ideas and feelings. You can validate the person's viewpoint even if you do not agree with it.

"You have really tried to be fair." "I can understand why you might feel...."

Restating

Briefly paraphrase the main points, to let the speaker know you have heard and understood. This is a simple but powerful way of building trust, and decreasing anger or frustration in the other person. Restating, also, does not necessarily imply agreement.

"So you intended to...."

"It sounds like you have...."

Reflecting

While restating deals with the content of what is being said, reflecting deals with the feelings you are hearing. Feelings are sometimes more important than content. Briefly reflecting the feelings the speaker has described is important, but be careful not to assume or project feelings.

"This has been a frustrating week for you." "You were excited about...."

Clarifying

Brief questions can help you be sure you understand correctly, and can give you additional information.

"Do you mean...?"

"Where did this happen?"

Centering

Centering questions can bring the speaker back to what is most important to them, or help the speaker stay on track.

"What is your most important concern in all of this?"

"What would be most helpful to you at this point?"

Attending

Pay attention to the speaker! This is the most important aspect of excellent listening. Do not let yourself be distracted. Let your eye contact, posture, and other non-verbals all indicate full attention. Focus on the speaker rather than on your own thoughts and possible responses.

Obstacles to Communication

Active listening promotes effective communication. The following responses tend to do just the opposite:

Advising

"What you should do is...."

"Well, I'll tell you what I'd do."

Commanding

"You go and tell her you're sorry -- right now!"

"You had better...."

Diagnosing

"Your problem is that you...."

"You're just feeling guilty about...."

Discounting

"Cheer up, it'll get better."

"It can't be all that bad...."

Judging

"You have no manners."

"That was a stupid idea."

Lecturing

"Don't you know that...."

"How many times do I have to tell you...."

Preaching

"You ought to know better than to...."

"If you were honest, you would...."

Threatening

"If you do, I'll...."

"This is the last time I will...."