

Mentoring skills: Active listening

This is a core skill of communicating. It can seem a very passive activity, though it actually involves a lot of hard work. It requires a high level of concentration and in addition to hearing the words it also involves accepting, understanding, checking and clarifying them. Moreover, you must show and actively demonstrate that you are listening to the person.

Good listening is something that many people think that they do well, but in reality, this skill is less common than you would imagine.

Barriers to effective listening

If you need to challenge a mentee's perception of his/herself, or a situation s/he is in, you will be more effective if:

- There are many potential problems including:
- Our concentration powers are limited
- Our previous knowledge or background may lead us to hearing what we expect or want to hear
- We do not agree with what is being said, or it conflicts with your beliefs and values
- We rehearse what we intend to say, thereby missing part of what is actually said
- We dislike the other person
- Distractions such as noise, movement or other matters occupying your mind
- We may hold some kind of prejudice because of political differences, social status, race, sexual orientation, etc.
- Low energy levels at certain points in the day.

Active listening

We can **show** that we are listening by:

- Maintaining appropriate eye contact. Move your gaze occasionally to avoid causing the other person anxiety.
- Remembering that a high percentage of communication between people is at a non-verbal level. Facial expressions and gestures should mirror what is being said.
- Avoiding distractions. Give the individual your full attention.
- Using non-verbal prompts such as head nodding and facial expressions to encourage the person.
- Using verbal prompts to encourage the person such as 'Yes, I see.'
- Keeping an open mind. Do not dismiss the other person's point of view or prejudge the situation.
- Not interrupting.
- Trying not to mentally rehearse or prepare your own views and ideas.
- Avoiding emotional involvement with what we are being told as our own feelings may then start to affect the process.



Skills to aid Active Listening

In addition, the following skills will aid active listening and understanding:

Paraphrasing

Re-state the message in a similar way but with fewer words. This encourages the speaker to continue as their message has been understood. If the speaker disagrees with what has been said, they will have the opportunity to correct it.

Clarifying

Be open if you have difficulty understanding what has been said, for example:

“I am not quite clear about this, could you tell me a bit more about her reaction”. This demonstrates a willingness and desire to really understand the other’s point of view and increases trust in the relationship.

Echoing

Pick up on a word, sentence in a questioning tone, for example “confused?”. This encourages the person to continue or expand on the particular point.

Asking for examples

Help the person to increase the understanding of the problem by asking for a concrete example on a particular point, for example: “Can you give me an example of when you felt he misled you?”

Checking understanding

Ask an explicit question when you may have misheard or not taken in the information, for example: “Did you say that this was the third time it has happened?”

Silence

Avoid the urge to say something just to fill in an uncomfortable silence. A short silence gives the other person a chance to think things through.

